

Kurdistan, the Islamic State, and Paradigm Shifts in the Middle East

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At the turn of the millennium, paradigm shifts in the Middle East changed the rules of the game and thus the political balance of power among the various forces in the region.

One hundred years ago, the map of the Middle East was drafted by external powers – the United Kingdom and France. Today, the designers of the regional map are local actors. While nation states were the accepted political framework in the twentieth century, non-state elements have joined them – perhaps overtaken them – in the twenty-first century. While nationalism and pan-Arab ideology were the dominant factors in the twentieth century, ethnic identity and Islamic religion determine the political agenda today. Whereas organized armies dictated political and military moves in the past, their role to a large extent has now been taken over by irregular armies, militias, and terrorist organizations.¹

The Kurds as a Barrier to the Islamic State

The struggle between the Kurds and the Islamic State, which erupted openly in the summer of 2014, constitutes a test case of these changes. These two actors currently shaping the political map are not states, but local players. Both rely on irregular military forces that are becoming increasingly regular, and both represent trends that undermine the legitimacy of existing states. In the case of the Kurds, the trend is ethno-national; in the case of the Islamic State, it is Islamic Salafi. Developments in Kurdistan in the Fertile Crescent mirror those in al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wal-Sham (ISIS), which adopted the name “Islamic State” in June 2014. Both players have been nourished by the crisis in Iraq and Syria and have challenged these states by

taking forceful control of regions beset by political vacuums and establishing autonomous governments. Both have striven to erase the borders between Syria and Iraq while aspiring to reach the sea and thus achieve economic and political independence.

In many respects, however, the two groups are antithetical and exhibit many clear differences, among them, ideology, political orientation, and overall objectives. The Islamic State is anti-Western, anti-democratic, Salafi, and an advocate of jihad, while both parts of Kurdistan are fighting the Islamic State, maintaining their distance from a politicized Islam, and developing the foundations of democracy.

The Kurds were once regarded as a group that placed regional stability in jeopardy. A 1948 CIA document, for example, warned against the Kurdish threat to Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.² Today, however, it is the Kurds who represent stability, tolerance, and relative moderation, especially if compared to the Islamic State, notorious for its extremism and unprecedented brutality that recalls the destructive campaigns waged by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Another interesting factor is the emergence of an operational Kurdish sub-system in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – the four countries that are home to the areas of Kurdistan – with tools and systems that interface and affect one another in each of these regions. All this complicates the picture and makes it far more difficult for those four countries to decide what to do about the Kurdish question.

What is the nature of relations between the Kurds and the Islamic State? In the immediate aftermath of the conquest of Mosul by the Islamic State and the conquest of the Kirkuk area by Kurdish Peshmerga forces in June 2014, it seemed that the two groups would be able to achieve some kind of modus vivendi. Two months later, however, the Kurds were taken by complete surprise when they became the chief target of an Islamic State offensive and their capital, Erbil, was nearly toppled.³ The reasons behind the attack on the Sunni Kurdish area were strategic economic motives; the Islamic State sought to gain control over the oil resources of Kirkuk, and to control a strategic road between Iraq and Syria in the Sinjar area. Similar considerations led to its subsequent attempts to occupy the Kurdish area in Syria, where the Kurds had established three autonomous cantons in the summer of 2012. Concurrently, the Kurds and the Islamic State have been engaged in a struggle over control of the oil wells in Hasakah in the Kurdish areas of Syria.⁴

The enmity between the two has become especially bitter due to the success of Kurdish fighters in bringing the Islamic State's momentum to a halt on their territory – in contrast to developments elsewhere. Their success in this respect is particularly noteworthy given the failures of the Syrian and Iraqi armies, which have thus far proven utterly helpless in fighting the Islamic State. It is enough to recall the fall of Mosul, in which the Iraqi army outnumbered the forces of the Islamic State by 15 to 1.⁵ An even more extraordinary claim asserts that hundreds of Islamic State soldiers defeated 75,000 Iraqi soldiers.⁶

On Balance: Gains and Losses among the Kurds

As they are fighting over the same territory and resources, a key question is whether the Islamic State is boosting nationalism among the Kurds, as well as their drive toward autonomy. What, in fact, have the Kurds gained and lost from the rise of the Islamic State?

On the positive side, the Kurds have earned credit for their strategy and benefited from improved international awareness and public relations. Their most significant gain lies in Iraq, where they have had little trouble occupying oil-rich territory whose control is disputed by the central government in Baghdad. Their most important conquest has been Kirkuk, which they refer to as the “Jerusalem of the Kurds.”⁷ It is highly unlikely that they would have dared such a move had the Islamic State not engaged in an offensive campaign that threatened Kirkuk and thus justified and granted urgency to the Kurdish takeover. These developments also strengthened Kurdish national identity in other regions of Greater Kurdistan and increased their will to fight the Islamic State. As at other times and places since the onset of the new era in the Middle East, so too here the war was an important factor in building national solidarity among Kurds while weakening national identity in Syria and Iraq – a process that grants legitimacy to dissolution of these nation states.⁸

The image of the Kurds in the international arena, as well as their links to the outside world, was upgraded significantly following the emergence of the Islamic State. The actions by the Islamic State have cast the Kurds in a far more positive light and highlighted their importance to the West as a stabilizing element in the Middle East. Erbil has hosted an increasing number of European leaders, the most important of whom was French President François Hollande, who visited the city in September 2014.⁹ Since

their exposure in the international arena, the Kurds have begun receiving economic and military assistance. The most significant to date has been in the form of aerial attacks aimed at halting the advance of the Islamic State, a move that has further aggravated the hostility between the Islamic State and the Kurds.

On the negative side, the conflict with the Islamic State has exposed the Kurds' military weakness, which while not necessarily reflecting their fighting ability, highlights their severe shortage of weapons and sophisticated military equipment. While the Islamic State has modern, heavy American weapons that it seized as spoils of war from the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014 and Ramadi in May 2015, the Kurds of Iraq rely almost entirely on light, outdated weapons. The number of modern, heavy weapons reaching them is a tiny fraction of those reaching Baghdad. It is ironic indeed that although the Iraqi army has become a bottomless pit and proven its abject failure at confronting the Islamic State, most American military aid is still flowing to Baghdad. Even the small amount being sent to the Kurds is channeled through Baghdad, which delays and sometimes prevents the supply from reaching the Kurds. The other negative consequence of the rise of the Islamic State is extreme economic damage, which is most severe in the Kurdish region of Iraq due to the need to absorb over 1.5 million refugees. Iraqi Kurdistan Prime Minister Nechirvan Idris Barzani has claimed that the region's population had grown by 28 percent as a result of this influx, and that a sum of \$1.4 billion is needed to address this situation.¹⁰ Similarly, the long borders of over 1,000 kilometers with the Islamic State, and the need to protect them, divert attention from the project of state building in Kurdistan.

In Iraq, the emergence of the Islamic State has led to a bloody and complicated triangle that reflects the country's tangled reality. All three sides of this triangle – the Islamic State, Kurdistan, and the Baghdad government, with all its Shiite militias – are engaged in simultaneous warfare or power struggles. Outgoing Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki declared that the al-Hashd al-Sha'bi militia had become the third most important group after the Iraqi army and police force.¹¹ As for the general goals of each of these three sides, the Kurdish entity is limiting its territorial ambition to the area under its present control, while both the Baghdad government, which is controlled primarily by Shiite Arabs and has a close affinity with Tehran, and the Islamic State seek to overtake all of Iraq. At a time that the Kurdish

entity is in effect trying to break away from Iraq, the other elements are trying to preserve the territorial integrity of the country under their exclusive rule.

What further complicates this triangular relationship is the involvement of foreign parties, which are tugging at the sides of the triangle, sometimes in opposite directions. The three main external actors have been the United States, Iran, and Turkey, each of which is simultaneously aiding two of the internal parties: the US and Iran are helping both the Kurds and the Baghdad government, while Turkey is offering minor aid to the Kurds in Iraq while secretly offering assistance to the Islamic State.

The Kurds in Syria are likewise waging a desperate struggle against the Islamic State. In the summer of 2012, only a year after the uprising in Syria, the Kurds managed to establish an autonomous entity, which they called Rojava (literally, West Kurdistan).¹² Considering their situation, the Kurds' achievements in Syria and their steadfast resistance to the Islamic State are extraordinary: their population in Syria is a silent minority that until now has received almost no international recognition; topographically and geographically, the three areas they inhabit consist primarily of plains with no territorial contiguity, a situation that makes defense difficult; and most importantly, their weapons are far lighter and less numerous than those of the Islamic State. Their principal fighting organization is the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), which is closely bound to the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) in Turkey. This explains their tight links to the Kurds in Turkey as well as Turkey's major involvement in events on the southern border. The picture created is that these fighters are even more resilient and have greater spirit than the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan, thanks in part to the participation of Kurdish women in the struggle in Syria and their courage. These capabilities were reflected during the struggle in Kobani (Ayn al-`Arab) – under siege by Islamic State forces from September 2014 until January 2015, and eventually liberated – and during the Kurdish offensive at Tal Abyad and other strategic locations. The YPG is trying to connect the territory between the three Kurdish cantons and also to reach the Mediterranean Sea.

The principal obstacle to these maneuvers is the presence of the Islamic State, which has been silently backed by Turkey. Although Turkey has developed strategic ties with the Kurdish region in Iraq, it regards Kurdish autonomy in Syria as a strategic risk of the highest importance since it fears that the border between the Kurds in Syria and their brethren in Turkey will be erased. The Turkish Kurds, who emerged stronger after the June 2015

elections in Turkey, are regarded in Ankara as a concrete threat working toward the formation of a Greater Kurdistan that will include parts of Turkey. The skirmishes that erupted in the aftermath of the June elections between the Turkish army and the PKK have put further pressure on the Kurds of Syria.

The Russian engagement in the fighting in Syria since late September 2015 added further complications to the already entangled situation of the Kurds, especially in Syria but in Iraq as well. The Kurds in these two regions have been receiving support from the US-led coalition since 2014. Thus, while Russia's sudden involvement may cause friction between Moscow and the US-led coalition, it may also put the Kurds in a dilemma with regard to the choice of foreign support against the Islamic State. So far they have managed to remain above the Russian-United States rivalry but it remains an open question if they can retain this position in the longer run.

Israeli Hesitancy, and Policy Shrouded in Uncertainty

These developments confront Israel with some difficult decisions. First, from a practical standpoint, Israel must determine whether it is worthwhile to give aid to the Kurds at a time when it is regularly accused of attempting to dismantle existing countries. Next, it must consider what it will gain by standing beside the Kurds at a moment when such an act is liable to alienate Turkey. Finally, Israel must decide whether it is wise to side publicly with the Kurds, as former President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Liberman have done.¹³ Their declarations, which followed each other in short order in June 2014, were made in the context of the sudden rise of the Islamic State and the desire of policymakers to back the Kurdish stand against it.

The Kurds too are faced with more than a few dilemmas. On the popular front, they harbor sympathy for Israel, desire to develop ties with it, and even deem it as a model for imitation. Yet despite hoping to obtain aid of some kind from Israel, Kurdish leaders totally object to any public acknowledgment of such a connection, since they fear a response from the surrounding countries, above all Iran and Turkey.

Although there are no definitive answers to these questions, a few general conclusions may be drawn. Like the Western world as a whole, Israel has a significant interest in the Kurds emerging victorious in their struggle against Salafi Jihad Islam. The fact that they are pro-Western, moderate, and relatively secular, and have proven organizational-institutional capabilities,

is an important strategic asset, given the forces of destruction in the region. Moreover, the Kurds have also proven themselves much friendlier to Israel than other peoples in the region, owing to their sense of sharing a fate with another small people whose right to their own country is not recognized. Strategically speaking, if in the past the Kurds served as Israel's "eye" on events in Iraq, then today they can play a similar strategic role with respect to Iran for Israel and the West.

In practice, there is much room for cooperation, mainly with the Kurdish area in Iraq. In addition to the realm of security and commerce, a new potential channel has been opened: the purchase of oil from the Kurdish area in Iraq, an arrangement thus far avoided by outside countries due to opposition from the Baghdad government and one that is likely to lead to the tacit formation of an undeclared triangle between Israel, the Kurdish area of Iraq, and Turkey, through which this oil flows. Israel would do well to extend as much humanitarian aid as possible to the Kurds of Syria, a measure that is unlikely to upset relations with Turkey, which itself is providing shelter to masses of fleeing Kurds. Another important conclusion to be drawn here is that – at least for the Kurds – the best way to conduct relations at this stage is behind the scenes.

In sum, the geopolitical map of the Fertile Crescent is in a state of flux and is being shaped by complex and sometimes destructive processes, some of which are by now so deeply rooted that they appear to have passed the point of no return and will probably make it difficult for Iraq and Syria ever to go back to being the united countries that they were in the twentieth century. The Kurds continue to move slowly toward independence in Iraq and autonomy in Syria. As for the Islamic State, it is premature to dismiss it; even if it is defeated, one may reasonably assume that it will be replaced by Salafi groups under one name or another that will wage a battle to restore the Sunnis to their ancient glory. And for "Shiistan" in Iraq to survive, it will have to accept – whether it desires it or not – the Iranian umbrella, which has been significantly strengthened by the nuclear deal signed in July 2015. From this perspective, the United States will be less relevant in reshaping the regional map. As an American researcher stated in an article summarizing his country's situation in Iraq, "We are lost in Iraq because Iraq... is itself lost."¹⁴ If this is true about Iraq, it is even more relevant to Syria. Given the situation, it is advisable that Israel seek options and paths for positive, powerful forces in the region, even if the West is slow to recognize them.

Notes

- 1 This article is an expanded and revised version of an article that appeared in *Tzomet HaMizrach HaTichon* (Middle East Crossroads) of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies.
- 2 “The Kurdish Minority Problem,” declassified CIA Report, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000258376.pdf.
- 3 The Islamic State forces were only 40 kilometers away from Erbil. See “Kurdish Forces, ISIS Clash Near Arbil,” *al-Arabiya*, August 6, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/06/U-N-condemns-ISIS-attacks-in-Iraq.html>.
- 4 Sam Dagher, “Control of Syrian Oil Fuels War Between Kurds and Islamic State,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/control-of-syrian-oil-fuels-war-between-kurds-and-islamic-state-1416799982>.
- 5 Michael Knights, “Battle for Mosul: Critical test Ahead for Iraq,” *BBC*, June 11, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27789770>.
- 6 Ghazi Hars, “The Fall of Mosul: Anatomy of a City’s Collapse,” *Rudaw*, June 10, 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/100620153>.
- 7 Sheren Khalel and Matthew Vickery, “The Kurds Are at Demographic War with ISIS in Kirkuk,” *Haaretz*, February 26, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/world/premium-1.644202>.
- 8 For a comprehensive discussion of these developments, see Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, eds., *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Mazda Publishers: Costa Mesa, California, 2013).
- 9 “Hollande Pledges More Military Help to Erbil and Baghdad in Iraq Visit,” *Middle East Eye*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hollande-pledges-more-military-help-erbil-and-baghdad-iraq-visit-186242625#sthash.P3RWoASi.dpuf>.
- 10 “KRG Prime Minister: Refugees Have Changed the Demographics of Kurdistan Region,” *Basnews*, February 12, 2015, <http://www.basnews.com/en/news/2015/02/12/kr-g-prime-minister-refugees-have-changed-the-demographics-of-kurdistan-region/>.
- 11 Abdelhak Mamoun, “al-Hashd al-Sha’bi Became Third Military Force after Army and Police, says Maliki,” *Iraqi News*, April 14, 2015, <http://www.iraqinews.com/features/al-hashd-al-shabi-became-third-military-force-army-police-says-maliki/>.
- 12 See Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2014), pp. 103-17.
- 13 For the complex relations between Israel and the Kurds, see Ofra Bengio, “Surprising Ties between the Kurds and Israel,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Summer 2014); and Ofra Bengio, “Why the Kurds Will Become the Second Non-Arab State in the Middle East,” *Tablet*, August 14, 2014.
- 14 Steven A. Cook, “Lost in Iraq,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 26, 2015.