

The Kurdish Question in the Middle East: Regional Dynamics and Return to National Control

Olivier Grojean

Lecturer in Political Science

The European Centre for Sociology and Political Science (CESSP), University of Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne and National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Paris

The past four decades have seen an increasing regionalization of the Kurdish question on the Middle East scale. The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the 1991 Gulf War and its consequences throughout the 1990s, US intervention in Iraq in 2003, the Syrian revolution and its repression as of 2011 and finally, the increasing power of the Islamic State as of 2014 have been important vectors for the expansion of Kurdish issues. There has likewise been a diversification and strengthening of non-state actors, and in particular, political parties on the regional level. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, who, since 1923, seek to maintain “the status quo, which consists of collectively combatting Kurdish dissent,”¹ have been obliged to deal with the interventionism of the US and international organizations, whose promoters had neither anticipated nor planned the consequences of the 1991 Gulf War. Hence, for instance, the Iraqi Kurds, through the intermediary of the PDK and the UPK,² progressively gained autonomy from Baghdad after the establishment of the no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel, to the point where they formed a federated autonomous state within Iraq after 2005. By the same token, the threats of US intervention in Iraq led the PKK – originally from Turkey but having its rear-guard in Syria, then in Iraqi Kurdistan – to create sister organizations that have allowed it to expand

its influence in Iran (via the PJAK), in Syria (via the PYD and its SDF, which now control numerous Kurdish and Arab territories) and even in Iraq, near Mont Qandil where it is based, but also in the Maxmûr Kurdish refugee camp in Turkey and the Yazidi regions of Sinjar. In sum, the past few decades have seen a rise in power of Kurdish political parties, which have managed to profoundly regionalize the Kurdish question by allying themselves with regional or global powers. At once both the lifeblood and consequence of this regionalization, the rivalry between the conservative, liberal pole embodied by Barzani’s PDK and the post-Marxist revolutionary pole embodied by the PKK has led to greater interconnection of Kurdish issues in different countries.

A Halt to the Regionalization of the Kurdish Question?

However, the most recent events have called these dynamics into question. In Turkey, the resumption of the armed struggle between the PKK and the Turkish Army – after a ceasefire that had been observed by both sides but that only led to sham negotiations beginning in 2013 – has led to a re-nationalization of the Kurdish issue after 2015, heightened by the massive repression following the failed July 2016 coup. In Iraq, Masoud Barzani’s hopes for independence have been crushed by the lack of international support and the central government’s reaction after the referendum on self-determination in September 2017 that led to the loss of Kirkuk. In Syria, despite the first local elections organized by the PYD and held that same month, the territorial defeat of the Is-

¹ BOZARSLAN, Hamit. *La question kurde. États et minorités au Moyen-Orient*. Paris: Presses de Science Po, 1997, p. 312.

² See the list of abbreviations and acronyms and their expansions in the box in this article. Translator’s Note.

Islamic State allowed Turkey to take control of the region of Afrin (one of the three Kurdish enclaves in Syria, having the consent of Russia and the United States) in March 2018, demonstrating that state actors in the region still had the means to rally or to oppose the major powers and contain these dynamics of regionalization. Finally, in Iran, the end of the armed struggle of the PJAK (2004–2011) coinciding with the onset of the Syrian uprising, as well as intra-Kurdish political rivalries (between the PDKI, the Komala and the PJAK) and the diplomatic influence of the Iranian government in Iraq and Syria (via the Shiite militias and Lebanese Hezbollah) seems to have kept Iranian Kurdistan (at least for the time being) from the regional dynamics of the Kurdish issue.

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It thus seems that government entities are regaining ground in the Middle East; that the Kurdish parties were too optimistic in banking on the collapse of the states in the region and on the support they could mobilize on the international level. But though we are witnessing an ebb in regional party dynamics, nothing would indicate that the states have again become 'strong', capable of legitimizing their power in all areas considered under their control. In fact, domestic unrest (protests against the Erdoğan regime in Turkey, the civil wars still underway in Iraq and Syria, economic crisis in Iran, heightened by the US's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal), socially and geographically localized, limit countries' room for manoeuvre, incapable of containing this diversification of political actors and their cross-border, transnational connections. The defeat of the Islamic State does not mean the end of History in Kurdish

regions and growing local tensions are vectors for new mobilizations.

The Kurds in Their Respective Countries

In Iraq, the Mosul victory against the Islamic State has effectively allowed the central government to regain ground in vast territories, in particular Sunni areas. The regional Kurdish government, which had granted itself greater autonomy than established in the 2005 constitution and had taken control of certain 'disputed areas' in 2014, such as the city of Kirkuk, has had its perspectives cut short by a blockade from Baghdad after the September 2017 independence referendum. This redeployment of the central government in the northern region of the country, particularly in the 'disputed areas,' usually characterized by ethnic and confessional diversity, however, has been carried out thanks to local militia elites co-opted by the large national Shiite parties, in other words, a model unlikely to ease relations between the State and populations, and which could also "foster the return of an organized armed resistance."³ The victory of Moqtada al-Sadr (a Shiite nationalist) in the May 2018 legislative elections, and his plans of alliance with the pro-Iranian Shiite Hadi al-Ameri (head of the national militia organization, Badr) will probably not do much to improve these dynamics, nor will it allow a cooling down of relations with the Kurds. After a number of protests against the 'traditional' political parties in December 2017, the population of Kurdistan still managed to send 58 MPs (out of 320) to the Iraqi Parliament in May, that is, only four less than in the preceding legislature. But the parties are more divided than ever, and disputed, and the economic crisis weighs heavily on these political challenges, with the not-entirely-resolved matter of the share of the national budget allocated to the KRG and the chronic powerlessness of the Iraqi political institutions. The population could also organize outside of parties to struggle for their economic and political survival, above all if intercommunity clashes take place in Kirkuk or other 'disputed areas'.

³ QUESNAY, Arthur, "Retour de l'État et concurrence milicienne dans le nord de l'Irak," *Noria*, 10 May 2018, URL: www.noria-research.com/retour-etat-concurrence-milicienne-nord-irak/. See also AL-RACHID, Loulouwa. "L'Irak après l'État islamique. Une victoire qui change tout ?," *Les notes de l'IFRI*, July 2017, URL: www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/al-rachid_irak_apres_etat_islamique_2017.pdf.

By the same token, in Syria, Russian and above all Iranian support (through Hezbollah) have allowed the Bashar al-Assad Regime to consolidate its power: whereas the Syrian government probably controlled less than 20% of the territory, by the end of September 2015, it controlled over 60%. On their part, the Kurds, who were enjoying unprecedented international enthusiasm and had calmly organized the first local elections in September and December 2017, had to back down before the Turkish forces in Afrin and withdraw from the majority Arab city of Manbij after negotiations between Russia, the United States and Turkey. In any case, it remains to be seen whether the pro-Turkish forces will be able to hold Afrin in the long term, given that abuses against the population, in particular against the Yezidis, have been regularly reported since March 2018. Moreover, the PYD, the YPG/YPJ and the SDF continue to control 25% of the Syrian territory, contributing to institutionalizing the Kobanî and Cizîrê (Jazira) Cantons. Reconstruction, which is very slow because it is being done under extremely difficult conditions, has even allowed the Hasakê-Qamişlo-al-Yaarubiyah rail line, which had not been running since 2005, to be reopened in December 2017.⁴ Growing tension with the regime, while a tacit, tactical pact of non-aggression – or even cooperation – links the PYD to the Bashar al-Assad forces, are also revealing signs of the real autonomization of Rojava, and of the interest held by the United States in stabilizing Syria's north-east area. In fact, despite the little international protest following the Turkish invasion of Afrin (which was not a strategic region for the United States), the Kurds are still crucial actors in the Syrian conflict.

In Turkey, politics are equally affected by the Kurdish issue, particularly since 1984, when the PKK guerrilla emerged. In the June 2015 legislative elections, President Erdoğan wished to consolidate his majority by obtaining Kurdish votes from the south-east area of the country which traditionally votes for the legal pro-Kurdish party, HDP. The direct consequence of the failure of this strategy (the AKP lost its absolute majority and the HDP became the second most voted party in Turkey) was the resumption of war with the PKK. Riding the coattails of the security theme and by repressing the HDP, Erdoğan's

party then won the November 2015 early legislative elections. A few months later, repression of the July 2016 failed coup was directed against sympathizers of Fetullah Gülenmais and against anyone criticizing the government's massive repression, whether they were union leaders, university students... or pro-Kurdish sympathizers. Finally, the April 2017 constitutional referendum granted the President new, inflated powers thanks to its multiple irregularities and completed the transformation of the Turkish parliamentary regime into a presidentialist one: early general elections (legislative and presidential) to be held in June 2018, called just after Turkish intervention in Afrin, aim to lend Erdoğan full powers for the next five to ten years. However, as demonstrated by the Gezi Park movement in 2013, this model is far from satisfying to all Turkish citizens, a significant number of whom are increasingly denouncing Erdoğan's repression, his 'dictatorial' inclinations (cf. spread of the hashtag 'tamam' – 'enough' – on Twitter), corruption and very risky economic management.

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On the international scale, Turkey has likewise lost the credit it had gained in the early 2000s, namely due to its rupturist posture: a NATO member but at odds with the West regarding the Kurds in Syria, becoming increasingly close with Russia while still officially aiming for the departure of Bashar al-Assad, the Turkish government no longer seems to have a strategic vision other than the fight against the Kurds... In short, Turkey's 'renationalization' of the Kurdish question could be but temporary, especially since threats of intervention in Iraq against the PKK have incited the guerrilla to undertake new action. And finally, in Iran, Hassan Rohani's re-election in May 2017 has not changed Kurdish relations with Teheran. Victims of an unprecedented economic cri-

⁴ *Bulletin de liaison et d'information de l'Institut kurde de Paris*, No. 393, December 2017, p. 3.

sis aggravated by the closing of the border with Iraqi Kurdistan, the Iranian Kurds seem to have been sidelined from the regionalization dynamics. However, the numerous social and political protests in December 2017 and January 2018 as well as the strike movement demanding the borders be re-opened that began in May and June 2018 demonstrate that the Kurdish society remains mobilized despite the repression. Especially since these protest movements arise after the PDKI's decision to heighten the struggle against the regime and since the different Kurdish parties are trying to coordinate their action more. In February 2018, protests in support of the Afrin Kurds also revealed Teheran's inability to completely suppress these cross-border solidarities.

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Thus, Kurdistan is subject to a sort of pendular motion between regional dynamics and a return to being under national control. The action of international powers such as the US or Russia, decisive in the Syrian conflict but devoid of long-term vision, has both strengthened Kurdish political parties and given states margin for manoeuvring. But the growing social and political tension in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, far from diminishing with the defeat of the Islamic State, emerges today as a powerful catalyst for renewed regionalization.

Abbreviations Cited in the Text

AKP: *Adaletve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party, a conservative Islamic party. The

party of the President of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government, an autonomous government established by the 2005 Iraqi constitution, dominated by Barzani's PDK.

HDP: *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party, the legal pro-Kurdish party of Turkey, active on the national level since 2014.

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces (*Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk*, HSD), a military coalition led by the YPG and, since late 2015, consisting of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian groups (pro-PYD/PKK).

Komala: Revolutionary Workers' Organization of Iranian Kurdistan (*Komalay Shoreshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistanî Iran*), an organization founded in 1969 in Iranian Kurdistan.

PDK: *Partîya Demokrata Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Democratic Party, founded in Iraq in 1946 and led first by Mustafa then Masoud Barzani, President of the KRG until the September 2017 referendum.

PDKI: *Partîya Demokrata Kurdistanê Iran*, Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, founded in 1945.

PKK: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers' Party, founded in 1978 in Turkey and led by Abdullah Öcalan until his arrest in 1999.

PJAK: *Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Free Life Party, sister organization to the PKK created in April 2004 in Iran.

PYD: *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party, sister organization to the PKK created in September 2003 in Syria.

UPK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekîtiya Nîştîmanîya Kurdistan*, YNK), a splinter party from Barzani's PDK splitting in 1975 and founded by Jalal Talabani (the former Iraqi President from 2005 to 2014 who died in Berlin in 2017).

YPG: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, People's Protection Units, the armed branch of the PYD in Syria (pro-PKK).

YPJ: *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, Women's Protection Units, the female armed branch of the PYD in Syria, the female counterpart of the YPG (pro-PKK).