



## Report

### **Kurdish politics amid the fight against the ISIS Can a common cause surmount old rivalries?**

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Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq. Germany has been supplying the Kurds with weapons and training to fight Isis. (DPA)

### **Abstract**

The conflict with ISIS is reshaping regional dynamics in a way that will likely affect the course of Kurdish politics for years to come. Driven by the struggle against a common enemy, several emerging trends can be viewed as largely positive: the emergence of a common Kurdish public sphere and a common Kurdish politics; the enhanced emphasis on the secular nature of Kurdish politics; and renewed efforts for security sector reform in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These positive trends, however, are not the only outcome of the fight between the Kurds and ISIS. Beneath the euphoria and the hyperbole of a renewed Kurdish unity, the seeds of discord and rivalry have been planted as well. This rivalry, reminiscent of the old bloody rivalries in Kurdish politics, is taking place on two interconnected levels: in Iraqi Kurdish politics, between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK); and regionally, between the KDP (based in Iraq) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, based in Turkey). The political skills and dexterity of Kurdish politicians will decide whether this transitional moment will lead to further pan-Kurdish cooperation or lead to a widening rift between different Kurdish factions.

### **A common threat stokes nationalist sentiment**

The rise of the self-styled Islamic State, or ISIS, has brought Kurdish politics under the international spotlight, attracting unprecedented levels of interest and scrutiny from foreign diplomats, security establishments, international observers, and regional experts.

For the Kurdish people, the phenomenon of ISIS represents a grave threat but also a new opportunity. On the one hand, Kurdish demands for statehood in Iraq, autonomy in Syria, and political settlement in Turkey appeared to nearly collapse as a result of the ISIS offensive in both Iraq and Syria. In fact, the political settlement process in Turkey has already collapsed. The situation damaged not only the reputation of the Iraqi Kurdish forces (the peshmerga), who initially retreated from their posts against advancing ISIS forces, but also damaged the confidence of the Kurdish political elite and the morale of the Kurdish people. (1)

On the other hand, the common danger presented by ISIS provided an impetus for the emergence of a common Kurdish public sphere (2) and politics, and enhanced international prestige for Kurdish politics. In particular, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), aided directly and indirectly by U.S. military support, proved to be a capable fighting force that could withstand the ISIS offensive. Moreover, the danger posed by ISIS triggered a process of much needed security sector reform in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, while the Kurds in Syria and Iraq did incur heavy humanitarian casualties along with economic, political, and security costs, they also made significant gains as a result of the fight against ISIS. This especially has been the case as the Iraqi Kurds who, after overcoming initial shocks and setbacks, proved to be a capable fighting force.

After initial military setbacks, the Kurds, with the backing of international air power, halted the ISIS offensive and pushed it back from Kurdish-majority territories. ISIS is now mostly contained, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan. The threat posed by ISIS to the Syrian Kurds has significantly diminished as well. The climax of this pushback against ISIS came with the liberation of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani, which had endured an ISIS siege for more than four months in early 2015. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, no other battle has received as much international media coverage as Kobani during the fight between the Kurds and ISIS. Thus, Kobani acquired a symbolic significance beyond its size and strategic importance. In the process, Kobani gained a special status in the Kurdish national consciousness.

Nationalism and nationalist projects are, as Michel Foucault calls them, "discursive formations", meaning ways of speaking that shape people's consciousness, heavily informed by symbolism including historical narratives, social solidarity, a common identity, a common culture, a common creed, shared heroes, etc., which are threaded together and given meanings through a particular way of speaking and narrating. (3) In this respect, the liberation of Kobani has provided Kurdish nationalism with a significant narrative together with new images and symbolism.

In this regard, just as the initial ISIS onslaught against the Kurds ushered in a “Kurdo-pessimism”, the subsequent pushback erased this initial pessimism, giving way to an unprecedented level of euphoria among the wider Kurdish society. The capture of the strategic Syrian northern border town of Tal Abyad—a lifeline for ISIS, enabling it to transfer fighters and goods to its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa—by Syrian Kurdish forces People’s Protection Unit (YPG) further contributed to the Kurds’ optimism and victorious mood. (4) As Cale Salih argued, “The YPG’s victory in Kobani was symbolically significant, but Tal Abyad offers far more strategic value. Long-term control of Tal Abyad would further the YPG’s goal of connecting the non-contiguous zones of territory it holds across northern Syria, which it organizes into three ‘cantons’: Afrin (north-west of Aleppo); Kobani (west of Tal Abyad); and al-Jazira (northeast Hasakeh province). If the YPG is able to hold Tal Abyad and use it to connect Kobani to al-Jazira, it will increase its strategic value to the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition and will empower its self-governance structures in predominately Kurdish north-eastern Syria.” (5) Indeed, the YPG has been able to hold Tal Abyad, thus creating territorial contiguity between two (Jazira and Kobani) of its three cantons.

With this achievement in the background, the YPG has shifted its focus towards capturing the remaining area between Kobani and Afrin, namely Jarablus and Azez, for creating full territorial contiguity between its cantons. Turkey has declared this area a “red line” and threatened military intervention if the YPG attempts to take control of it. Though taking this warning seriously, the YPG nevertheless crossed this line—but not under its own flag. To seize this area, Kurdish forces advanced under the banner of the U.S.-created Syrian Democratic Forces, the backbone of which is formed by the YPG, but which also includes a fraction of Arabs and Turkoman forces trained to fight ISIS.

Moreover, despite initial American/Western reservations, the U.S.-led coalition eventually supported the YPG with air strikes and shared intelligence. This partnership in the fight against ISIS has had the effect of increasing the international legitimacy of the YPG and its political wing, the PYD.

Combined, these developments have created a foundation for the remarkable level of elation and confidence amongst the Kurds. Pronouncements of Kurdish unity and the international prestige of Kurdish politics have dominated the headlines of publications linked to the Kurdish national movement. Even beyond the political class, some scholars of Kurdish affairs have claimed that the Kurds have never before attained such a level of influence in regional politics and international legitimacy. (6) Such analysis encouraged

and confirmed Kurds in their self-confidence and self-congratulation. The increased sense of empowerment among the Kurdish political class in Turkey received a further boost after the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) gained eighty seats in the June 2015 Turkish parliamentary election, (7) which subsequently decreased to 59 MPs in the snap election held on November 1, 2015. In the wake of these developments, talk circulated of imminent independence for Iraqi Kurds, and a victorious mood prevailed among the Syrian Kurds. (8)

Though it is valid to say that the fight against ISIS has bestowed further legitimacy upon the aspirations of Kurdish national movements, one still should be wary of bold pronouncements that "the Kurdish time has arrived". Neither should this over-enthusiasm conceal other trends that have been ushered in by the same process, and which present the possibility of drastic consequences. The seeds of a menacing rivalry between different Kurdish factions, which could upset all Kurdish political calculations, have been sown. (9) Though Kurds have travelled a long way from the internecine conflicts of the 1990s, they are not yet immune to the possibility of deadly rivalries erupting.

Therefore, a thorough analysis of the Kurds' fight against ISIS needs to take into account these two different trajectories. A sound judgment as to how regional Kurdish politics will evolve as a result of the fight against ISIS can be attained only once the positive and negative repercussions of this fight are duly analyzed. In this respect, it is necessary to divide these repercussions into positive and negative categories in order to systematically examine their implications for regional Kurdish politics.

### **The emergence of a common Kurdish public sphere**

Historically speaking, it was difficult to articulate a common Kurdish public sphere because the Kurdish community was divided across four different nation states—Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran—as a result of the post-World War I settlement. The divergent agendas of these host states shaped the local Kurdish outlook and political projection. In their political struggles, Kurds fought their own battles against the nation state whose borders they were living within. For Turkish Kurds, Turkey became the constitutive other (10) of their nation-building process. For Iraqi Kurds, it was Iraq; for Iranian Kurds, Iran; and for Syrian Kurds, Syria. As a result, "Turkish Kurds", "Syrian Kurds", "Iraqi Kurds", and "Iranian Kurds" were the favored—and probably more accurate—descriptors, rather than the more general terminology of "Kurds".

In their political struggle, Kurds fought their own battle against the nation state whose borders they were living in. For Turkey's Kurds, it was Turkey that became their nation-building process' constitutive other. For Iraqi Kurds, it was Iraq, for Iranian Kurds, Iran, and for Syrian Kurds, Syria.

Such description of the Kurds was largely a function of the preference of the nation states in which the Kurds were residing. Affixing the Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian adjective in front of the Kurdish noun had three primary implications: First, such a depiction relegated the Kurds to minority status in the respective nation-states where they lived. Second, it denied the existence of a Kurdish nation with its attendant rights and privileges. Third, it rejected the existence of a Kurdish homeland, though divided amongst four nation-states, that is regarded by the constitutive elements of the Kurdish nation as a contiguous political, geographical, and cultural space. As a corollary, these nation states have named the territories the Kurds were living in not in relation to the Kurds, but in relation to the nation states within whose borders the Kurds were residing. For instance, Turkish official discourse has traditionally referred to Iraqi Kurdistan as Northern Iraq, emphasizing the primacy of the Iraqi nation-state and denying the Kurds the right to claim a historical geography and homeland that cuts across the boundaries that divided them between modern day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. (11) In contrast, the Kurds treat Kurdistan as a single unit divided among four nation states. As such, they prefer geographical terminology that reflects such a reading of Kurdistan. In referring to the different parts of the Kurdish homeland, the Kurdish political class employs the following vocabularies: Bakur (North, Turkish Kurdistan), Bashur (South, Iraqi Kurdistan), Rojhelat (East, Iranian Kurdistan), and Rojava (West, Syrian Kurdistan). (12) This implies unitary nature of Kurdistan, rather than a fragmented one.

Though Kurdish nationalism treated Kurdistan as a single unit, at least at the discursive level, few instances and issues, if any, in the last century have created incentive and impetus for the Kurds of all parts of Kurdistan to realize and emphasize this point. (13) The fight against ISIS has provided a unique opportunity in this respect. It has given fresh impetus to the reading of Kurdistan as a single unit, rekindling the pan-Kurdish idea of Kurdistan. For the first time in history, Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan seem to believe that they face the same enemy: ISIS. For once, the media in all parts of Kurdistan spoke of the same enemy. Kurdish political leaders referred to the same impending danger. Likewise, not only Kurds living in the Middle East, but also the diaspora protested against the same group: ISIS. ISIS has not only become the Kurdish nation's constitutive other, the fight against ISIS has also revitalized the idea of Kurdistan as a single unit.

In her comparison between the “Arab revolution” and the Kurdish revolution, (14) Ofra Bengio argues that “while the Arab revolutions brought to the surface the cracks and divisions within the Arab societies, in the Kurdish case we notice a growing tendency toward trans-border cooperation and unity. Thus, if the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the division of the Kurdish territories between four states so that ties among the different communities could only be maintained randomly, the beginning of the twentieth-first century, and especially its latest upheavals, brought them closer together. It opened the way for some degree of pan-Kurdism and somehow mitigated the chronic tendency toward tribalism, internal wars, and factionalism.” (15) Though this argument is yet to be substantiated at the political level, it seems to be plausible once the Kurdish society becomes the primary unit of the analysis.

This political aspect has been strengthened with the inclusion of an emotional ingredient, which plays an indispensable role in the development of any form of a shared belonging. (16) Cross-border funerals and transnational grief have become a defining feature of the struggle against ISIS. Deceased bodies of young Kurds have travelled from Syria and Iraq to Turkey, and from Syria to Iraqi Kurdistan. (17) To borrow Benedict Anderson’s terminology, such occurrences of cross-border grief do not only make “the imagined community” real, but also create shared pain among the constituent members. (18) In a sense, it transforms the community of common ethnic origins and language into community bonded by sentiment, emotion, and ideology. (19) All in all, ISIS has become the Kurdish nation’s constitutive other on the regional level, but without completely replacing Kurdish national politics’ traditional constitutive other, namely the four host states. For example, the resumption of low-intensity warfare between the PKK and Turkey since July 2015 has once again mobilized Kurdish nationalist politics and feelings against Turkey.

### **The emergence of a fragile common Kurdish politics**

The emergence of the Kurdish public sphere amid the fight against ISIS set the stage for the emergence of a common Kurdish political scene. (20) This fragile political scene has manifested itself in several different ways. The two main veins of Kurdish regional politics—the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, and the Ocalan-led Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) in Turkey—have, in several important instances, set aside their traditional rivalries and cooperated. The PKK provided support to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in defense of Makmour, Mount Sinjar, Kirkuk, and other places under threat in the KRG. The KRG, but particularly the KDP, reciprocated by

sending peshmerga fighters to Kobani to aid the PKK's sister party, PYD, in its fight against ISIS. This help, coupled with support from the U.S.-led coalition, saved Kobani from falling to ISIS. Moreover, the KRG's parliament recognized the three PYD-administered cantons in northern Syria, or Rojava in Kurdish.

The thaw in relations expressed itself further in the KDP facilitating a meeting of the different Syrian Kurdish factions in Duhok, KRG, which culminated in the Duhok Agreement on 22 October 2014. (21) According to the Duhok Agreement, the pro-KDP Syria Kurdish National Council and pro-PKK PYD agreed to establish a joint political and military administration for the three Kurdish cantons in Syria: Kobani, Afrin, and Jazeera. While the current PYD administration will continue, it will be more inclusive in its administrative structure. (22)

The Duhok Agreement represented an important step forward for intra-Kurdish reconciliation in Syria and, by extension, the entire region, as Kurdish Syria has become the main battleground between the PKK and KDP to dominate Kurdish politics. (23) The impact of the Duhok Agreement, however, remains symbolic as the agreement's provisions have yet to be enacted.

Numerous sources of friction remain between the parties. (24) In fact, as the threat posed by ISIS has decreased since late March 2015, bickering has increased among the Kurdish leadership.

### **Secularism clouded with the language of Islam; or secularism a la Kurd**

All the groups that the Kurds currently face are adherents of variants of Islamist politics, mostly in its radical forms. (25) This has led Kurdish political leaders to further emphasize the secular nature of their politics, and highlight this feature as a social-marker of Kurdish politics in the region. This can be seen in the emphasis on the representation of women; the inclusion of people of different faiths (or no faith) within party organizations; the non-religious content of the proposed social contract of Rojava; and the incessant criticism of Islamism. These are all part of a strategy that aims to set Kurdish politics apart from other dominant actors, notably the Islamist factions of the Syrian opposition, and hardline religious elements in contemporary Iraqi, Iranian, and Turkish politics. Kurdish leaders believe this distinction will earn Kurds more international legitimacy and support.



Yet at the same time, Kurdish politicians have also resorted to the language of Islam when communicating with their domestic constituencies. Given that Islam influences the political inclinations of its adherents and is a potent mobilizing force in the region, Kurdish politicians sense they cannot remain oblivious to the language of Islam. In the end, the language of Islam adopted by the Kurds' adversaries resonates with a segment of its own constituency. The significant number of the Kurds from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq joining the ranks of the ISIS is a case in point. (26) In response, Kurdish political groups have shown a willingness to play the Islamic card and have adopted, partially, the language of Islam as a discursive shield. For example, the PKK's offshoot organization, the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) organized the Democratic Islamic Congress in Diyarbakir in 2014, which was later reconvened on several occasions. (27) KRG President Masoud Barzani's increasing use of religion in his public speeches illustrate this tendency among Kurdish factions.

### **Security sector reform**

During the ISIS offensive against the Kurds, the vaunted peshmerga forces disappointed many, but particularly the Kurds, by hastily abandoning their military posts. The inability to withstand the advancing ISIS forces in the initial stages of the fight immeasurably tarnished the image of the peshmergas. Suddenly, the once revered and feared peshmergas appeared to be nothing more than paper tigers.

Kurdish public officials and seasoned observers of Kurdish politics have attempted to identify the causes of the military failure. Several factors were cited and various explanations were offered to account for this military retreat. For example, the relative security that has reigned in Kurdish Iraq led to apathy, the peshmergas' involvement in extra-military affairs weakened their focus, and their lack of proper equipment and training were said to have all contributed to the poor performance on the battlefield. (28) Besides these, there are other more structural factors at work. The fragmented nature of the Kurdish peshmergas' command structure along partisan lines, the divided loyalties of its constituent parts, and the lack of national imagination of its members can be cited as such structural factors that crippled the peshmergas' ability as a fighting force.

Both sets of factors pointed to the same urgent need: security sector reform. ISIS' offensive made clear the acute need for security sector reform in the KRG. (29) To that effect, the KRG has undertaken several steps. On 23 July 2014, a week after the ISIS captured Mosul and marched toward KRG's capital Erbil, the Kurdish parliament ordered

the KRG to unify all peshmerga forces within six months. (30) A parliamentary committee was established to oversee this projected transition from party militias into a national army. Foreign military advisers were brought in to drive the restructuring efforts and military training. (31)

These steps, if implemented successfully, would have helped the KRG transform its peshmerga forces from party militias with divided partisan loyalties to a genuine national army with its loyalty located at the national level. Yet almost one and half years since the parliamentary decree, progress has failed to materialize in the de-politicization, professionalization, and nationalization of the peshmerga forces. Partisan loyalties still rule supreme. As such, the defense and security architecture of Iraqi Kurdistan is yet to be delinked from partisan considerations.

Conventional wisdom suggests that army building is a prerequisite of nation building. As such, the recent fight between the KRG and ISIS should prove beneficial for the long-term Kurdish nation-building process in the sense that it created urgency and momentum for the unification and nationalization of the Kurdish security forces.

Yet, the political leadership, for one reason or another, has failed to capitalize on this. And as the level of danger posed by ISIS to Iraqi Kurdistan recedes, so does the appetite for the unification, nationalization, professionalization, and de-politicization of the peshmerga forces. Despite repeated calls from President Barzani that the time for Kurdish independence has long arrived, and that the Kurds are ready to press forward with independence, the state of Iraqi Kurdistan's security establishment suggests that the Kurds still have a long road to travel.

As outlined above, the fight with ISIS has generated several new trends in Kurdish politics in the Near East. Most of these trends are likely to embolden Kurdish national aspirations and aid its politics in the medium and long term. However, one should not be overly optimistic. The same process has also introduced several alarming new trends and causes for friction in regional Kurdish politics. The seeds for dangerous rivalry between different Kurdish groups in the region have been sown. (32) If allowed to materialize, this scenario might prove ominous for the Kurds in the Middle East. This rivalry, which is reminiscent of the old, bloody rivalries in Kurdish politics, is taking place along two axes: on the regional level, between the KDP and the PKK; and within the context of the KRG, between the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Therefore, a thorough account of the effects of the fight against ISIS should set the positive developments against the negative developments that could potentially materialize.

## Who will define the future of the KRG?

Within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the KDP and PUK—the two traditional ruling parties of Iraqi Kurdistan—have been engaged in a simmering rivalry. As the KDP has progressively come to dominate Kurdish politics in the KRG, and as the PUK has gradually lost ground to the Goran (Change) Movement (a splinter group originating from the PUK), the PUK feels cornered. This is especially the case in Sulaymaniyah Province, PUK's traditional stronghold, where the PUK has recently lost ground.

The PUK is now searching for ways to recover some of its losses, and it is believed that ISIS' offensive in Iraqi Kurdistan in August/September 2014 provided such an opportunity. The peshmergas' initial retreat from some of the areas attacked by ISIS gave the PUK a political opening, as the retreating peshmerga were seen as belonging to the KDP. (33) During this period, PUK-affiliated media outlets blamed KDP forces for withdrawing from the crucial border area of Sinjar without a fight, thereby facilitating the massacre of Yazidi civilians and the enslavement of Yazidi women. (34)

The KRG's prestige and public standing was dented by these attacks, and the PUK tried to frame this early setback as the KDP's inability to protect Kurdish lives, rights, and the Kurdish cause. Moreover, while PUK cast its own struggle in the lexicon of a national cause, it framed the KDP's cause as that of tribe and party. (35) The KDP hit back by accusing the PUK of seeking cheap gains through propaganda. If this corrosive rhetoric continues, the drive by the PUK to reclaim its waning influence in Kurdish politics might cause lasting harm to KDP relations, and result in dire consequences for Kurdish politics in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Beside the war of words, the KRG has been embroiled in a heated dispute over the election—or re-election—of its president. The term of the incumbent Masoud Barzani, who has served as KRG president since 2005, expired in August 2015. Since then, the question of what should happen in the aftermath of this expiry has been a topic of great controversy, often confrontational and violent. (36)

In the absence of clear constitutional guidelines, there are two contending narratives as to how to proceed. The opposition asserts that once Barzani's term expired, the speaker of parliament should have assumed his authority until the election of the next president by parliament. The emphasis on the role of parliament is important because it is a contentious issue, related to the balance of power within the KRG's government. (37) In

contrast, the pro-Barzani camp, led by the KDP, contends that Barzani should continue in office until a new president is elected by the people. The emphasis on the people is important as well. The pro-Barzani camp argues that it is the people who should elect the president, while the anti-Barzani group contends that parliament should have that power. The former group supports a presidential system whereas the latter favors a parliamentary system to limit the power of the presidency. (38) This controversy is ongoing and tightly linked to the power struggle over the future of the KRG politics.

Lastly, in January 2016 the PUK announced that the long-defunct strategic agreement between the PUK and the KDP, which outlined a 50-50 power-sharing arrangement, must be reworked. (39) The symbolism of this announcement is important. The PUK seems to be seeking a new arrangement in which it will try to reverse its recent political losses.

All in all, the relatively swift changes in the balance of the power within the KRG has created discord between the parties and invited revisionist forces to the fore. The KRG's political leadership must attend to these developments in order to avoid political tensions escalating into open conflict.

### **KDP-PKK axis: a struggle to dominate regional Kurdish politics**

A second rivalry within the Kurdish politics is taking place at the regional level. This rivalry, between the PKK (based in Turkey) and the KDP (based in Iraq), is seen as a struggle for the future direction of Kurdish regional politics. (40)

The historical roots of discord between the PKK and KDP go back to the late 1980s and 1990s. Inflamed by power struggles, driven by factional and ideological differences, this discord claimed thousands of lives on both sides and gave further prominence to the Kurdish concept of *brakujî*, or fratricide. Despite a relative calm in the 2000s, the rivalry was revitalized in the context of the Syrian civil war and the drive by both sides to dominate Syrian Kurdish politics within various enclaves. (41) In this regard, the PKK proved much more successful than the KDP. It established an almost total grip over the Kurdish enclaves in Syria, situated itself as (ostensibly) the only credible representative of the Kurdish people in the country, and maintained a battle-hardened fighting force on the ground. Moreover, it expelled or imprisoned pro-KDP forces, especially targeting the leadership of the group in Rojava (the Kurdish term for Kurdish Syria). This exacerbated the already tense relations between PKK and KDP. The president of the KRG and chairman of the KDP, Masoud Barzani, angrily responded by closing the border between

the KRG and Rojava, cutting off significant supply and economic lifelines. The first of many casualties of this acrimonious rivalry was the repeated delay of the convention of the Kurdish National Congress in Erbil that aimed to strike a modus vivendi among Kurdish groups and chart a direction for Kurdish politics in the Near East.

This tense situation was temporarily subdued by the fight against ISIS in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan, which required cross-border cooperation between the PKK and KDP. The PKK came to the aid of the KDP and other Kurdish groups in the KRG, and the KRG reciprocated by coming to the aid of the PKK/PYD in Kobani, encouraging a new positive dynamic in relations. This process has been buttressed by pressure on the political elite from an emerging plurality of Kurds who wish to see pan-Kurdish cooperation. Such cooperation has proved significant for pushing back ISIS, reclaiming most of the lost territory, and securing U.S./Western military support. Moreover, this cooperative atmosphere was further bolstered by the signing of the Duhok Agreement, brokered by Barzani between different Syrian Kurdish groups. Though it has yet to be implemented, the agreement envisions cooperation between and the adoption of a common position by signatory parties with the aim of establishing a common integrated military structure in Rojava. (42)

Yet this picture suffered a setback in January 2015 following the PKK's announcement that Shingal Province, which is inhabited by Yazidi Kurds and located in the KRG, should declare its own cantonal administration, mirroring the PKK-administered cantonal structure in Rojava. (43) This declaration was seen by the KDP as a direct intrusion by the PKK into the KRG's domestic politics in order to seek a foothold for itself on KRG territory. This move has driven a wedge between the two parties. In fact, the KRG has warned the PKK against interfering in Shingal. "We want to announce that the current PKK attempts to create a canton for Shingal is unlawful and is completely contradictory with the laws of the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Region, and they must stop these interventions inside the Kurdistan Region, as Shingal is part of the disputed areas in the Iraqi constitution," a KRG official said. (44) In fact, during the latest offensive against ISIS in Shingal in November 2015 the KDP was quick to announce that the operation was solely undertaken by local peshmerga forces, thus denying the PKK any share in the victory. (45)

The PKK's regional ambitions in Iraqi Kurdistan are likely to elicit an increased effort by the KDP to have its affiliated organizations/personalities based in Turkey to disturb the PKK's hegemony over Kurdish politics in Turkey. In other words, if the PKK continues to seek to undermine the KDP in the KRG, the KDP will have increased motivation to situate

itself as an oppositional force against the hegemony of the PKK over Turkey's Kurdish politics. But as the results of Turkey's June and November 2015 general elections showed, the PKK is consolidating its power among Turkey's Kurdish population. The PKK-affiliated HDP won a major electoral victory by acquiring the majority of the Kurdish voters. This also shows that the any attempt by the KDP to oppose the PKK will face an uphill battle in Turkey's Kurdish region. Nevertheless, the KDP can still create some headaches for the PKK through its links amongst Turkey's Kurds.

### **A common Kurdish public sphere: a cause for cooperation or competition?**

The Kurdish affairs analyst Rebwar Kerim Weli argues that the PKK's motivations for establishing a de facto presence in Shingal are three-fold. First, the PKK is competing for primacy with the KDP in Rojava (in which it has proved much more successful than the KDP), and it regards asserting influence over the land that borders Rojava in the KRG as being of utmost importance. Second, by emphasizing its role as the savior of a minority religious sect (the Yazidi Kurds), the PKK believes it will acquire further international legitimacy. Third, Shingal will provide the PKK with another foothold on KRG soil and an avenue to influence internal KRG politics, thus squeezing its main regional competitor. (46) Though ferociously resisted by the KDP, the PKK's approach has neither received criticism from the PUK nor Goran, reflecting the fact that the PKK and KDP are the main contenders for primacy in Kurdish regional politics.

As a common Kurdish public sphere emerges, most of the Kurdish movements have gradually begun to adopt a pan-Kurdish agenda. Therefore, the common Kurdish public sphere has created new possibilities for Kurdish politics in the region, but at the same time it has also provided ample causes for friction among Kurdish groups as they feel more pressure to appeal to the larger Kurdish public to justify their political activities. This cause of friction is still hypothetical and hasn't yet materialized. The political skills and dexterity of Kurdish politicians will decide whether this common Kurdish public sphere will be utilized for further cooperation or lead to a widening rift between different Kurdish factions.

### **Conclusion**

Beyond the obvious dangers posed by ISIS, the fight against the radical group has created a common cause among Kurds and opened the possibility for regional political alignment. A sole focus on the opportunities prompted by this fight will not present a

complete and accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of regional Kurdish politics. An informed and impartial observation requires attention be paid to sources of friction unleashed as a result of the fight between Kurds and ISIS. Yet, it is eventually the regional context, and the will and deftness of Kurdish politicians that will decide which scenario will prevail.

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## References

- 1 "Peshmerga" is a Kurdish word used to refer to Iraqi Kurdish military forces. This term literally means "one who confronts death".
- 2 After the World War I, historical Kurdistan was divided into four nation states (Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria). During this time, Kurdish agenda and political inclinations were mostly shaped by the realities of these nation states. But with the Kurdish fight against the ISIS, we have witnessed to the emergence of a de-facto Kurdish public sphere in which the nature of the discussions and concerns weren't stifled by the realities of these nation-states.
- 3 Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism*. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 3.
- 4 Zeina Karam. "Kurds capture Tal Abyad from ISIS in Syria, cutting off supply line to Raqqa," Huffington Post, 16 June 2015 [www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/16/kurds-capture-tal-abyad-isis\\_n\\_7594132.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/16/kurds-capture-tal-abyad-isis_n_7594132.html) (Accessed 16 July 2015)
- 5 Cale Salih, "Is Tal Abyad a turning point for Syria's Kurds?" European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2015
- 6 See the Rudaw interview with David L. Philips, director of Columbia University's Peace and Human Rights Studies. "Kürt Baharı'nın yazarı: Kürtler hiç bu kadar güçlenmemişti!" Rudaw, 6 February 2015 <http://rudaw.net/turkish/interview/06022015> (Accessed 22 February 2015)
- 7 In the aftermath of Turkey's June 7 general election, the pro-Kurdish HDP was depicted as the real winner of the election. Many viewed the electoral results as a harbinger of Kurdish ascendancy in Turkish politics, mirroring Kurds' enhanced role in the broader regional politics. Micha'el Tanchum's line "amassing power at ballot box and on the battlefield" in his Foreign Affairs piece sums up this thinking. Micha'el Tanchum, "The Kurdish Consolidation," Foreign Affairs, 29 June 2015. (The number of HDP members of parliament decreased to fifty-nine in the snap election held 1 November 2015).
- 8 The Kurds in the Middle East are mainly divided between four nation-states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The largest share of the Kurdish population lives in Turkey, followed by Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Though Iran possesses the second largest share of the Kurdish population, Iranian Kurds have comparatively attracted less attention to their political activism in recent years. Nevertheless, the Iranian regime has cracked down harshly on Kurdish political dissidents—executing a number of Kurdish activists in recent years. This points to festering resentment among Iranian Kurds towards the Iranian regime and its repressive policies, and suggests a possible emergence of an Iranian dimension within regional Kurdish political activism. As such, the state of the Iranian Kurds merits an extensive study.
- 9 For a similar judgment on renewed rivalries among Kurdish factions, see Ranj Alaaldin, "A dangerous rivalry for the Kurds," New York Times, 16 December 2014.
- 10 'Constitutive other', in this paper, denotes the actor against whom one develops its identity.
- 11 In recent years, Turkey has enjoyed good relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. It is the largest investor in the KRG's economy and has been relatively at ease in pronouncing the name of the KRG rather than adopting the denialist mantra of "Northern Iraq" as a substitute. Nevertheless, Turkey still remains opposed to the emergence of a unified Kurdistan and is especially uneasy with the emergence of a Syrian Kurdistan.
- 12 Ofra Bengio, "Introduction," in Ofra Bengio, ed., *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2014), 1-15.
- 13 Once it was fashionable to claim that the world is entering and experiencing a post-national era in which the previously strong nationalist ideas, feelings, and motivations will lose currency. Yet time and circumstances seem to disprove this assertion. Indeed, nationalism is still a potent force in today's world politics. The developments in the wider Kurdish geo-politics in the Middle East are a case in point. The eminent social scientist Craig Calhoun convincingly argues in favor of why

nations still matters in world politics and why the claim that the world has entered a post-national phase is flawed. See, Craig Calhoun, *Nations matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream*. (London: Routledge, 2007)

14 Ofra Bengio employs the terms "Arab revolution" and "Kurdish revolution" to refer to the developments, uprisings, and upheavals since the onset of the Arab Spring both in Arab and Kurdish contexts.

15 Ofra Bengio, "Conclusion," in Ofra Bengio, ed., *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2014), 273.

16 For a good overview of role of emotion in the development of a common belonging, particularly in the Kurdish nationalism, see Neuberger, "Kurdish Nationalism in Comparative Perspective," in Bengio, ed. *Kurdish Awakening*, 15 – 37. For the historical evolution of the modern Kurdish nationalism, see Eppel, "Historical Setting: The roots of modern Kurdish nationalism," in Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 37-63. Also, see Tetsunori Koizumi, who analyzes how national development is shaped by the interplay between nationalism as ideology and nationalism as emotion. Koizumi, "Nationalism as ideology, nationalism as emotion, and the pitfalls national development," *Cybernetics and Systems: An International Journal*, (1994) 25 (6), 747–761.

17 For an account of cross border-funerals and grief, see Cale Salih, "Kurds demands unity amid battle against Islamic State," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 January 2015.

18 In his seminal book "Imagined Communities" Benedict Anderson stresses the role of the "print language" in unifying dialects and creating national languages, hence creating a sense of common belonging amongst the people who share this new 'standardized' language. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Revised Edition, London: Verso, 2006)

19 Among the scholars of nationalism, Anthony Smith is famous for his study on the historical roots or "objective root" (shared ethnicity, language, creed, etc.) of nationalism. See Smith, *Nationalism*. (2nd Edition, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010)

20 For a study on how the fight against ISIS has reshaped Kurdish politics, see Cale Salih, "Divided Kurds fight the Islamic State," in Barnes-Dacey, Geranmayeh, and Levy, eds., *The Islamic State through the regional lens*. (London: ECFR, 2015), 57-63.

21 Mahmut Bozarslan, "Kürt partileri Rojava için anlaştı," *Al Jazeera Turk*, 22 October 2014 <http://staff.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/kurt-partileri-rojava-icin-anlasti> (Accessed 27 February 2015)

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Al Jazeera Turk, "PYD ve KDP'nin Kobani'de iktidar mücadelesi," 21 October 2014. [www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/pyd-ve-kdpnin-kobanide-iktidar-mucadelesi](http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/pyd-ve-kdpnin-kobanide-iktidar-mucadelesi) (Accessed 27 February 2015)

25 These groups can be divided into several categories, such as radical Islamism and democratic political Islamism. For instance, while the pro-Kurdish HDP competes with democratic political Islamist AK Party, the Syrian Kurds fight radical groups such as ISIS and Jabhat-al Nusra, and Iraqi Kurds face off against ISIS but also this Shia-Islamist-dominated central government in Baghdad.

26 Emmanuel Haddad, "Rival brothers: The Kurds who join the Islamic State," *Middle East Eye*, 11 December 2015 [www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/rival-brothers-kurds-snatched-islamic-state-1491602783](http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/rival-brothers-kurds-snatched-islamic-state-1491602783) (Accessed 19 January 2016)

27 BBC Turkce, "Diyarbakır'da 'Demokratik İslam Kongresi,' 10 May 2014 [www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2014/05/140510\\_kongre\\_diyarbakir](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2014/05/140510_kongre_diyarbakir) (Accessed 22 February 2015)

28 Anne Hagood, "The Peshmergas and the Future of the State," *Noria: Network of Researchers in International Affairs*, January 2015. For another analysis arguing along the same lines, see Michael Knights, "Divided Forces," *The Washington Institute*, October 2014.

29 Patrick Schmidt, "KRG announces security sector reform," *Iraqi Business News*, 26 August 2014 [www.iraq-businessnews.com/2014/08/26/krq-announce-security-sector-reform/](http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2014/08/26/krq-announce-security-sector-reform/) (Accessed 22 February 2015)

30 Mario Fumerton and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces," *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 16 December 2015.

31 See a well-researched piece on the KRG's drive to acquire heavy weaponry for the peshmergas, Martin Chulov, "Kurdish peshmerga call for heavy weaponry to take their fight to ISIS," *The Guardian*, 22 February 2015.

32 For a similar judgment on the rivalry among Kurdish factions, see Ranj Alaaldin, "A dangerous rivalry for the Kurds," *New York Times*, 16 December 2014.

33 For an extensive report on the peshmerga's initial retreat from ISIS—and analysis of the impact on Iraqi Kurdish politics and intra-Kurdish rivalry, see Dexter Filkins. "The fight of their lives," *New Yorker*, 29 September 2014.

34 Mario Fumerton and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces," *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 16 December 2015.



35 KDP is dominated by the Barzani family and their tribe. The president as well as the prime minister of the KRG—Mesut Barzani and Necirvan Barzani—come from the Barzani tribe. Likewise, the head of the intelligence service, Masrour Barzani, is the son of KRG President Mesut Barzani. Many senior posts within the KDP and within KRG's regional politics are filled by members of the Barzani tribe or close associates. This apparent nepotism has led many to accuse the KDP of prioritizing tribal links before the national interest.

36 Reuters, "Three killed in violent unrest in Iraq's Kurdistan region," 18 October 2015 [www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurds-protests-idUSKCN0S40JE20151010-6kpDhuT9PebM3JWx.97](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurds-protests-idUSKCN0S40JE20151010-6kpDhuT9PebM3JWx.97) (Accessed: 18 January 2016)

37 Galip Dalay, "Regional implications of Iraqi KRG's presidency row," Middle East Eye, November 2015. [www.middleeasteye.net/columns/regional-implications-iraqi-krgs-presidency-row-1521167001](http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/regional-implications-iraqi-krgs-presidency-row-1521167001) (Accessed: 18 January 2016)

38 Ibid.

39 Vatan Gazetesi, "Barzani ve Talabani arasındaki ittifak bitti," Vatan Gazetesi, January 2016. [www.gazetevatan.com/barzani-ve-talabani-arasindaki-ittifak-bitti-906547-dunya/](http://www.gazetevatan.com/barzani-ve-talabani-arasindaki-ittifak-bitti-906547-dunya/) (Accessed 20 January 2016)

40 See the strongly worded warning from the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization of pro-PKK groups, aimed at the KRG in general and the KDP in particular. In the statement the KCK called attention to "the hidden and dirty policy and propaganda recently pursued in South Kurdistan (meaning KRG) against the PKK," and threatened to withdraw PKK forces from the KRG. ANF News, "KCK: We are discussing to withdraw the guerrilla forces fighting ISIS," 8 February 2015 <http://anfenglish.com/news/kck-we-are-discussing-to-withdraw-the-querrilla-forces-fighting-isis#.VNfB3f-lpBM.twitter> (Accessed 25 February 2015)

41 For a historical overview of Syrian Kurdish politics, and the influential roles of the PKK and the KDP, see Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*. (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014)

42 Rudaw. "Divided Syrian Kurds reach deal in the face of ISIS threat," 22 October 2014 <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/221020141> (Accessed 25 February 2015)

43 For a detailed discussion of the impact of the PKK's approach to Shingal on PKK-KDP relations, see Dağ, R, "Ortadoğu Denklemine Suriye Kürtleri," *Ortadoğu Analiz*, (2015) 69 (7), 9–13. The PKK's position has damaged relations with the KDP, and Marianna Charountaki contends that improved relations are instrumental for the PKK and Syrian Kurds to gain international legitimacy and support. Charountaki, "Arap ayaklanmalarının Suriyeli Kürtler üzerindeki etkisi," *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 2015 69 (7), 13-16.

44 Rudaw, "Erbil warns PKK it will not brook 'external interference' in Shingal," 17 January 2015 <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/17012015> (Accessed 3 March 2015)

45 Ezidi Press, "Barzani: 'Only the Peshmerga have liberated Shingal, no other unit has been involved'," November 2015 <http://ezidipress.com/en/barzani-only-the-peshmerga-have-liberated-shingal-no-other-unit-has-been-involved/> (Accessed 21 January 2016)

46 Rebwar Kerim Weli, "KDP'den kantona cevap," Rudaw, 01 February 2015 <http://rudaw.net/turkish/opinion/01022015> (Accessed 03 March 2015).