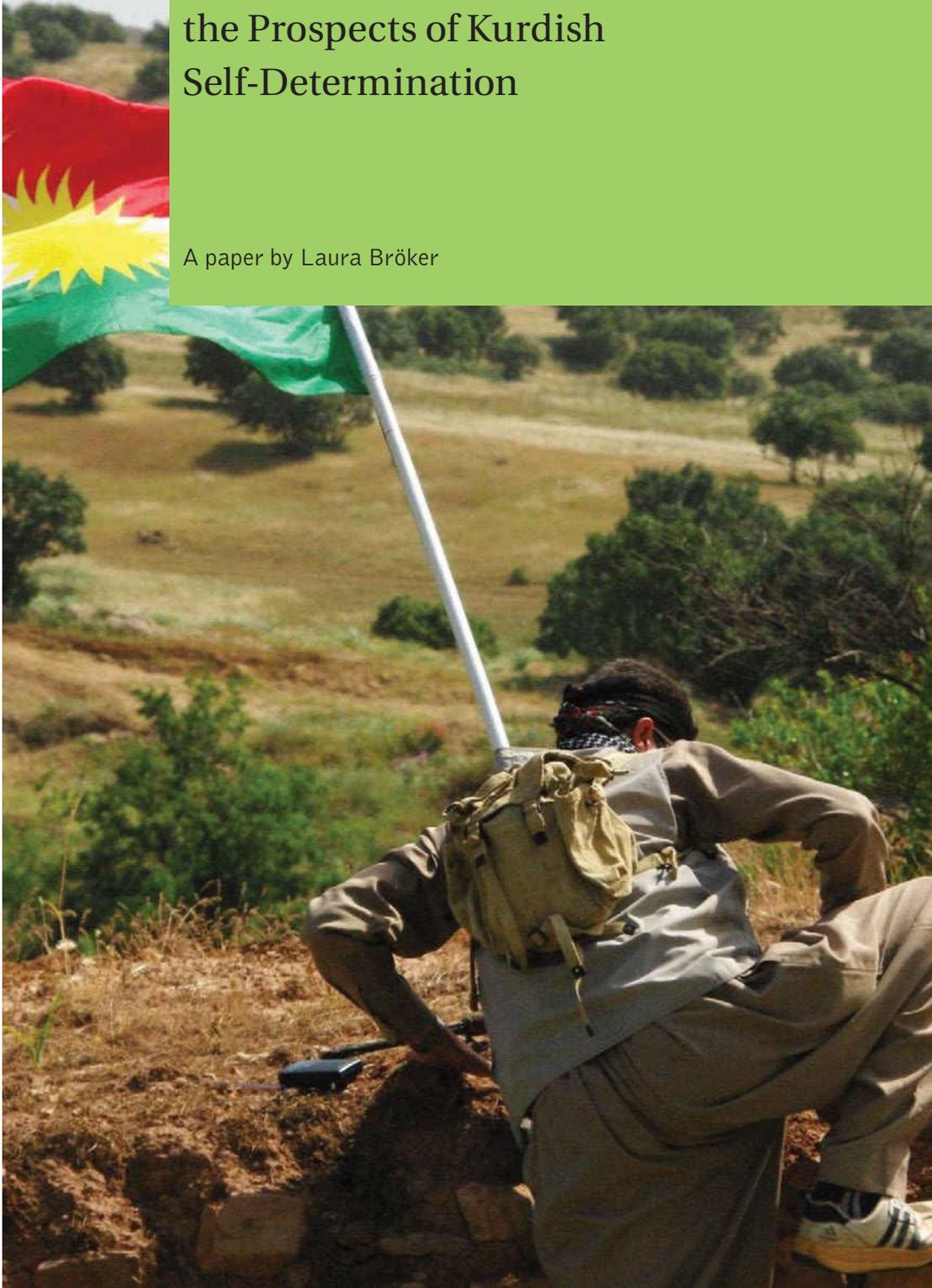


Any Hope for a Kurdish State?

The United States, Germany and the Prospects of Kurdish Self-Determination

A paper by Laura Bröker



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INTRODUCTION

Early this February, Massoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, openly called for a referendum on Kurdish statehood, declaring that “the time has come and the conditions are now suitable for the people to make a decision [...] on their fate.”¹ It was not the first time that the KRG announced such a referendum. In fact, a first informal referendum on Kurdish independence had been held in the wake of the Iraqi parliamentary and Iraqi Kurdistan elections 2005, with close to 99% of the voters voting in favor of secession from Iraq.² Another referendum had been announced in the summer of 2014.³ And the Iraqi Kurds were not the only ones to make the quest for Kurdish self-determination. In mid March 2016, representatives of Syria’s Kurdish-controlled northern regions also voted to seek autonomy, drawing rebukes from both regional and international actors, such as Turkey and the United States.⁴

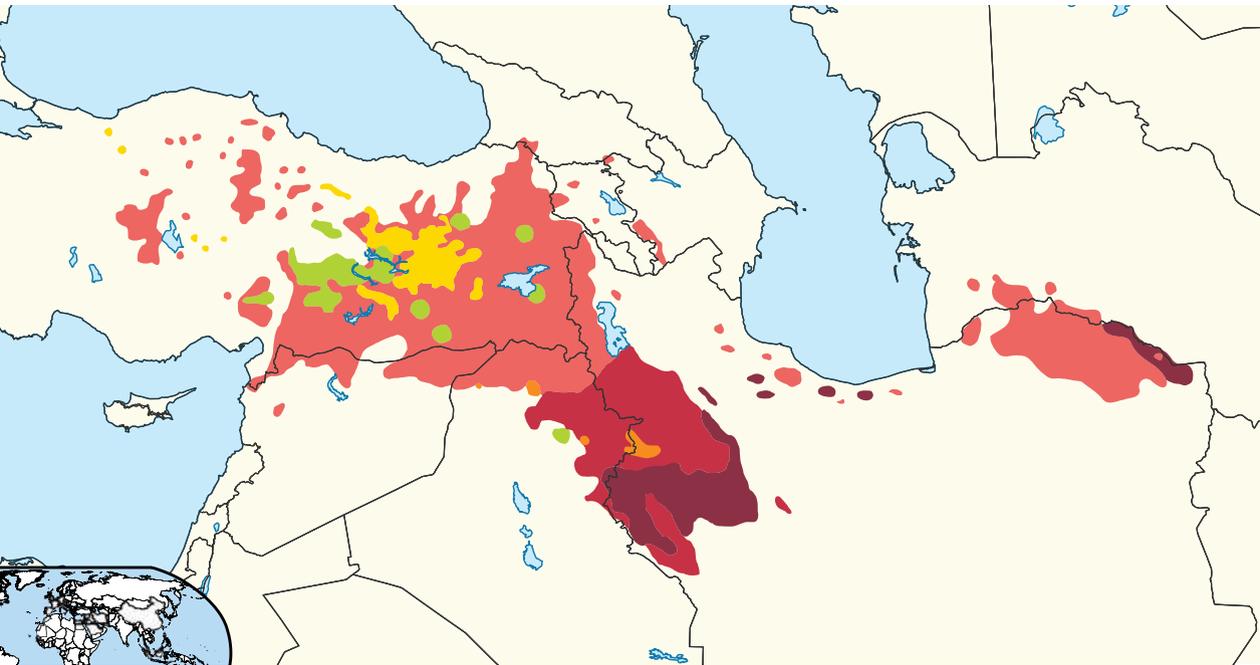
The idea of Kurdish self-determination is not new, but has shaped the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East for decades. Massoud Barzani’s most recent proposal and the Syrian Kurdish call for autonomy, however, have brought the question of Kurdish independence back on the agenda, just at a time when the region is facing enormous turmoil and the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have gained increasing international recognition for their efforts in combating ISIS. Some observers conclude that the conditions for an independent Kurdistan have never been as favorable as they are now.⁵ But what are the prospects for a Kurdish nation state? And which positions do Western governments - particularly the US and Germany which are among the key international partners of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds - take with regard to Kurdish independence?

To answer these questions, we have to take a step back and consider historical developments, as well as the geopolitical dimensions of the Kurdish issue. With a population of approximately 30 million people in the Middle Eastern region, the Kurds are the world’s largest ethnic group without a nation state.⁶ They form a minority in four

- 1 Reuters (2016): “Iraqi Kurdish leader calls for non-binding independence referendum.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurds-idUSKCN0VB2EY>
- 2 Anderson, Liam/ Stansfield, Gareth (2005): “The Implications for Elections in Iraq: Toward a Five-Region Model.” <http://people.exeter.ac.uk/grvstans/Webpage/publiuspdf.pdf>
- 3 BBC News (2014): “Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum planned.” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28103124>
- 4 Reuters (2016): “Syria’s Kurds rebuked for seeking autonomous region.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0WJ1EP>
- 5 Salih, Mohammed A. (2016): “Low Oil Prices Complicate Kurdish Independence,” MEI Policy Focus 2016-7: p.4. <http://www.mei.edu/content/low-oil-prices-complicate-iraqi-kurdish-independence>
- 6 Reuters (2014): “Special Report: Amid Syria’s violence, Kurds carve out autonomy.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kurdistan-specialreport-idUSBREA0L17320140122>

countries of the Middle East: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The struggle for Kurdish rights and greater autonomy has been simmering in all of these countries, albeit with varying success. While the Iranian Kurds have not yet managed to gain substantial minority rights due to their relatively small number, the Kurdish-Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has challenged Turkish policies on minorities since its formation in 1978. Although the PKK is not the only actor advocating for Kurdish minority rights within Turkey, its armed struggle has dominated the Kurdish-Turkish conflict for decades. Despite temporary rapprochements between the Turkish government and the PKK, this conflict remains unresolved and fights have again intensified within the last months.

For Kurds in Iraq and Syria, however, the picture looks different, as both groups — independently from one another — have been able to gain significant rights of autonomy. Their growing regional weight, as well as direct US and German military support have raised hopes for Kurdish self-determination. Yet, a Kurdish nation state seems rather distant these days, given the political divisions among the Kurds and the lack of international support for Kurdish independence.



Kurdish Speaking Areas of the Middle East
 Approximate distribution of the Kurdish languages:

- | | |
|---|--|
| Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish) | Zazaki |
| Sorani (Central Kurdish) | Gorani |
| Pehlewani (Southern Kurdish) | Mixed areas ⁷ |

⁷ Creator: ArnoldPlaton/ Wikimedia. This image is licensed under a Creative Commons License, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdish_languages#/media/File:Kurdish_languages_map.svg

The development of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and Syria

The Iraqi Kurdish resistance movement can be traced back to the 19th century, with the first Kurdish rebellions taking place in the 1920s.⁸ The following decades were marked by an ongoing struggle, varying only in the intensity of fighting. Even though several agreements and accords have been brokered, none of them was implemented in a way that could satisfy both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish rebels. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), state repression against the Iraqi Kurdish population reached its peak. Suspicious of Kurdish support for Iran, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein launched the “Anfal operations”, resulting in the destruction of Kurdish villages and the systematic expulsion, detention and killing of Iraqi Kurds. Part of the Anfal operations was the poison gas attack of Halabija in March 1988, which led to the death of 5,000 people and was harshly condemned as an act of genocide by the international community.⁹

The First Gulf War was a turning point for the Iraqi Kurds.¹⁰ It marked the beginning of a slow, but steady process of increasing autonomy, in which the US would play a crucial role. The US, along with Turkey and the UK, established a safe zone in northern Iraq in April 1991, providing protection for the 1.1 million Kurds who had fled Iraqi state repression, paving the way (intentionally or not) for the creation of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The US administration also brokered the 1998 peace agreement between the two rival Kurdish parties KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) that had engaged in a bloody fraternal war, following the first elections of a Kurdish National Assembly in 1992. In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq further helped the Kurdish region to prosper and stabilize, as billions of dollars of post-war reconstruction investments flowed into the region.¹¹

In Syria, repression of the Kurds and other ethnic minorities has been a persistent feature of the Syrian Arab Republic ever since its creation by French Mandate after World War I. In 1962, a census stripped 120,000 Syrian Kurds of their citizenship, leaving them stateless and with no claim to another nationality.¹² The Syrian Kurdish resistance movement began to intensify in the mid-2000s. In March 2004, provocations during a football match in Qamishli between a Sunni Arab and a local Kurdish team triggered violent clashes between the fans of the opposing sides, spilling into the streets of the city.

8 Chapman, Dennis P. (2009): Security Forces of the Kurdish Regional Government. Pennsylvania: US Army War College Civilian Research Project.

9 Zülch/Tilman (ed.) (1991): Völkermord an den Kurden. Eine Dokumentation der Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker. Frankfurt a.M., p. 9.

10 In the US, the war waged by coalition forces against Iraq in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait, is usually referred to as the (First) Gulf War. In Germany, however, this war is usually called the Second Gulf War, with the Iran/Iraq war 1980-88 being the First Gulf War.

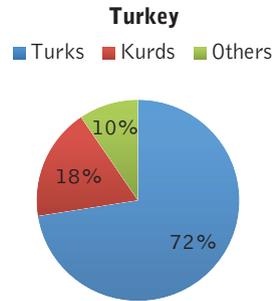
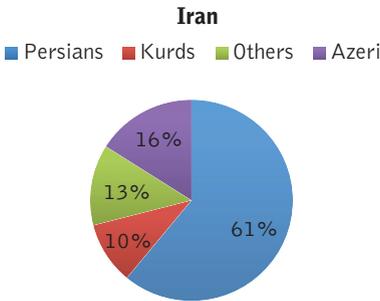
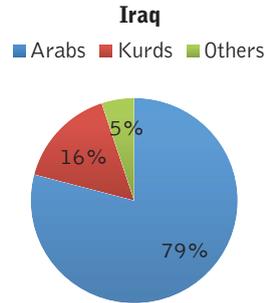
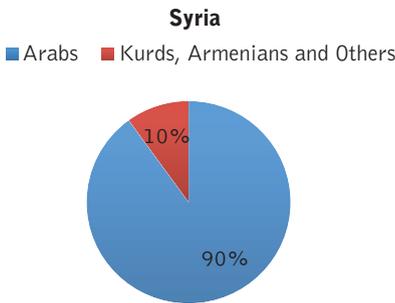
11 Al Jazeera (2014): “Iraqi Kurdistan referendum: Going it alone.” <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/iraqi-kurdistan-referendum-going-it-alone-201472123552438480.html>

12 Human Rights Watch (1996): “Syria. The Silenced Kurds.” <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm>

The Syrian Security forces intervened, killing 15 people, 11 of them Kurds.¹³

The popular uprisings against the Assad regime in early 2011 provided the Syrian Kurds with the opportunity to organize their struggle within a wider framework. The Syrian regime tried to appease the Kurdish factions and promised to grant all Kurds citizenship. However, by March 2012, only an estimated 6,000 out of 150,000 stateless Kurds had been granted citizenship and discriminatory regulations continued.¹⁴ As the popular uprisings and the regime's brutal crackdown on protestors evolved into a protracted civil war, the Syrian Kurds — tolerated by the Syrian regime — took the opportunity to create facts on the ground, establishing a de-facto autonomous Kurdish region in Syria's north.

Estimated Population in Countries with Significant Kurdish Minorities¹⁵



¹³ The Boston Globe (2004): “Tension unabated after riots in Syria.” http://archive.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2004/03/16/tension_unabated_after_riots_in_syria/
¹⁴ The Daily Star Lebanon (2012): “Minority Kurds struggle for recognition in Syrian revolt.” <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Mar-31/168622-minority-kurds-struggle-for-recognition-in-syrian-revolt.ashx#axzz21XpGFIr>
¹⁵ Values used in this figures represent the median population estimations provided by the CIA Factbook (2016). <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> and, for the country of Iran, the CIA World Factbook (2015). http://www.indexmundi.com/iran/demographics_profile.html

Hopes for self-determination?

Despite the severe setbacks and defeats, Kurds in Iraq and Syria have gained a substantial degree of autonomy, raising hopes and expectations for Kurdish independence throughout the region. In Iraq, the KRG managed to stabilize the northern Iraqi territory, distinguishing itself as a democratic role model in the region and a pioneer of Kurdish autonomy. The KRG's governmental performance was boosted by promising economic conditions. With the oil prices at their peak in 2012 and 2013, Iraqi Kurdistan experienced rapid economic growth with annual growth rates amounting to 12 percent.¹⁶ In 2012, an estimated 55 percent of all investment in Iraq concentrated in northern Iraq.¹⁷ The KRG also heavily benefitted from the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which allowed the government access revenues from the Iraqi central government without having to pay taxes, declare revenues or contribute to the Iraqi national budget.¹⁸ Over the last ten years, the KRG has increasingly developed its own energy sector. It has attracted international oil companies to the Iraqi Kurdistan region and has started to build pipeline infrastructure. Its biggest coup, however, was the energy agreement with neighboring Turkey: In November 2013, KRG Prime Minister Nurchivan Barzani signed a strategic deal with the Turkish government to export Kurdish oil and gas to that country for the next 50 years.¹⁹ The deal strengthened the deep economic ties between the KRG and Turkey and fueled mounting speculations that Turkey would finally tolerate an independent Kurdish state if Iraq were to fall apart.²⁰

In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), originally formed in 2003, managed to distinguish itself as the dominant Kurdish force, gaining and consolidating control over large portions of the country's north. When the Syrian army partially withdrew from northern Syria in 2012, the PYD and its armed wing, the People's Protection Unit (YPG), used the power vacuum to take control of the three non-contiguous enclaves of Afrin, Kobane and Cezire. In November 2013, the PYD unilaterally proclaimed the transitional administration of Rojava (Western Kurdistan). With the PYD distributing humanitarian aid, running tribunals and prisons and overseeing security with its military and police forces, it assumed de facto governing authority in Syria's northern territory. In early 2014, it went one step further, forming the first local governments in Cezire and Kobane and issuing a provisional constitutional charter for the region, called the "social contract of Rojava."²¹ In the public debate, Rojava's political system is often portrayed as particularly progressive and

16 Invest In Group (2013): "Determined to Grow: Economy." <http://investingroup.org/review/236/determined-to-grow-economy-kurdistan/>

17 Ibid.

18 Natali, Denise (2015): "Stalemate, not statehood for Iraqi Kurdistan." Brookings Middle East Politics & Policies. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/11/02-stalemate-not-statehood-iraqi-kurdistan>

19 Salih (2016): p. 1

20 Reuters (2014): "Turkey rejects Kurdish independence, wants Iraq unity government, official says." <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-turkey-kurds-idUSKBN0F51RU20140630>

21 International Crisis Group (2014): "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria", Middle East Report No 151, p. 15. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria-lebanon/syria/151-flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precious-rise-in-syria.aspx>

inclusive.²² The PYD's emphases on secularism and gender equality have turned them into "the darlings of international media."²³ Media attention primarily focuses on the prominent role of female fighters in the YPG ranks, as 7,500 women are estimated to have joined the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), set up in 2012 as part of the YPG.²⁴

In their struggle for autonomy, both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds benefitted from the weakness of their central governments in Baghdad and Damascus. While sectarian conflicts and a dysfunctional Iraqi government enabled the KRG to consolidate its power and to brand itself as the functional, "other Iraq," the civil war in Syria has paved the way for the Syrian Kurds to assume de-facto control in Syria's northern region. The fragility of the Iraqi and Syrian central states have thus strengthened Kurdish claims for self-determination.

Direct support from the US and Germany

Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish military forces are often depicted by Western media and policymakers as the most reliable and effective Western allies in the war against ISIS. Their military successes provided the Kurds with a degree of international recognition that they have rarely enjoyed in the past. The US and Germany were among the key international players, supporting Kurdish efforts in combating ISIS.

The German government declared its willingness to arm Iraqi Peshmerga forces fighting Islamic militants in August 2014.²⁵ This was a significant decision, as Germany has long-time refrained from direct military involvement in conflicts after World War II (a position that has changed with the Kosovo intervention in 1999). Although it is the world's third-largest arms exporter after the United States and Russia, Germany (at least officially) does not deliver arms into direct conflict zones.²⁶ The case of northern Iraq is thus a notable exception, justified by the German government with the "unique quality" of ISIS' advance in the region and "the huge scale of human suffering."²⁷ The German population, however, did not approve the government's decision to play a more active role in the conflict. A poll in August 2014 showed that 63 percent of Germans were against supplying weapons to the Iraqi Kurds.²⁸ Despite public disapproval, the first three tranches of arms and equipment were delivered to the Kurdish Peshmerga from September to November 2014. In the following months, the German government expanded its assistance to the Peshmerga. From late April

22 Open Democracy (2015): "The Rojava revolution." <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution>; ZEIT (2014): "Traurige Gewinner." <http://www.zeit.de/2014/12/kurden-syrien-norden>

23 Al Monitor (2015): "Amnesty International accuses Kurdish YPG of war crimes." <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2015/10/syria-turkey-right-groups-accused-kurds-rojava-of-war-crimes.html>

24 Reuters (2014): "Female fighters battle for freedom and equality in Syria: TRFN." <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-women-idUSKBN0JU0D020141216>

25 Reuters (2014): "Germany, Italy say prepared to send weapons to Iraq's Kurds." <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-germany-arms-idUSKBN0GK1IG20140820>

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

through May 2015, the German army (Bundeswehr) sent at least five plane-loads of arms, equipment and supplies to northern Iraq. According to the German Ministry of Defense, Germany had transferred a total of about 1,800 tons of arms, ammunition, equipment, and supplies to the Iraqi Peshmerga by the end of May 2015.²⁹ In December 2015, the German government announced the delivery of additional missile systems and armored vehicles.³⁰ In addition to material support, Germany, along with Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom, also took an active role in training Peshmerga units.³¹

While German support has been limited to the Peshmerga, the US administration has supported both Kurdish factions in Iraq and Syria. With the Syrian Kurds inflicting successive defeats on ISIS, military collaboration between the US and YPG quickly deepened to a point where both would plan joint operations, such as the capture of the border town of Tal Abyad.³² Due to its military capabilities, the YPG emerged as an indispensable partner in the fight against ISIS. This has put the US in the unique position of being “the lone actor with significant influence over both Ankara and the PKK-YPG camp.”³³ The US decision to turn a blind eye to the PYD-PKK affiliation has raised Syrian Kurds aspirations and — simultaneously — heightened the mistrust of the US’ strategic NATO partner, Turkey.³⁴

In contrast to the YPG, Iraqi Peshmerga forces can look back to a long history of intensive US-military cooperation, starting with the Iraq War in 2003. Peshmerga forces formed an integral part of the US operation “Viking Hammer,” which fought the Islamist Ansar al-Islam movement in northern Iraq. They were also among the most important US allies in the fight against Saddam Hussein. Even after Hussein’s overthrow, Peshmerga forces served as border guards and supported the US military in operations outside the Kurdish regions.³⁵ Due to this close military cooperation with the Peshmerga in the past, it came as no surprise when the US administration resorted to their strategic northern Iraqi partners in their fight against ISIS. In July 2015, U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter arrived on an unannounced visit to Erbil, the KRG’s capital, meeting President Barzani, as well as US forces advising and training the Peshmerga. Speaking in testimony to the US Congress earlier that month, Carter praised the Peshmerga forces, calling them “an example of what we’re looking for, which is an effective ground force that’ll stick up for itself, hold

29 Wallace, Stephan (2015): “Germany Steps Up Military Aid to Kurdish Forces in Iraq.” <http://www.aicgs.org/issue/germany-steps-up-military-aid-to-kurdish-forces-in-iraq/>

30 Der Spiegel (2015): “Kampf gegen den IS: Deutscher Waffennachschub für die Peschmerga.” <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/deutscher-waffen-nachschub-fuer-die-peschmerga-a-1068371.html>

31 Reuters (2016): “Kabinett billigt Ausweitung von Bundeswehr-Einsätzen in Irak, Mali.” <http://de.reuters.com/article/chland-kabinett-bundeswehr-idDEKBN0UK0LF20160106>

32 Barkey, Henri J. (2016): “Syria’s Dark Shadow over US-Turkey relations,” in: *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, p. 29. http://turkishpolicy.com/files/articlepdf/syrias-dark-shadow-over-us-turkey-relations_en_9867.pdf

33 International Crisis Group (2016): “Steps Towards Stabilising Syria’s Northern Border”, Middle East Briefing No 49, p. 1. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria-lebanon/syria/b049-steps-toward-stabilising-syria-s-northern-border.aspx>

34 US Department of State (2016). <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/02/253123.htm>

35 Lortz, Michael G. (2005): *Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces—The Peshmerga—From the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq*. Florida State University, p. 66.

together, take and hold territory.”³⁶ In April 2016, Carter announced the provision of a \$415 million package of financial assistance to the Peshmerga in response to a request from the Kurdistan regional government for economic assistance, referring, once again, to the Peshmerga as one of the most effective fighting forces against ISIS.³⁷

Statehood: so near, and yet so far

The promising developments on the political and economic level, the Kurds’ evolving military strength and international recognition, as well as the looming collapse of the Iraqi and Syrian central states all seem to suggest that a window of opportunity for Kurdish statehood has finally opened. A closer look at the internal, regional and international factors, however, reveals severe challenges and obstacles to Kurdish statehood.

Waning public support and economic recession in Kurdish-controlled regions

After years of economic growth and prosperity, the KRG in Iraq has recently entered a phase of economic crisis, due to the fluctuating levels of oil production and the dramatic drop in oil prices. By the end of 2015, the KRG was reported to be between three and five months behind in paying its almost 1.4 million employers, paralyzing the public sector.³⁸ The latest figures in 2016 show that the KRG is estimated to be \$14 to \$20 billion in debt.³⁹ Thousands of local businesses have closed and nearly 25,000 Kurds, mainly educated youth, had left the KRG region by November 2015.⁴⁰ Experts link the economical destabilization to the KRG’s “oil gamble with Turkey.”⁴¹ Far from being a sovereign entity, the KRG continues to rely on Iraqi pipeline infrastructure. Its exports are not fully independent, as the Iraqi central government still retains the legal rights over the oil flows. In response to the KRG’s energy deal with Turkey, Baghdad filed a suit against Ankara at the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris and has almost entirely cut the KRG budget, representing 95 percent of the KRG’s operating expenses.⁴²

Due to its decision to bypass the central government, the KRG is held accountable for the dire economic situation in the region. Economic pressures thus coincide with a crisis of political leadership. Within the last months, the growing opposition movement inside Iraqi Kurdistan has manifested in protests, which have at times turned violent. In the Suleymania province, nine protestors were injured in October 2015, when demonstrating against the government’s

36 Reuters (2015): “Pentagon chief flies into Iraqi Kurdistan, to meet Barzani.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-iraq-idUSKCN0PY0QW20150724>

37 US Department of Defense (2016): “Carter: Next Step in Iraq ISIL Fight Include More Troops, Military Equipment.” <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/737764/carter-next-steps-in-iraq-isil-fight-include-more-troops-military-equipment>

38 Salih (2016): p. 1.

39 Ibid: p. 2.

40 Natali (2015): p. 5.

41 Ibid: p. 5.

42 Ibid: p. 4.

failure to pay employees.⁴³ These developments are part of a larger trend. Support for the KRG's dominant parties KDP and PUK has decreased ever since the establishment of the KRG. In the KRG's first parliamentary elections in 1992, the KDP and the PUK were the only parties elected into parliament due a 7 percent threshold. In 2005, the KDP and the PUK, merged under the "Kurdistan National Democratic List", gained almost 90 percent of the votes.⁴⁴ In 2009, however, its share of the votes dropped to 57 percent, while the so called "Change movement" (Goran) was able to gain almost 24 percent.⁴⁵ In the last parliamentary elections in September 2013, the Goran opposition even unseated the PUK as second largest party after the KDP.⁴⁶

In Syria, the public support for the PYD has been mixed from the start. Although many inhabitants of Syria's northern regions appreciate the ability of the PYD's armed wing YPG to provide protection, there is substantial resentment towards its mode of operation. Complaints of human rights abuses by YPG fighters, as well as reports of abduction, imprisonment and assassination of non-PYD activists, have fueled concerns about the PYD's aspiration for single-party rule.⁴⁷ According to a report by Amnesty International from October 2015, the PYD and its armed wing have been involved in forced displacement, demolition of homes and the seizure and destruction of property — instances Amnesty International considers to constitute war crimes.⁴⁸

The most serious allegation against the PYD, however, is its presumed cooperation with the Syrian regime. In the first years of the Syrian civil war, the relationship with the regime proved crucial for the Kurds' territorial gains. The YPG's initial advance in June 2012 had been highly dependent on Assad's withdrawal from the Kurdish areas, prompting some opposition forces to perceive the Kurdish territorial gains as a "gift from Damascus."⁴⁹ According to a report from the International Crisis Group in 2014, the PYD has received material support from the Assad regime.⁵⁰ The Syrian government remained an important source of supply for the PYD, given the party's hostile relationship to its neighbor Turkey that considers the PYD as a terrorist organization.⁵¹ Violent PYD attacks against Kurdish protestors in Aleppo and Erbil, as well as its alleged role in the assassination of Mashaal Tammo (leader of the Kurdish Future Movement) have further reinforced the impression of an unspoken alliance between the PYD and the Syrian regime and highlighted the PYD's ambiguous stance toward the Syrian revolution.⁵²

43 International Crisis Group (2015): Crisis Watch Database — Iraq, Database: 2 November 2015. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/crisiswatch/crisiswatch-database.aspx?CountryIDs={18CB966A-0073-4264-B3F5-ED0472ED975C}#results>

44 Kurdistan Parliament (2015). <http://www.perleman.org/uploads/About-the-Parliament.pdf>

45 Ibid; International Crisis Group (2010): "Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan: Results and Implications." <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/op-eds/elections-in-iraqi-kurdistan-results-and-implications.aspx>

46 Freedom House (2014): "Iraq — Freedom in the World 2014." <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/iraq>

47 International Crisis Group (2014): p. 17.

48 Amnesty International (2015): "Syria: 'We had nowhere to go' — Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria", p. 6. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/>

49 International Crisis Group (2014): p. 8.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid, p. 9.

52 <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48526>

Intra-Kurdish rivalries

In addition to the modest public support, intra-Kurdish rivalries and the competition for Kurdish predominance have turned out to be one of the main obstacles to a Kurdish nation state. In Syria, the Kurdish movement is primarily split between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The latter was established in October 2011 under the auspices of KRG President Barzani, who tried to position himself as a power-broker in bringing the sixteen Kurdish Syrian parties together in a coalition.⁵³ The KNC was established as a counterweight to the PYD, which had managed to maintain the upper hand in controlling the Kurdish territories in northern Syria. Due to its strong economic ties to Turkey, the KRG under President Barzani is interested in curbing the influence of the (anti-Turkish) PKK and the PKK-affiliated PYD in the region. Therefore, Barzani attempted to counter the PYD's political and territorial advantage with the "Erbil declaration" in mid-2012. According to this political initiative, a Supreme Kurdish Committee is supposed to govern the Syrian Kurdish regions through joint political, security and economic committees with equal numbers of PYD and KNC members. The agreement, however, was not implemented, as both parties clashed over the interpretation of power-sharing.⁵⁴

In the course of events, the border between Syria's and Iraq's Kurdish areas became the arena for an Intra- Kurdish power struggle between the PYD on the one, and the KNC and KDP on the other side. Fearing that the PYD would extend its influence and strength by assuming the control of aid distribution, the KDP temporarily closed crossings on its side of the border between late 2012 and mid-2013, barring the entry of supplies. This led to the deterioration of living conditions in Syria's north and prompted a stream of Syrian Kurds fleeing to Iraqi Kurdistan in the short periods of time in which the borders were opened. The KDP also barred PYD members from entering the governorate of Erbil. The PYD responded by hindering pro-Barzani leaders from crossing into Syria.⁵⁵

Kurdish rivalry is not a new phenomenon in the region. Between 1994 and 1997, the KRG's major political parties, the KDP and PUK, engaged in a bloody fraternal war, claiming the lives of 5,000 people.⁵⁶ With the Kurdish parties in desperate search for potential allies, the Iraqi central government and regional powers, such as Turkey or Iran, were able to step into the destructive conflict and play the parties against each other. Even though the "Kurdish civil war" ended in 1998, KDP and PUK security forces have not yet fully merged and many Peshmerga still maintain allegiances to their respective parties.⁵⁷ With the new lines of dispute between the PKK-affiliated PYD on the one side and the KPD and KNC on the other, the history of intra-Kurdish struggle seems to be repeating itself. Although the conflict has not escalated, these tensions and internal splits severely

53 International Crisis Group (2014): p. 1f.

54 Ibid: p. 2.

55 Ibid: p. 10.

56 Asia Times (2010): "New Forces Emerge in Kirkuk." http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/LB20Ak02.html

57 Al Monitor (2015): "Kurdish peshmerga divisions hamper war effort." <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iraq-kurdish-peshmerga-division-islamic-state.html#>

weaken the Kurdish parties. Not only do they make the Kurds across all factions vulnerable to external exploitation, they also impede the establishment of a unified, pan-Kurdish movement, whose calls for independence would be much harder to ignore.

The lack of an official representative body is particularly difficult for the Syrian Kurds. While the KNC has joined the opposition's foremost political body — the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) — to represent the Syrian Kurds at the Geneva peace talks, Turkey has fiercely opposed the participation of the PYD, the actual force on the ground in northern Syria.⁵⁸

Lack of international support for Kurdish independence

Over the last decades, prospects for the “Kurdish cause” have always been dependent on the support and goodwill of the international community, especially of Western allies. Yet, these allies have been extremely cautious in responding to the most recent calls for Kurdish self-determination.

After a meeting with Barzani at the Munich Security Conference, German minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier expressed “serious concern” about the plan for a Kurdish statehood referendum in Iraq.⁵⁹ In a previous visit to Erbil in December 2015, Steinmeier had already called for the central government and the KRG to preserve Iraq's territorial unity. To resist further complicating their relationship, Germany's military support for the Kurdish Peshmerga will continue to be processed through Baghdad.⁶⁰ With regard to a potential Kurdish secession, Steinmeier declared himself to be no friend of new border demarcations in the Middle East.⁶¹ EU Foreign Policy chief Federica Mogherini shared his position, clarifying that the EU, “does not support any separatist agenda for the Kurds — be it in Turkey, be it in Iraq, be it in Syria.”⁶² The US administration is no exception to the rule. It has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity, most recently on April 11, 2016, when U.S. Vice President Biden expressed, “continued U.S. support for a unified, federal, and democratic Iraq,” and encouraged the Iraqi Government and the KRG to “take steps to strengthen political unity and economic stability.”⁶³

The same is true of the Kurdish factions in Syria and their plan to establish the self-administered “Federal Democratic System of Rojava - Northern Syria.”⁶⁴ The US administration, which has backed Syrian Kurdish fighters with air strikes on ISIS targets and is one of the YPG's biggest international supporters, was displeased by the autonomy

⁵⁸ International Crisis Group (2014): p. 15, 21.

⁵⁹ The National Interest (2016): “2016: The Year Kurdistan Finally Breaks from Iraq?” <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/2016-the-year-kurdistan-finally-breaks-iraq-15321>

⁶⁰ Reuters (2015): “Steinmeier dringt auf staatliche Einheit des Iraks.” <http://de.reuters.com/article/is-irak-deutschland-steinmeier-idDEKBN0TR1AT20151208>

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Daily Sabah (2016): “EU against formation of Kurdish state in Middle East, Mogherini says.” <http://www.dailysabah.com/eu-affairs/2016/02/23/eu-against-formation-of-kurdish-state-in-middle-east-mogherini-says>

⁶³ Reuters (2016): “Biden urges ‘unified, federal and democratic Iraq’ to Abadi, Barzani.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-biden-idUSKCN0X82HO>

⁶⁴ Reuters (2016): “Syria's Kurds rebuked for seeking autonomous region.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-federalism-idUSKCN0WJ1EP>

vote. State Department spokesman John Kirby made no secret of American disapproval, stating that: “We don’t support self-ruled, semi-autonomous zones inside Syria. We just don’t.”⁶⁵ German and US diplomats might well be aware that the PYD is not their exclusive partner, but is also open to cooperate with governments that support their political goals. Indeed, in an interview in October 2015, PYD leader Salih Muslim suggested that the party will not hesitate to cooperate with the Syrian regime and Russia in order to achieve its utmost strategic goal, the unification of the Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria.⁶⁶

It is Turkey, which is most opposed to this idea. With a Kurdish population of approximately 18 percent, ongoing clashes between the PKK and Turkish security forces, and recent terrorist attacks in Turkish city centers, Ankara has by far the most to lose from an independent Kurdistan.⁶⁷ Ankara fears that a Kurdish nation state right on its southern and southeastern borders could further embolden Turkish-Kurdish aspirations for self-determination and provide a safe haven for PKK fighters. Despite the financial benefits of deepening economic ties with the KRG, Turkey therefore remains committed to a weak but sovereign Iraqi state, enabling it to influence Iraqi Kurds as well as Sunni and Shi’a communities.⁶⁸ Ankara has also constantly expressed its fierce opposition to Syrian Kurdish autonomy, declaring the PYD a terrorist organization and pushing for its diplomatic isolation.

To the misfortune of the Kurds, Turkish leverage is growing, especially in the EU. In the wake of the European refugee crisis, Ankara has turned out to be a key player, hosting more than 2.7 million Syrian refugees.⁶⁹ In order to stem the flow of migrants and refugees entering the EU along the “Balkan route,” the EU and Turkey agreed on a migration deal that came into power in March 2016.⁷⁰ There is little to suggest that the EU would jeopardize this deal by embracing the KRG’s newest efforts for Kurdish independence or by supporting Ankara’s major opponent in northern Syria.

Meanwhile, Washington’s support for the PYD has severely strained US-Turkish relations. Yet the US has proven eager to maintain its strategic partner in the region. As a result, Ankara has won major concessions from the US. In March 2016, US forces agreed to prevent the PYD from crossing the Euphrates River westwards, where they could link up with the isolated Kurdish canton, Afrin, to establish a continuous belt of Kurdish territories in northern Syria.⁷¹ Ankara announced that this step would cross its red line, fearing that such a move would empower the PYD and enable them to expand their logistical support

65 Ibid.

66 Balanche, Fabrice (2015): “Syria’s Kurds Are Contemplating an Aleppo Alliance with Assad and Russia”, Washington Institute, Policy Watch 2499. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-kurds-are-contemplating-an-aleppo-alliance-with-assad-and-russia>

67 See CIA World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>

68 Natali (2005): p. 7.

69 See UNHCR. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224> (last updated 19 May 2016)

70 BBC (2016): “Migrant crisis: EU-Turkey deal comes into effect.” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35854413>

71 Barkey (2016): p. 31.

to the PKK.⁷² According to some sources, the issue was President Erdogan's top priority during his most recent visit to Washington in April 2016.⁷³

Dim prospects for Kurdish statehood: Going it alone?

A closer look at the domestic and regional situation draws a rather discouraging picture for Kurdish independence. Kurdish groups are deeply divided along party affiliations and among regional supporters, impeding them from speaking with one voice and from effectively seizing the opportunity of regional turmoil to draw international attention to their cause. Furthermore, the dominant Kurdish factions in Iraq and Syria are contested in their constituencies, as protests and accusations of human right violations have increased. Yet even if the Kurds could settle their internal disputes, Kurdish autonomy, let alone full independence, is less likely to be determined by the various Kurdish parties and actors than by “the demands, deals, and incentive structures brokered by powerful regional states and non-state actors.”⁷⁴ And these do not seem to have an interest in an independent Kurdistan.

There is no doubt that the Kurds' military capabilities and successes have strengthened their role on the international stage. Enhanced cooperation and recognition, however, have not yet translated into political power, but remain at a military level. The reluctance of Western governments, such as the United States and Germany, to embrace Kurdish advances toward independence or greater autonomy raise further questions of how these governments will act once ISIS is defeated and Kurdish military support no longer needed. KRG President Barzani is well aware of these dim prospects. When announcing the referendum in early 2016, he acknowledged, “If the people of Kurdistan expect others to present the right of self-determination to them as a gift, independence will never be achieved. That right exists and the people of Kurdistan must demand it and exercise it.”⁷⁵ Pursuing the goal of Kurdish independence alone, however, might be a step too big, given the political and geographical divisions within the Kurds.

72 International Crisis Group (2016): p. 4.

73 Tol, Gönül (2016): “U.S., Turkey Compromise on P.Y.D.”, Middle East Institute. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/us-turkey-compromise-pyd>

74 Natali (2015): p. 2.

75 Kurdistan Regional Presidency (2016): “President Barzani: Time is Apt for Kurdistan to Hold Referendum.” <http://www.presidency.krd/english/articledisplay.aspx?id=RY+rNq+QXIQ=>

LIST OF ACRONYMS

KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (northern Iraq)
KNC	Kurdish National Council (Syria)
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government (northern Iraq)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (northern Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SNC	Syrian National Coalition
YPG	People's Protection Unit, Armed Wing of the PYD (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Unit (Syria)



Any Hope for a Kurdish State?

The United States, Germany and the Prospects of Kurdish Self-Determination

The calls by Massoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, for a referendum on Kurdish statehood, as well as Syrian Kurdish calls for autonomy have brought the question of Kurdish independence just at a time when the region is facing enormous turmoil. The Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have gained increasing international recognition for their efforts in combating ISIS and some observers conclude that the conditions for an independent Kurdistan have never been as favorable as they are now. But what are the prospects for a Kurdish nation state? And which positions do Western governments — particularly the US and Germany which are among the key international partners of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds — take with regard to Kurdish independence?