



The Kurds: new perspectives?

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Author: Ben Smith

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- The Arab uprisings and, in particular, the Syrian conflict have thrown most assumptions about the region and its borders in doubt, with relevance to the stateless Kurdish people.
- The increasing autonomy of the Kurdish region of Iraq has been a dramatic change. The possibility that Syrian Kurdistan will go the same way has meant that traditional alliances have been questioned.
- Turkey, traditionally hostile to Kurdish autonomy, has changed tack recently, pursuing peace with Turkish Kurds and building economic bridges with the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq.
- Looking ahead, and bearing in mind the fragility of the Iraqi and Syrian polities and even the Iranian regime, some have talked of a 'Kurdish Spring', with the possibility of further autonomy or even the creation of a Kurdish state.
- It is plausible that Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds will come out of the present instability with more autonomy but the situation is fraught with danger and further violence is possible for a number of reasons.
- A pan-Kurdish state is unlikely to emerge in the foreseeable future.

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Kurdish-populated areas



Source: University of Texas

1 Background

1.1 Who are the Kurds?

The Kurds are an Indo-European (non-Arab), predominantly Sunni-Muslim people, who inhabit the mountainous region straddling Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Their languages (which are not always mutually comprehensible) are related to Iranian. Estimates of the total Kurdish population vary from 15 million to 30 million, with large numbers now living in Western Europe. Precise figures for the total Kurdish population are difficult to obtain, as some countries do not recognise the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group, but most observers believe there to be at least 25 million.

There is a large Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe and many Kurdish political leaders are now based in Belgium and elsewhere. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey is one of the best-known political groups and it has been designated a terrorist organisation by the European Union, the United Nations and the United States.

1.2 After the Ottoman Empire

With the break-up of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I, the Great Powers sought to address the status of the Kurdish population in the region. Under the Treaty of Sevres of 1920, signed by Allied and Turkish representatives, it was agreed to establish local autonomy for the Kurds, with the possibility of Kurdish independence within one year of the treaty coming into force.

Section III of the treaty set out how autonomy would be arranged:

SECTION III.

KURDISTAN.

ARTICLE 62.

A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3). If unanimity cannot be secured on any question, it will be referred by the members of the Commission to their respective Governments. The scheme shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas, and with this object a Commission composed of British, French, Italian, Persian and Kurdish representatives shall visit the spot to examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier where, under the provisions of the present Treaty, that frontier coincides with that of Persia.

ARTICLE 63.

The Turkish Government hereby agrees to accept and execute the decisions of both the Commissions mentioned in Article 62 within three months from their communication to the said Government.

ARTICLE 64.

If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.

The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the Principal Allied Powers and Turkey.

If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul vilayet.¹

¹ [Treaty of Peace with Turkey, Signed at Sèvres, August 10 1920](#), Cmd 964

The treaty was never ratified. As Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and his Turkish National Movement gained control of Anatolia, ending the Allied occupation in the Turkish War of Independence, Kurdish national aspirations were effectively quashed. Turkey, Iran and Iraq each agreed not to recognize an independent Kurdish state. The Treaty of Sèvres was superseded in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne, which omitted any provisions relating to Kurdistan, so the bulk of the Kurdish population remained divided between Turkey, Iraq, Iran and, to a lesser extent, Syria.

1.3 Nation without a state

Kurds have traditionally been politically divided, with no recent history of a national political culture. Nevertheless, despite still being spread across four very different states, the Kurdish world seems to be getting smaller. More importantly, the future of the state boundaries drawn up by Sykes and Picot during the First World War quite suddenly looks uncertain, as the Syrian conflict destabilises the entire region. The deepening Sunni-Shia chasm across the region sets the Kurds firmly in the generally pro-Western Turkish camp, and against the Shia of Iran, Iraq's al-Maliki, the Assad regime and Hizballah in Lebanon.

The Turks appear to be testing the viability of replacing their 'zero problems with neighbours' foreign policy, shattered by the Syrian conflict, with a new one of embracing the Kurds. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Kurds are pulling away from the rest of Iraq, powered by surging oil production.

In Erbil in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq, there will be a Kurdish National Conference in September. The organisers, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), deny that the conference will be demanding a Kurdish state and stress the importance of peaceful co-existence, but Kurdish aspirations will probably be aired in a new spirit of optimism.

2 Kurds in Turkey

2.1 Insurgency in the 20th century

There has been a Kurdish insurgency in south-east Turkey since 1984, boosted by weapons, explosives and instability in neighbouring Iraq. Its aim was originally an independent Kurdish state. At least 4,500 members of the Turkish security forces have been killed in the rebellion, and many rebels as well as civilians. Some reports say that more than 40,000 have died in total as a result of the conflict.² Turkish army clearances of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish villagers in the 1990s turned the regional economy upside down and forced many rural Kurds into urban peripheries. Torture and extra-judicial killings of dissidents were rife.

2.2 A brief ceasefire

After the capture and imprisonment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)'s leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the insurgents largely withdrew from Turkey, mainly to northern Iraq. Virtually all of the PKK's foreign governmental sponsors had withdrawn their support in the late 1990s – most critically Syria. Shortly afterwards the PKK introduced a five-year unilateral ceasefire and took a number of steps to try to change its image and widen its appeal, calling on the Government to involve it in the country's political process, allow more cultural rights for Kurds and release imprisoned PKK members including Öcalan. But these demands were not met to the PKK's satisfaction and the ceasefire ended in 2004 and attacks resumed.

² 'Kurdish PKK rebels tell Turkey to implement reforms', *BBC News Online*, 19 July 2013

2.3 A democratic opening?

Despite continued sporadic attacks, Prime Minister Erdoğan changed the government's approach in the second half of the decade by instituting a 'democratic opening'. He eased restrictions on the Kurdish language, provided economic investment and held back the army. He authorised secret talks with the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and other senior Kurdish militants in Europe and Iraq. A recently leaked recording of a 2009 meeting between the man who is now Turkey's intelligence chief and various Kurdish representatives reportedly shows how close Mr Erdoğan came to peace.³

Both terrorist attacks and military operations increased after 2009, however. In contrast to 2007, the pre-election rhetoric of the AK Party in 2011 was aimed more at attracting the nationalist vote than the Kurdish vote, and suggestions of decentralisation were not prominent in the campaign. Large-scale hostilities resumed in 2011, with levels of casualties the highest in 13 years.⁴

The large group of Kurdish politicians in parliament has increased the demands for political and constitutional reform to give Kurds greater rights. These demands include greater autonomy, the right to be educated in the Kurdish language, reform of ethnicity requirements for citizenship, a general decentralisation of state power and a reduction in the threshold for parties to take seats in the parliament, which should boost Kurdish representation. However, several Kurdish politicians were disqualified from taking their seats after the 2011 elections, leading to a three-month boycott of parliament.

A new constitution may nevertheless provide some of the reforms the Kurds seek. After many delays, an all-party parliamentary committee was set up in October 2011 to prepare the first draft of the new constitution that has been promised by the government for several years.

The Kurdish movement, including PKK leaders, is often criticised for not disavowing terrorist attacks, and for not publicly committing to realistic political goals. Some Kurds have however supported moves by Leyla Zana, a Kurdish movement leader, to open up a dialogue with the government. Zana met Erdoğan on 30 June 2012 to ask for a revival of talks with the PKK, a proper apology for the killing of 34 Kurdish smugglers and a consideration of a move to house arrest for the jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan.

2.4 Peace process restarted

The peace process between Ankara and Kurdish nationalists restarted in October 2012, with a statement from Öcalan that the PKK's armed struggle should be ended and that he would enter direct negotiations with the Turkish government. In March 2013, Öcalan announced a ceasefire and in April the PKK military chief pledged that PKK fighters would be moved out of Turkey into Northern Iraq, starting in May 2013.

The path towards peace has not been smooth however. A protester was killed in the Kurdish area in June, leading to massive demonstrations in Istanbul, and both sides have complained that the other is failing to honour its commitments. Some have said that the recent unrest in Turkey, with liberal protesters demonstrating in Istanbul against the perceived authoritarianism of the government, will make progress on the Kurdish issue more likely as

³ "Turkey and the Arab Spring", *Economist*, 24 September 2011 [via Factiva]

⁴ Gareth H. Jenkins, "Fighting blind: the AKP's increasingly hardline Kurdish policy", *Turkey Analyst* vol 5 no 17, 12 September 2012; International Crisis Group, "Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement", *Europe Report N°21911*, September 2012

the AP party may attempt to show that it is capable of progressive reform. Others counter that it will make it less likely, as AKP may want to strengthen its ties with its nationalistic support base.

In indication that the authorities in Ankara take the process seriously, it was announced that the Turkish parliament would reconvene earlier than planned to pass the 'democratisation package' law, including measures related to Kurdish-language education, the terrorism laws and a reduction of the 10% threshold in national elections for political parties to enter the parliament. A Kurdish spokesman had earlier set a deadline of 1 September to see concrete action from the government side. With signs that PKK recruitment is on the increase again, the road to reconciliation will not be smooth.⁵

Jonathan Powell, formerly chief of staff for Tony Blair, has been involved in the peace negotiations through the London-based Democratic Progress Institute. He recently expressed hopes that the peace process would not be derailed by recent disagreements and said that Turkey had much to gain from a resolution: "Solving the Kurdish problem will help Turkey get into the European Union."⁶

2.5 Turkey and the Syria conflict

The Syria crisis has led to the emergence of a quasi-autonomous Kurdish region along Turkey's border. Assad's forces left the control of the Kurdish areas of Syria to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is closely tied to the PKK, increasing the risk of insurgents exploiting the power vacuum in Syria.⁷

At first, the reaction of the Turkish government was hostile, with Erdoğan, referring to the links between the PYD and the PKK, saying: "We will not let the terrorist group to set up camps [in northern Syria] and pose a threat to us."⁸ However, as the situation in Syria has become more complicated, Turkish policy there, which seemed to be based on a quick defeat for the Assad regime, has been called into question. Turkey has become increasingly accommodating towards the Kurds in Syria.

The leader of the PYD, Saleh Muslim, was invited to Ankara in July for talks, in which Turkey pledged aid for the Syrian Kurds. There were also indications that the Turkish government would clamp down on Jabhat al-Nusra militants staying in Turkey then shuttling into Syria to join the attack PYD forces. Turkey's broader aim is to get Kurdish forces integrated into the Syrian National Coalition.⁹

3 Iraqi Kurdistan

3.1 20th century violence and massacre

The Kurdistan region of Iraq has a history of difficult relations with the authorities in Baghdad, to say the least. There was prolonged armed conflict in the 1960s, culminating with an agreement with Baghdad in 1970 to create the Kurdish Autonomous Region, with a parliament. No real independence was achieved, however.

⁵ 'Early convening of Turkish legislature reduces risk of Kurdish peace process collapse', *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 12 August 2013

⁶ 'Turkey protests 'must not derail peace process with Kurdish rebels'', *Guardian*, 24 June 2013

⁷ Firdevs Robinson, "Turkey's Juggling Act", *Foreign Policy Centre briefing*, October 2012

⁸ 'Don't provoke us, Erdoğan says in stern warning to Syrian Kurds', *Today's Zaman*, 26 July 2012

⁹ National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. For more information on this see the Library Standard Note *Military forces in Syria and the rise of the jihadis*, April 2013

During the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Kurdish areas, which he considered to be full of traitors to Iraq. The massacre at Halabja in 1988, the worst gas attack against civilians in history,¹⁰ left the Kurdish memory deeply scarred and damaged whatever trust existed between Kurds and Arabs in that country.

When part of the Kurdish region was removed from the influence of Baghdad after the Gulf War of 1990-1991, with the help of a no-fly zone maintained by US and UK air forces, Kurdistan enjoyed *de facto* independence for the first time in many years.

3.2 Oil

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Kurdistan has prospered. Northern Iraq has about 20% of known Iraqi oil reserves,¹¹ although not all these areas are presently administered by the Kurdish regional government. The region's oil reserves, coupled with its relative stability, have been a powerful magnet for oil companies and the region has thus made more progress than the rest of Iraq in investing in its oil productive capacity, despite the failure of the central authorities in Baghdad to pass the legislative framework for contracts. Kurdistan has ignored the debatable legislative basis and signed contracts with international oil companies, offering generally better terms than those available elsewhere in comparable situations. Exxon-Mobil, the world's largest oil company, signed a deal with the KRG in 2011, despite threats from Baghdad to the company's activities in southern Iraq, and Total and Chevron have followed suit. Meanwhile, BP has taken the opposite road and is only working with the central government.

Some analysts have suggested that, as much as an economic strategy, the signing of contracts with oil companies from a wide range of countries is a political move designed to boost the regional government's legitimacy in international circles and to gain international support in the event of a confrontation with the Iraqi central government, perhaps even to gain international support for an independence bid.¹²

Kurdistan's oil production looks set to continue increasing in the medium term, but the region may run into a number of problems: firstly with the central government over its "unlawful" contracts. It may also have difficulty exporting its crude because it is landlocked and must rely on neighbours to get its oil to the international markets. Thirdly, as Iraqi overall production increases, it will eventually hit the production quota ceiling imposed by OPEC. When it does, arguments are likely to begin about how to share the Iraqi quota between southern Iraq and the Kurdish region. Lastly, there remains an enormous problem with the definition of Kurdistan's borders. Some provinces were subject to Saddam Hussein's 'Arabisation' drive, which involved moving Arab Iraqis into oil-rich areas, particularly around Kirkuk. The Kurdish parties claim that these should be included in Kurdistan. It is not clear how this dispute is going to be resolved and it could lead to conflict between the Kurdish and Baghdad authorities.

3.3 Internal politics

The Peshmerga militias that fought against Saddam Hussein are an important part of Kurdish society. With so much violence having been directed against Kurds in the past, it is not surprising that the militias loom so large, and the main Iraqi Kurdish parties, Massoud

¹⁰ For more information see [Recognising the killings of Iraqi Kurds as genocide](#) - Commons Library Standard Note, February 2013

¹¹ US Energy Information Administration, [Iraq](#)

¹² Joost Hilteerman, "Ethnic interests could trump economic sense", *Financial Times*, 7 December 2011

Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have strong roots in the Peshmerga (‘those who face death’). They are also thought to have their own informal militias. Massoud Barzani is the president of the Kurdish Regional Government and Jalal Talabani is the President of Iraq (real power in Baghdad belongs to the Prime Minister). It may be that the militarised past and the possible security threats of the future, combined with the nepotistic power of the two main political groups, are undermining the democracy in the autonomous region.

Years of fighting between the two parties led to a full-blown civil war in 1994 with each party controlling its own part of the Kurdish north of Iraq. At the same time there were attacks from assorted militant groups and from neighbouring countries Turkey and Iran. The KDP and the PUK signed a peace deal in Washington in 1998, although the administration of the region remained split between the two. By 2002, the imminent invasion of Iraq was concentrating minds and the two parties started to work together. At the first 2005 Iraqi election, Kurdish parties formed an alliance that took a sizeable slice of the seats in the national parliament in Baghdad.

The 2005 Kurdish elections installed Massoud Barzani of the KDP as president and a coalition of the two parties dominated the regional assembly.

At the 2009 regional assembly election, the KDP/PUK coalition still dominated, but a new party, Goran (Change), gained 25 seats in the 111-seat chamber. Goran had campaigned against corruption in the ruling parties.

Election, 25 July 2009

	Seats
Kurdistani List (PUK and KDP)	59
Movement for Change (Gorran)*	25
Service and Reform List†	13
Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan	2
Freedom and Social Justice List	1
Minority Groups	11
Total	111

* Established in 2006 by former members of the PUK.

† Comprises the Kurdistan Islamic Union, Islamic Group in Kurdistan, Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party and Future Party.[1]

Source: Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (Iraq), in Europa World online.

In February 2010, inspired by the uprisings in the Arab world, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Suleimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan, a stronghold of the Gorran movement. They were protesting against the corruption of the elite formed of the KDP and the PUK. Protesters complained that the monopolisation of the economy, civil society groups and education by a small group means that it is difficult to get a job or do anything without the right connections in the main parties.

The protest was violently suppressed. Two demonstrators were killed by gunmen suspected of being members of the ruling parties' militias.

While the respective parties of the Barzanis and the Talabanis have been cohabiting in government since 2005, the coalition may not survive for ever. In practice the two parties control different parts of the KAR and their cooperation could be described as little better than a ceasefire. The unstable situation in Syria could spark new conflict between them, particularly if the Syrian Kurds end up fighting to preserve their autonomy, a situation which could draw in the PKK too.¹³

3.4 Relations between the KRG and the Iraqi government

The Kurdish Regional Government has been increasing its autonomy and earning the annoyance of the Shia-led central government of Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad.

Kurds including Bazsani and the Iraqi President Jalal Talabani participated enthusiastically in the attempt in 2012 to pass a motion of no confidence in Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki. This did nothing to ease strained relations between the KRG and Baghdad. Coupled with Kurdish defiance over its oil industry and its growing de facto autonomy from central government, many commentators have worried about the potential for a military clash between the two sides. This nearly happened in 2012, when the two sides' armed forces came close to fighting over disputed territory around Kirkuk and close to the Syrian border.

The dramatic shift in power and allegiances was demonstrated when the Iraqi Vice-President, Tareq al-Hashemi, a Sunni Arab, fled to Iraqi Kurdistan when accused of terrorist-related offences. In the (Sunni) Kurdish Autonomous Region he was beyond the reach of Baghdad's security forces.

However, there are recent signs that relations are thawing, helped along by changing electoral threats to the governing parties in Baghdad and Erbil. The coalitions that both Barzani and al-Maliki depend on to retain power are not guaranteed to remain in place at forthcoming elections. Al-Maliki is threatened by the party of Muqtada al-Sadr and by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, with national parliamentary elections due in 2014. In the regional assembly, the Kurdistan list, composed of the PUK and the KDP, has also been questioned ahead of the Kurdish elections scheduled for September 2013. Both are said to be looking for support from the other to maintain power.

Against this background, Massoud Barzani made a highly important visit to Baghdad in July 2013. The two men set special committees to work to find resolutions to the problems between the two sides; although these committees may find their work difficult, the symbolic importance of the meeting is widely agreed.

Despite economic progress and promising external relations, the Kurdistan Regional Government is accused of human rights abuses, although not on the scale seen in the rest of Iraq. Amnesty International reports cases of illegal detention and torture, particularly of Wali Yunis Ahmad, who was detained without charge for 10 years and tortured, then he was convicted of terrorist offences committed while he was in custody, and sentenced to a further five years, despite the court acknowledging that he had been detained unlawfully.¹⁴

¹³ For more information on relations between the PKK, the KDP the PUK and Syria's PYD, see Dimitar Bechev, 'Syria: the Kurdish view', European Council on Foreign Relations, 24 June 2013

¹⁴ *Iraq: A decade of abuses*, Amnesty International, March 2013, p31

Corruption and nepotism are reported to be rife in the autonomous region (Iraq as a whole has one of the worst reputations for corruption in the world),¹⁵ and the authorities try to prevent journalists from investigating it.¹⁶ The concentration of power in the hands of two clans, the Barzanis and the Talabanis, has resulted in the elite controlling swathes of the economy and personal fortunes being made by top officials and their relatives of. Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor has grown much wider and public services remain poor.

3.5 Relations with Turkey

Turkey was originally hostile towards the Kurdish Autonomous Region, understandably worried about the implications that Kurdish autonomy in Iraq would have for the Kurdish question in Turkey. Turkey also accused the Kurdish Regional Government of harbouring PKK fighters in the mountains along the border with Turkey and allowing them to mount raids on Turkish territory. In response, Turkish forces bombed PKK bases in Iraqi territory in 2011 in raids lasting for six days resulting in the deaths of perhaps 100 PKK militants. Further military actions were taken in 2012.

Turkey has also been opposed to the KAR's claim to include the city of Kirkuk, which is rich in oil and whose population would probably favour inclusion in the autonomous region, fearing that the larger and more successful the KAR, the more likely it will be to encourage Kurdish separatists in Turkey.

Economic realities have largely been responsible for a remarkable turnaround in Turkey's attitude. While the proposed Iraqi law regulating contracts for the exploitation of Iraq's hydrocarbon resources has languished in Baghdad for years, the Kurdish Regional Government has decided to go ahead and sign contracts with international oil companies and has quickly increased its oil production. In disputes over payments to the KRG from Baghdad, the Kurds have completely suspended oil exports via Baghdad on more than one occasion. Now, much of the growing production goes to energy-hungry Turkey, bypassing the Iraqi national oil pipeline network. More than 1,000 Turkish companies are in turn working in the Kurdish Autonomous Region, where a construction boom is underway.¹⁷

The Turkish government has risked relations with the Shia-led Iraqi government in Baghdad by trading in Kurdish oil.

So far, exports to Turkey have been by tanker, but the KRG has said that a new oil pipeline to Turkey will be ready in September 2013,¹⁸ further cementing the region's economic autonomy. It remains to be decided whether the pipeline will avoid the Iraqi national network entirely and take Kurdish oil directly to Turkey. The US government does not support the pipeline because it fears that it will make the breakup of Iraq more likely.

The Kurdish Regional Government has a complicated relationship with the Turkish PKK. Although the PKK is largely based in the mountains of Kurdish northern Iraq and the region has agreed that PKK fighters should withdraw there as part of the Turkish/PKK peace process, the PKK and Barzani's KDP remain rivals for the leadership of the overall Kurdish movement.

¹⁵ [Corruption Perceptions Index 2012](#), Transparency International, 2013

¹⁶ 'Kurdistan: The Next Autocracy?', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 3 July 2013

¹⁷ Ofra Bengio, 'Will the Kurds Get Their Way?', *The American Interest*, November/December 2012

¹⁸ 'Turkey-Kurdistan Pipeline to be Completed September', *Wall Street Journal*,

4 Syria

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the dominant force in the Kurdish region of Syria. The PYD accepts Abdullah Öcalan of the Turkish PKK as its ultimate leader and sometimes uses PKK insignia. Its relations with the main Kurdish parties in the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq are not good, because of its affiliation with the terrorist-designated PKK.

The present conflict is both a threat and an opportunity for the country's Kurds. After initial regime attempts to suppress the rebellion in the Kurdish region in 2011, where thousands demonstrated for an end to the Assad regime, government forces performed a tactical retreat in 2012, largely abandoning Kurdish region and leaving the Kurds to set up a de facto autonomous region. The Syrian government's decision may also have been intended as retaliation against Turkey for its outspoken support for the rebellion. Relative calm was established in the Kurdish region.

However, with the rise in power of radical Islamist groups in Syria, there has been increasing conflict in the region between Jabhat al-Nusra, a group affiliated to al-Qaeda, and Kurdish fighters, particularly in the town of Ras al-Ayn. It is reported that many of these fighters were based in Turkey near the border with Syria and were crossing over to join the fighting, unmolested by Turkish authorities.¹⁹ On the back of improved relations with Turkey, however, the PYD hopes that Turkish officials will prevent radical militants entering Syria from Turkey to attack Kurdish positions. Meanwhile, Turkish Kurds have also entered Syria to join the fight against the largely Arab Jabhat al-Nusra.

The PYD has requested independent representation at the forthcoming Geneva conference on the future of Syria.

5 Iranian Kurds

Iran's Kurds number anywhere between five and 12 million out of a total population of some 75 million and are concentrated in the country's northwest, particularly in the provinces of Elam, Kermanshah, and Kordistan. The Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims, while the Persian or Farsi majority is Shiite.

In Iran, political dissent is barely tolerated from any quarter, and security legislation is often used to suppress critical comment, prevent demonstrations and harass and imprison opposition leaders, who have alleged ill-treatment and torture.²⁰ This is particularly the case in Iran's minority ethnic areas such as those where Kurds and Arabs live.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, there was a particularly fierce wave of repression against the Kurds, resulting in the death of some 10,000 and the destruction of scores or even hundreds of villages. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s both governments fomented rebellion by Kurds on the other side of the border, while ruthlessly crushing it on their own side.

Attacks against Iranian government targets sometimes take place, normally conducted by the PJAK, the Kurdish Free Life Party. The PJAK is affiliated to the terrorist-designated Turkish PKK and, like the PKK has fighters based in the mountainous regions of Iraqi Kurdistan. In

¹⁹ 'From threat to dialogue before the Syrian Kurds', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 30 July 2013

²⁰ *Iran: Freedom of Expression and Association in the Kurdish Regions*, Human Rights Watch, January 2009

2011, Iranian troops invaded northern Iraq and inflicted a “heavy and historic defeat” on the PJAK bases there.²¹

Other Kurdish parties in Iran such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran and Komala, a left-wing party, have recently tried to unify around a common programme, possibly with the intention of marginalising the PJAK, whose connection with the terrorist-designated Turkish PKK is resented by some.²²

According to a Kurdish Iranian MP, Persian Iranians continue to discriminate against Kurds, even those Persians in favour of democracy:

Persians who are fighting for democracy do not wish to apply democracy to nations such as Kurds, Azeris, Arabs and this goes back to racist reasoning... There is also classist oppression from Persian elite.²³

Amnesty International released a report in 2008 saying that there is widespread oppression of Iran’s Kurdish minority:

The Iranian authorities do allow the Kurdish language to be used in certain broadcasts and some publications. Expressions of Kurdish culture, such as dress and music, are respected. However, when Kurdish rights activists link their human rights work – drawing attention to the government’s failure to observe international human rights standards - to their Kurdish identity they risk further violations of their rights. All too often, these brave individuals have found themselves in jail or targeted for other abuses.²⁴

The oppression leads to a general marginalisation and economic disadvantage for Iranian Kurds, according to Amnesty, and the situation worsened after the election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to the Iranian presidency in 2005. Any expression of dissent makes journalists and writers liable to arrest and may result in their being accused of ‘enmity against God’, a catch-all offence that is often used in Iran to prosecute regime opponents. Human Rights Watch reported in 2012 that ‘At least 28 Kurdish prisoners are also known to be awaiting execution on various national security charges, including ‘enmity against God’.²⁵

The powerful commander of Iran’s Qods Force, overseas branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, has warned against a break away by Iraqi Kurdistan. A PUK official said that Qasem Soleimani, the Qods commander, told the PUK delegation: “You should not think about the division of Iraq and harming Kurdish-Shiite relations,” Soleimani also asked the delegation to “keep their distance from Turkey and not join their axis,”²⁶ a reference to Turkey’s pro-Western and anti-Assad alignment.

6 Conclusion

There is a broad re-alignment under way in relation to Kurds. Fighting in Syria and bombings in Iraq threaten the stability of the whole region and many analysts have said that the arrangement of states in the region, based on the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, is now in

²¹ [Iranian troops attack Kurdish PJAK rebel bases in Iraq](#), *BBC News Online*, 18 July 2011

²² [“New Iranian Kurdish Front: A Means of Isolating PJAK?”](#), *Rudaw*, 3 October 2012

²³ “Kurds have the right to demand federal areas: Kurdish Iranian MP”, *al-Arabiyya*, 11 August 2012

²⁴ [Iran: Human rights abuses against the Kurdish minority](#), Amnesty International, 2008

²⁵ [Codifying Repression – An assessment of Iran’s New Penal Code](#), Human Rights Watch, 28 August 2012

²⁶ ‘Iran Tells Iraq’s Kurds: Don’t Think about Independence or Closer Ties with Turkey’, *Rudaw*, 13 February 2013

question.²⁷ In these circumstances, some Kurds may be thinking that the time for a Kurdish state has now come.

They should not be in too much of a hurry. While Turkey is undoubtedly looking at these developments and may have come to a strategic decision in favour of trying out a rapprochement with the Kurds both inside and outside Turkey, that does not mean that Turkey would allow its Kurdish region to break away.

The breakaway of the Kurdish region of Iraq does look distinctly possible, but the Iraqi government, while it wants to avoid a military clash with Kurdish forces at the same time as trying to control an upsurge of Sunni-Shia violence in its Arab areas, will not simply give in to the break-up of the Iraqi state. In this it is supported, at least at present, by the US. In any case, the Iraqi Kurds may well decide that they are better off as they are than attempting to lead any relatively poor and fractious pan-Kurdish entity.²⁸

Neither is Iran going to give up on its sizeable Kurdish region and the fall of the Islamic Republic is unlikely, despite Iran's present economic difficulties. A federal Syria in which the Kurdish region has substantial autonomy is one possible outcome there, but so is the survival of the Assad regime or, possibly more likely in the end, a new Sunni-dominated government, either of which could re-impose strong central authority.

Much depends of the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK. If that progresses, it is possible to envisage Turkey enjoying an economic resurgence in the east of the country, combined with close alliances with booming, oil-rich Iraqi Kurdistan and a newly-autonomous Syrian Kurdish region. Seeing the shift in Turkish policy, the US may acquiesce to moves that strengthen the Kurds and weaken Iraq, especially if the Maliki government continues to lean towards Iran. This might also have the advantage, in some US perceptions, of encouraging Kurdish dissent in Iran.

Equally, violence could engulf the Kurds in Iraq and Syria and, if the peace process fails, in Turkey too. These are dangerous times in the region.

²⁷ See for example Gareth Stansfield, *The Remaking of Syria, Iraq and the Wider Middle East The End of the Sykes-Picot State System?*, Royal United Services Institute, August 2013

²⁸ Gareth Stansfield, *The Remaking of Syria, Iraq and the Wider Middle East The End of the Sykes-Picot State System?*, Royal United Services Institute, August 2013, p5