The Trump Administration, the Middle East, and the Kurds

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The Trump Administration and the Middle East

Donald Trump's foreign policy toward the Kurds has not been outlined explicitly, notwithstanding various remarks about the Kurds and certain policy positions that will affect this ethnic group. Trump has made statements that favor the Kurds, including a comment on July 15, 2016 that he is a "big fan of the Kurds." He has also stated that "it would be ideal if we could get them [Turkey and the Kurds] together."[1] However, these favorable statements about the Kurds are joined by statements that might well worry the Kurds, including expressions of nostalgia for Saddam Hussein and trivialization of the mass murder of Kurds in 1989 by stating that Saddam threw around a "little gas."[2]

Along with this rhetoric, Trump has shown he is committed to policies that will have a direct impact on the Kurds, particularly the elimination of the Islamic State and the containment of Iran. The goal to eliminate the Islamic State is a policy carried over from the Obama administration, but with Trump's preference for the use of force. Trump has argued that the United States should "bomb the hell" out of the Islamic State,[3] and that the only solution to the problem is a military solution. This unilateral approach has also included support for a no-fly zone over northern Syria at times,[4] as well as threats to bomb Islamic State-controlled oil fields in order to deprive them of revenue[5] and even proposals to send in ground forces.[6] This contrasts with Obama's policies, which largely tried to prevent United States entanglement in the Syrian conflict. Obama did authorize limited military intervention in Syria; Trump's proposal would require a significant escalation in US intervention in that war-torn state. Trump's

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unilateral and more militarized approach to the Islamic State challenge could potentially favor the Kurds, as he may seek out local allies in Iraq and Syria to alleviate or lessen the need for US troops there.

Trump's approach to Iran, like his approach toward the Islamic State, is unilateral and militaristic. When asked about Iranian gunboats harassing US military ships, for example, he said that he would shoot them out of the water.[7] In addition, in February 2017, in response to Iran's testing of ballistic missiles, the administration imposed new sanctions against the Iranian government.[8] Trump's former National Security Advisor, retired General Michael Flynn, said at the time that Iran was being put on notice.[9] In addition, both Secretary of Defense General James Mattis[10] and presidential advisor Sebastian Gorka[11] have indicated that they perceive Iran as a threat. Thus while President Trump has only vaguely mentioned the Kurds, his pursuit of both the elimination of the Islamic State and the containment of Iran will involve the Kurds and have implications for them.

Kurdish Interests

Syrian and Iraqi Kurds are divided, and different Kurdish actors have different interests. Currently the three most prominent Kurdish actors are the PKK, which has proxies in Syria in the form of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which effectively controls Syrian Kurdistan and operates in Northern Iraqi Kurdistan, and the KDP and PUK, both of which are active in Iraqi Kurdistan and have proxies in Syria but wield little influence beyond Iraqi Kurdistan.

Syrian Kurdistan

Syrian Kurdistan is controlled by the PYD, which is an offshoot of the PKK. The PKK is a Kurdish nationalist organization that was founded in Turkey in the 1970s as a Marxist-Leninist organization that sought an independent Kurdistan.[12] The PKK has since abandoned its Marxist-Leninist ideology and desire for an independent Kurdistan and now wants autonomy for the Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Syria.[13] To this end, with the development of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian Kurds have been able to create their own autonomous region within Syria. This autonomous region was formed from three cantons, Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, which are not contiguous but together form what is called Western Kurdistan or Rojava.[14] Rojava is in practice an autonomous region within Syria, though it is very different from the autonomous region within Iraq.

While Syrian Kurdistan has managed to obtain a large degree of autonomy, like that of Iraqi Kurdistan, there are some substantial differences. Iraqi Kurdistan has enjoyed de facto autonomy since 1991 – when the US enforced a no-fly zone over northern Iraq – and de jure autonomy since 2003. Rojava did not obtain its autonomy until 2013, and even then, it was created out of a civil war and is not recognized by the Syrian government. This lack of recognition means that the autonomy that the Kurds now have in Syria reflects only the effective control by the PYD in the context of an ongoing civil war. Should the PYD be defeated, Rojava's autonomy may cease.

In addition to the difference in legal status, the two Kurdistans have different systems of governance. Iraqi Kurdistan is more nationalistic, traditional, and tribal; Syrian Kurdistan is trying to create an alternative based on decentralization of power to the local level, to create "democracy without the state."[15] This model has seen, and seeks to create, hundreds if not thousands of municipalities that would be governed by the Rojava constitution. This model also does not endorse Kurdish nationalism and is meant to be inclusive of non-Kurds.[16] While Rojava is currently controlled by the PYD, there is domestic opposition, most prominently from the KNC, which is an umbrella organization established by the KDP. Yet although the KNC operates in Syria, it is relatively marginal and has limited influence within Syrian Kurdistan. In addition to having a small following, its followers have been harassed by the PYD, as the two have opposing relationships with the Turkish government. The KNC, because of its relationship with the KDP and the KDP's good relationship with the Turkish government, is strongly opposed by the PYD, as the latter is aligned with the PKK, which is currently in conflict with the Turkish government.[17]

The interest of the PYD within Syria is to maintain its autonomy, but at times has found it hard to do so. The PYD attempted to link Afrin to Kobani and Jazira in August of 2016, when a coalition of different militias, including the PYD, tried to take Jarablus and Manjib.[18] This goal was thwarted when Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield in order to prevent the formation of a contiguous Syrian Kurdistan controlled by the PYD and to contain the growth of Rojava.[19] Following this failure to link the cantons, the PYD has revised its interests and focused on consolidating territory already under its control.[20] The PYD has also stated that its forces will not participate in the liberation of Raqqa from the Islamic State. They will surround the city and contain the organization but will not be involved in the fighting inside the city, which will be left to Arab forces.[21]

While the PYD has failed to link the three cantons, it has created security arrangements with different political actors within Syria. The PYD's relations with the Assad regime as well as with the Syrian rebels have ranged from friendly to hostile, depending on the motivations of both the PYD and the other political actors. At times the PYD has fought with the Assad regime when fighting against other rebels and the Islamic State.[22] However, at times the PYD has cooperated with other rebel groups against the Islamic State.[23] Furthermore, Assad has said he does not recognize Rojava as autonomous and has no intention of recognizing it.[24] This would imply that any cooperation with the regime is for short term, tactical reasons, and that once the Islamic State and the Syrian rebels have been defeated, Assad and the PYD could clash over Rojava's autonomy.

Iraqi Kurdistan

While the PKK and its proxies largely control Rojava in Syria, they are less active in most of Iraqi Kurdistan, where the primary political actors are the KDP, the Gorran Party, and the PUK. At the same time, the PKK has some influence in both the Mount Sinjar area and the Qandil Mountain area, though this presence is strongly opposed by the KDP[25] and has even resulted in armed clashes between both actors.[26] The opposition from the KDP lay in the concern that should the PKK gain influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, it may be at the expense of KDP influence.

Currently Iraqi Kurdistan is formally composed of four governorates: Erbil, Dohuk, Halabja, and Sulimaniyah. However, with the collapse of the Iraqi state and the rise of the Islamic State, the territories that the Kurds govern has expanded, as they have incorporated the governorate of Kirkuk as well as some territory in the north of Iraq.[27]

The KDP was founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani and its base is in Erbil and Dohuk; the PUK was founded in 1975 by Jalal Talabani and its base is in Sulimaniyah.[28] Historically, both these parties have governed Iraqi Kurdistan together, although there has been tension and even conflict between them. The Kurdish civil war (1994-1997) was a particularly bloody episode in Iraqi Kurdistan's history and ended with a peace deal negotiated by America, which had Iraqi Kurdistan formally split into two. One area consisted of Erbil and Dohuk and was governed by the KDP; the second area consisted of Sulimaniyah and was governed by the PUK. While formally abolished in 2003, this division has informally continued to today with the fight against the Islamic State.

Since the formal establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 2003, the PUK and the KDP have controlled the Parliament, the primary formal political institution within Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2013, a new party, the Gorran Party, was formed, created by former members of the PUK who left the party because they were dissatisfied with its political corruption.[29] The results of the 2013 parliamentary election saw the KDP winning 38 seats, the Gorran Party winning 24 seats, and the PUK winning 18 seats. The President of Iraqi Kurdistan is Masoud Barzani of the KDP, and the Prime Minister, also from the KDP, is Nechirvan Barzani.[30]

While the KDP currently has the greatest number of seats in the Parliament and control of the political executive, Iraqi Kurdistan is very divided. In August of 2015, President Barzani decided to extend his presidency beyond the constitutional two term limit. A month later, he removed four Gorran ministers, replaced them with ministers from the KDP, and then blocked Yousif Mohammed, the speaker of the Parliament and a Gorran MP, from entering Erbil.[31] Both decisions effectively eliminated any democratic legitimacy that the KDP and President Barzani had enjoyed and concentrated political power in the hands of the KDP. These decisions have also polarized Iraqi Kurdistan, with the KDP and its supporters in one camp and the opposition in the other.

Political disorder is problematic because it spills over into both the foreign relations of the Iraqi Kurds and the military, as both the KDP and PUK have their own militias. The spillover affects the fight against the Islamic State, because rather than deploying their best forces and weapons against the organization, they are sometimes held in reserve and used for partisan purposes. Furthermore, because of the politicization of the military, the different Peshmerga units do not communicate with each other.[32]

While there is division within the Kurdish military ranks, the Kurds have fought the Islamic State because it threatens the territories and the vital interests of both the KDP. The KDP has fought the Islamic State when it threatened Erbil and is currently fighting the Islamic State in northern Iraq, while the PUK has fought against the Islamic State in Kirkuk and recaptured Kirkuk. Erbil is a base and a vital interest of the KDP, and Kirkuk is a vital interest of the PUK because it is a stronghold[33] and because of its symbolic importance.

However, there are limitations as to how far both actors are willing to advance, and they have shown restraint when dealing with areas beyond their own territory. One key example of this limitation is the battle of Mosul:

as a senior KDP Peshmerga commander indicated, they are very reluctant to go into Mosul itself as they are worried about possible resistance.[34] Accordingly, if President Trump seeks to use the Kurds instead of Americans as frontline soldiers, he may find that while the Kurds will be willing to contain the Islamic State, they may not be willing to go into Islamic State-held territory. This division also spills over into the Iraqi Kurds' foreign policy. The KDP and the PUK lean toward different foreign regional powers; the former has strong ties with Turkey while the latter is inclined toward Iran.

Regional Powers and the Kurds

Further complicating the internal political dynamics in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan is the role of regional powers. Turkey has very strong ties with the KDP in Iraq and more moderate ties with the PUK, while its relationship with the PKK and PYD in Syria is openly hostile. By contrast, Iran has very strong ties to the PUK and moderate ties to the KDP in Iraq and the PKK/PYD in Syria, explained by its broader regional aspirations. Key PKK territory exists along a route Iran uses to send materiel and personnel from Tehran to Latakia, both as a method for supporting the Assad regime and as an instrument to open a corridor to the Mediterranean. This route passes through the territories of Sinjar, Qamishli, and Kobani, all of which are currently controlled by either the PKK or its proxy, the PYD. Therefore, Iran must maintain good relations with the PKK for this route to function, and this route is essential for Iran to obtain the regional hegemony that it seeks.[35] While Iran has an interest in maintaining good relations with the PKK, it is concerned about the possibility that autonomy within Syria for the Kurds could possibility spill over.[36] This concern is linked to the PKK, because the PKK has a branch in Iran, called the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK).[37] PJAK and the Iranian government engaged in military clashes in 2011, but subsequently signed a ceasefire.[38]

While Iran and Turkey have contrasting ties with the PYD, both are concerned about the spillover effect an autonomous Syrian Kurdistan would have on their respective Kurdish populations. Another source of commonality is their relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq; neither the Iranian nor the Turkish government wishes to see the current KDP government removed from power, though for different reasons. Turkey supports a KDP-controlled KRG because of its desire to turn itself into a regional energy hub and to lessen its dependency on Iranian and Russian energy.[39] To do this, it needs Iraqi Kurdistan's energy

to flow through Turkey,[40] and thus Erdogan has cultivated strong ties with the KDP and with President Barzani.[41] However, it has not totally alienated the PUK; the leaders of both parties have been given Turkish passports and both parties have posted formal representatives in Turkey.

Iran's approach has been virtually the opposite. It has much stronger relations with the PUK, which it supported during the bloody Iraqi Kurdistan Civil War from 1994-1997, and Iranian forces have fought recently with the PUK against the Islamic State. Still, Iran did not oppose the extension of President Barzani's term and assisted the KDP when Erbil was attacked by the Islamic State, providing arms and personnel. [42] Iran may be willing to support the KDP because Iranian interests are served by having a strong unified Iraqi Kurdistan fighting the Islamic State rather than having an Iraqi Kurdistan split, with the major factions fighting one another.

Going Forward

The internal political dynamics of both Kurdistans as well as regional political dynamics within the Middle East are central to any understanding of future United States-Kurdish relations. Regardless of which elements are aligned with the Kurds, there will be consequences that American policymakers will have to take in account.

All of the major Kurdish political actors share President Trump's primary objective of eliminating the Islamic State. But should America continue to arm the PYD or increase its support for the PYD, both the KDP and Turkey will likely object, since they will perceive this support as threatening their interests, and the fact that the US refrains from criticizing the Turkish government's actions to suppress the PKK within Turkish borders would make little difference. America could, however, try to preempt Turkish opposition and cultivate more Turkish goodwill by extraditing Gülen or curtailing his influence. The US could also balance any military and financial assistance to the PYD by providing equal assistance to the KDP in Iraq. While arming the KDP might appease any concern the KDP has about arming the PYD, one problem that could arise is that these arms could potentially be used not against the Islamic State, but rather against the PUK should a civil war erupt within Iraqi Kurdistan. The internal tension between the KDP and the PUK could potentially be contained if the United States applies pressure on both political actors – the United States negotiated the peace agreement between both actors in 1997 – and this could reduce the chances of a civil war within Kurdistan and focus Kurdish attention on the Islamic

State. Still, the underlying conflict between the KDP and the PYD can only be truly resolved by political reform in both Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan and by a reduction in tensions between Turkey and the PYD.

Another problem that will arise should Trump seek to use the Kurds to fight the Islamic State is that the KDP, PUK, and PYD are all reluctant to operate beyond the borders of what they consider to be Kurdish territory. Therefore, while the Kurds will be useful in containing the Islamic State, it is questionable whether they will assist in its elimination beyond those borders.

In the pursuit of Trump's second objective of containing Iran, the Kurds are unlikely to support this objective given the relationships that exist between the primary Kurdish political actors in Iraq and Syria and the Iranian government. Iran has assisted both the KDP and the PUK in their fight against the Islamic State. Furthermore, Iran has not and is not threatening the political interest of either actor. The same is true of the relationship between the PKK/PYD and Iran. This does not mean there will not be tensions, since the parties have different interests in Syria, but it does mean that neither side is currently pursuing its interests at the expanse of the other. Looming over the future, however, is the major issue of Rojava's future as an autonomous entity.

Conclusion

United States policy toward the Middle East is shifting with Donald Trump in the White House. This change will likely consist of America taking a much more aggressive stance toward the Islamic State and pursuing a policy of containment of Iran. Both these policies have implications for US-Kurdish relations. This article has examined the different variables and factors that must be taken into consideration before any policy can be formed relating to the Kurds. While President Trump may want to arm the Kurds to fight the Islamic State, there are reasons why such a policy would not be advised. First, while the Kurds will fight the Islamic State when it directly threatens Kurdish territory, they are much more cautious about fighting beyond Kurdish territory and interests. Second, while Kurdish political actors perceive the Islamic State as a threat to their interests, they also perceive each other as threats and therefore any arms given to the Kurds to fight the Islamic State could potentially be used against rival Kurdish factions. The Kurds are likely to resist embracing the pursuit of President Trump's second goal of containing Iran, because none of the major Kurdish

political actors are currently antagonistic toward Iran. Therefore, Kurdish and United States interests will probably not be aligned on this matter.

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