THE COMMENTARIES
July 2025
Volume: 5, No: 1, pp. 1 – 18
ISSN: 2754-8791 (Print) ISSN: 2754-8805 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/com
TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/tc.v5i1.3534

Kurdish Identity: Then, Now, Future

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Abstract

This article analyses Kurdish identity then, now, and in the future with emphasis on the Iraqi Kurds (KRG). The KRG currently has many of the trappings of an independent state: its own president, prime minister and parliament; its own flag and national anthem; its own army that has the right to prevent the federal Iraqi army from entering the Kurdish region; its own international airports and educational system in which Kurdish is the principal language of instruction; and even its own stamp entered into the passports of visitors. This article also analyses the new Trump 2.0 administration's approach to the Kurds. It also asks why not several different Kurdish states? After all, there are some 22 Arab states and 6 Turkic states. So, if Kurdish unity is so difficult to achieve, why not at least 2 different Kurdish states, the KRG and Rojava? However, the Iraqi Kurds should not be discouraged at the lack of full U.S. support. After all, look at Europe. Under Trump, the United States almost seems hesitant even to guarantee Europe's independence from Putin's Russia. This means if the KRG still seeks eventual independence, it must be patient and play the waiting game. Furthermore, despite initial optimism, the current PKK peace process initiative with Turkey seems unlikely to be successful because it appears more like a PKK surrender than a guarantee of Kurdish constitutional rights in return for disarming and disbanding the PKK. In

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conclusion, the Kurds, especially in Iraq, have made enormous progress in recent years towards constitutional guaranteed economic, social, and even political rights as Kurds. However, much remains to be accomplished, elusive Kurdish coordination and unity being of utmost importance.

***Keywords**: Kurdish identity; KRG; Donald Trump; Turkey-PKK peace process, Kurdish unity.*

Then

Occupying the mountainous borders where Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria converge in the Middle East, the more than 30 million Kurds constitute the largest nation/ethnic group in the world without its own independent state.[3] The Kurds are a largely Sunni Muslim people, although there are also Shiite, Alevi and Yezidi Kurds, among other communities.[4] They are quite distinct ethnically from the Turks and Arabs, but related to the Iranians, with whom they share the Newroz (New Year) holiday at the beginning of spring. They speak

[3] In recent years there has been an explosion of excellent publications on the Kurdish issue. Three that have achieved legendary status in the discipline include: Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006, originally submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation in early 1960); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London and New Jersey, Zed Books Ltd., 1992, but also originally submitted as a doctoral dissertation in the 1970s) , and David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 4th ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021). For more than 700 cross-referenced entries on important Kurdish personalities, politics, economy, foreign relations, religion, and culture, as well as a chronology, introduction, and an extensive bibliography, see Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). This article is a continuation of two earlier articles reappraising the Kurdish situation in Turkey that the authors recently published: Michael M. Gunter and Seevan Saeed, "Turkey's Kurdish Insurgency Reappraised (Part I)," *The Commentaries* 4 (February 2024), pp. 1-22; and Michael M. Gunter and Seevan Saeed, "Turkey's Kurdish Insurgency Reappraised (Part II)," *The Commentaries* 4 (February 2024), pp. 23-42.

[4] A short listing of some of the more thorough, edited collections of wide-ranging chapters on the Kurds also introduces many of the other more prominent authors dealing with this stateless nation: Hamit Bozarslan, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Kurds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef, eds., *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (London: Hurst and Company, 2017); Ofra Bengio, ed., *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Michael M. Gunter, ed., *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Mehmet Gurses, David Romano, and Michael M. Gunter, eds. *The Kurds in the Middle East; Enduring Problems and New Dynamics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter, eds., *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2013); and Michael M. Gunter, ed., *Kurdish Issues: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Olson* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2016). Professor Robert W. Olson (1940-2023) was one of the founders of modern-day Kurdish studies in the West and a true giant in the discipline. He very richly deserved this festschrift.

their own distinct language, Kurdish, (with numerous dialects) which is of Indo-European origin.[5]

However, no precise figures for the Kurdish population exist because some Kurdish communities have tended to exaggerate their numbers to seem more important, while the states in which they live have historically tended to undercount them to downplay their significance. In addition, a significant number of Kurds have partially or fully assimilated into the larger Arab, Turkish, or Iranian populations in which they have found themselves. Finally, it should be noted that numerous minorities also live in Kurdistan. These minorities—although sometimes thinking of themselves as Kurdistanis—include Christian groups such as the Assyrians and Armenians, as well as Turkomans and Turks, Arabs and Iranians, among others.

The precise origin of the Kurds is uncertain, although some scholars believe them to be the descendants of various Indo-European tribes, which settled in the area as early as 2000 BCE. The Kurds themselves claim to be the descendants of the Medes who helped overthrow the Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE, and also recite myths about their origins involving King Solomon, *jinn*, and other magical agents. Many believe that the Kardouchoi, mentioned in Anabasis by Xenophon as having given his 10,000 soldiers such a mauling as they retreated from Persia in 401 BCE, were the ancestors of the Kurds. In the seventh century AD, the conquering Arabs applied the name Kurds [Akrad] to the mountainous people whom they converted to Islam in the region, and history also records that the famous Saladin (Salah al-Din), who fought so chivalrously and successfully against the Christian Crusaders and Richard the Lionheart, was a Kurd.

The desire of many Kurds for self-determination and independence, or at least cultural autonomy, has led to an almost continuous series of Kurdish revolts since the creation of the modern Middle East following the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman

[5] On the Kurdish language and literature, see the classic interpretation by Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

Empire. Meanwhile, the states in which the Kurds live fear that Kurdish demands will threaten and even destroy their territorial integrity. The resulting situation constitutes the modern-day Kurdish Question.

Despite a common objective of independence and statehood, the Kurds are notoriously divided geographically, politically, linguistically and tribally. In all the Kurdish revolts of the 20th century, for example, significant numbers of Kurds supported the national government of the country in which they found themselves, owing to tribal antipathies for those who were rebelling. In Iraq, pro-government Kurds have been derisively referred to as *josh* (little donkeys), while Turkey has encouraged the creation of a pro-government militia of Kurds—the so-called village guards. Recently, however, a greater sense of pan-Kurdish identity has arisen for a number of reasons, including the collapse of the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussain in Iraq in 2003, increasing Kurdish rights in Turkey, and the long-running civil war in Syria since 2011. Although Iran too has seen significant Kurdish unrest, it has been on a lesser scale.

Thus, Kurdish divisions long played a significant role in defining Kurdish identity and still do. Kurdish nationalism came late and mainly as a reaction to Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalism after World War I. However, in 1891 Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamit (Abd al-Hamid) II created the *Hamidiye*, a pro-government Kurdish cavalry that proved to be an important stage in the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism.[6] None the less, most Kurds supported the Ottomans during the First World War and then Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) during the Turkish War of Independence following that conflict.

Equally inhibiting to Kurdish identity, the notorious British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement during World War I gave much of Kurdistan to British and French imperialism and the artificial states it created

[6] Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

or sought to create. Thus, the Sykes-Picot Agreement became a byword for imperialist manipulation of the Kurds.

In addition, the stillborn Treaty of Sevres (1920) represented a lost opportunity of "local autonomy" for predominantly Kurdish areas (Article 62), while Article 64 even looked forward to the possibility of Kurdish independence from Turkey. However, the definitive Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 created the modern Republic of Turkey, in part on the back of Kurdish failure. Kurdish nationalism came late and mainly as a reaction to Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalism after World War I. Today, *Kurdayeti* is a Kurdish concept that in general expresses the transferral of the Kurdish awareness of themselves as a people into cultural and political activity. More specifically, it has come to refer to a coherent system of modern pan-Kurdish nationalism that was developed by Kurdish intellectual nationalists by the 1960s.

Iraq

After their victory in the First World War, the British decided to attach the largely Kurdish vilayet (province) of Mosul to their newly won League-of-Nations mandate in Iraq because of its vast oil resources. The British believed that this was the only way Iraq could be made viable. However, the Kurds in Iraq considered British policy as a betrayal of their aspirations for independence and were in an almost constant state of revolt against the government of Iraq.

With the final defeat of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji in 1931 after a series of rebellions on behalf of the Kurds against Mandatory Iraq, which was under British control at the time, Mulla Mustafa Barzani began to emerge as the leader most synonymous with the Kurdish movement in Iraq. Although the Barzani tribe's influence was originally founded on religious authority, as the leaders were Sufi sheikhs of the Naqshbandi sect, they also became noted for their fighting abilities. For more than 50 years, Barzani fought the Iraqi Government in one way or another. He was the guiding spirit and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), founded in August

1946, spent a decade in exile (1947–58) in the Soviet Union, and at the height of his power negotiated the March Manifesto of 1970, which theoretically provided for Kurdish autonomy under his rule.

However, infighting with other Kurdish leaders such as Ibrahim Ahmad and his son-in-law Jalal Talabani who founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in June 1975, and continuing government opposition, led to Barzani's ultimate defeat in 1975. His defeat was also due in part to the USA and Iran withdrawing their support for him in return for Iraqi concessions over a territorial dispute with Iran—an action US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger cynically explained as "necessary covert action not to be confused with missionary work."[7] The Iraqi Kurds finally established the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a largely autonomous federal state in Iraq, which began to achieve real autonomy and even aspects of de facto independence in 1991 after the defeat of Saddam Hussain's regime in the 1990–91 and 2003 Gulf Wars.

However, divided by philosophy, geography, dialect, and ambition, the KDP and Talabani's PUK have alternated between cooperation and conflict ever since. They both have also suffered from repression, such as the genocidal Anfal campaign of 1986–89 led by the regime of Saddam Hussein, including the chemical attack on the city of Halabja in March 1988.[8]

After the 1990–91 Gulf War and failure of the ensuing Kurdish uprising in March 1991, the mass flight of Kurdish refugees to the mountains reluctantly forced the USA to create a safe haven and a

[7] For Kissinger's infamous cynical remark, see the Pike Committee Report in "Case 2: Arms Support," pp. 85 and 87-88 in "The CIA Report the President Doesn't Want You to Read," *The Village Voice*, February 16, 1976, pp. 70-92. However, Kissinger later cogently blamed, "forbidding geography, ambivalent motives on the part of neighboring countries, and incompatible motivations within the Kurdish community itself." The American diplomat then partially apologized, "For the Kurdish people, perennial victims of history, this is, of course, no consolation," and then further explained, "Those who afterward spoke so righteously about 'cynicism' and 'betrayal'—having remained silent, or worse, about the far vaster tragedy taking place in Indochina [in reference to the end of the Vietnam War]—never put forward an alternative course we could, in fact, have pursued." See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 596 in a chapter aptly entitled "Tragedy of the Kurds."

[8] For trenchant background, see Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Choman Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Farmham Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011).

"no-fly zone" in which a de facto Kurdish state began to develop in northern Iraq. In addition, the unprecedented UN Security Council Resolution 688 of April 1991 condemned the repression of the Iraqi civilian population in Kurdish-populated areas and demanded an immediate end to repression by Iraq. As symbolic as it may have been, never before had the Kurds received such official international attention and an appeal for protection.

Despite the fact that the KRG began to emerge in northern Iraq following Saddam Hussein's defeat in the 1990–91 Gulf War, the KDP and PUK proceeded to fight a civil war against each other during 1994–98. As a result of internal Kurdish fighting, there were two separate rump governments in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1994–2006: the KDP-led administration in Irbil and the PUK's in Sulaymaniya. The USA finally brokered a ceasefire after negotiations to which both Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani were invited to Washington, DC, in September 1998. The Kurds were also entitled to 13 percent of receipts from the oil that Iraq was allowed to export after 1995.

Despite being economically underdeveloped historically, for some time the KRG region witnessed a significant amount of economic, political and social modernization. Indeed, the economy of the KRG prospered, relative to the rest of Iraq, in the late 1990s due to the oil-for-food program funds it received from the sale of Iraqi oil through the United Nations (UN). Furthermore, given the security problems to the south, many foreign investors were attracted to the much safer KRG region after 2003. Currently, the KRG supposedly receives 17 percent of the Iraqi federal budget, but in practice often goes for long periods of time without anything due to disagreements between the two over oil exports.

Since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, many foreign investors—particularly Turkish—have been attracted to the region and construction has been booming. Modern stores, homes and automobiles have proliferated. Two international airports have been constructed and are handling more than 100 flights a week in Irbil and Sulaymaniya, while a third airport operates for contested

Kirkuk.[9] As many as 31 universities or other schools of higher education were also operating, although some were of marginal quality. However, huge discrepancies in wealth also have developed, as well as corruption and nepotism. Problems between the KRG and the federal Government in Baghdad continue, regarding access to the vast Iraqi oil reserves, the internal border between the KRG and the rest of Iraq, and the future of the province and the city of Kirkuk.

The Iraqi Constitution, approved by referendum in October 2005, established a federal structure for Iraq that granted significant powers to the regions. Indeed, for the first time most Kurds now thought of their government in Irbil, not the one in Baghdad, when the concept of government was raised. However, as already noted, the actual division of power between the Iraqi federal government and the KRG remained in dispute. As noted above, the contested matters included the ownership of the vast oil reserves and the control of the revenues flowing from them, the role of the KRG army or *peshmerga* (militia), and the final status of Kirkuk and its surrounding territory, among others. As of today, the KRG and the Iraqi federal government often remain locked in a protracted disagreement over their differences.

In June 2014 the potential disintegration of Iraq appeared a possible prospect when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Islamic State)—a genocidal Sunni Islamist organization whose objectives and methods were so extreme that even al-Qaeda had disassociated itself from it—suddenly captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. With the rout of the federal Government's armies (mostly comprising Shiite soldiers) in the north, the KRG quickly occupied Kirkuk and other disputed territories and thus seemingly moved to the brink of independence. Although ISIS had already held territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria for some time, its latest conquest moved Iraq closer to a tripartite division among the Shiite, Sunnis and Kurds, as the group was able to appeal to the Iraqi Sunnis, many

[9] On this much contested city and governorate, see Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

of whom had been alienated by the Iraqi federal government's pro-Shiite policies.

In addition, on August 3, 2014, ISIS suddenly attacked the KRG and quickly captured the largely Yazidi-inhabited city of Sinjar (Shingal in Kurdish), from which KRG forces were forced to flee.[10] To the consternation of the KRG Government, ISIS fighters then even reached within 20 miles of Irbil, the KRG's administrative center, before US airstrikes and limited military aid enabled the KRG, along with considerable assistance from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK/Turkey) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD/Syria)—both long-time Kurdish opponents of the KRG—to drive ISIS's forces back. (Troops from the Iraqi army also supported the effort.) With US air support for the KRG and Iranian ground support for Baghdad, by mid-2015 ISIS had been pushed back and was eventually defeated

From 2015 on, the KRG's position deteriorated for a variety of economic, political, security, and social reasons. As a largely rentier state, the precipitous drop in oil prices during 2015 immediately reduced the KRG's available revenues, a problem compounded by Baghdad no longer remitting the constitutionally mandated 17 percent of its budget to the Kurds whose budget included a grossly bloated government payroll. Even the peshmerga ceased to be paid regularly despite the existential struggle against ISIS. And socially the more than 2 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) dislocated by war and terrorism and now domiciled in Iraqi Kurdistan created enormous more problems. Even expatriates, who earlier had returned to Iraqi Kurdistan, were beginning to leave again.

Nevertheless, as the final victory over ISIS neared and the economic situation began to improve, KRG president Massoud Barzani announced on June 7, 2017 that a referendum on independence would be held on September 25, 2017. However, the referendum

[10] On these much misunderstood "other Kurds" once erroneously referred to as "devil worshippers," see Philip Kreyenbroek and Khanna Omarkhali, "Yezidism and Yezidi Studies in the Early 21st Century," Special Issue: *Kurdish Studies* (Vol. 4, No. 2, 2016); and Birgul Acikyildiz, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

would be non-binding, merely an expression of popular opinion for the KRG government to use while negotiating with Baghdad, not the mandatory decision the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom was.

Although the referendum strongly advised independence, the vehement opposition of almost all the KRG's important neighbors and even the United States, plunged the KRG into renewed crises as Baghdad reoccupied Kirkuk and closed down the KRG's two international airports, among many other stinging rebuffs. As a result, Massoud Barzani finally resigned as president of the KRG and was succeeded by his nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, while Massoud's son, Masrour Barzani, eventually became prime minister. Both continued to hold these roles as of 2025.

The most recent KRG elections were held in October 2024 with the KDP winning 39 seats, the PUK 23, the New Generation Movement 15, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union 7. Smaller groups won the remaining 17 seats. The once powerful Gorran party virtually ceased to exist, its reformist founder and leader, Nawshirwan Mustafa, having died in 2017. Barham Salih, once a leading member of the PUK and president of Iraq from 2018-2022, regretfully no longer participated in any governmental role due to his reformist attitudes and lack of important family ties.

Now

The KRG currently has many of the trappings of an independent state: its own president, prime minister and parliament; its own flag and national anthem; its own army that has the right to prevent the federal Iraqi army from entering the Kurdish region; its own international airports and educational system in which Kurdish is the principal language of instruction; and even its own stamp entered into the passports of visitors. Although many wondered what would happen to the KRG once the remaining US troops were withdrawn from Iraq at the end of 2011, the Kurds have managed to survive and to some extent even prosper without them.

However, despite the relatively new sense of Kurdish nationalism or *Kurdayeti,* Kurdish divisions continue to inhibit their march to independence. These divisions not only exist among the Kurds living in the four states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, but also within each one of these states. The continuing divisions between the KDP and PUK, of course, are very well known to all who follow Kurdish politics. They greatly inhibit the development of the KRG. Indeed, the authors of this article cannot emphasize how frequently they hear important government officials and knowledgeable scholars say how the Kurdish population in northern Iraq must get their act together and overcome their debilitating divisions for them to achieve their just goals of economic development, peace, and even eventual independence. Only then can the United States and their other potential friends support them better instead of manipulating them through divide-and-rule tactics.

The New Trump Administration's Approach to the Kurdish Issue and the Middle East

Despite his mercurial style, we probably can tell a lot about the new Donald Trump administration's (Trump 2.0) approach to the Kurdish issue in general by simply looking at the first Trump administration's (Trump 1.0) style. When we do so, the first thing we note is that despite Trump's non-stop bluster and threats, the man disdains war and did keep the US at peace. Thus, the new, second Trump administration is not likely to use actual military force to support the Kurds in Iraq (Basur) or Syria (Rojava). The Kurds are basically on their own.

However, not completely! Trump does like to use economic force and even the implied threat of military power. Although many describe Trump's policies as transactional—that is temporary deal making freed from ideology or permanent alliances—a more accurate characterization might be extortionist, that is threatening or even black mailing. For example, in October 2019, when Turkey and its proxy Syrian/Islamists allies drove the Syrian Kurds off parts of their mutual border—seemingly with Trump's approval—Trump's

advisors quickly managed to walk him back into keeping just enough US troops in north-eastern Syria to deter Turkey from totally eliminating the Syrian Kurds.[11]

Similarly, today, despite his rhetoric about completely withdrawing, Trump has already stationed by some reports up to 2,000 US troops near Kobane to deter an all-out onslaught by the Turkish proxy militias usually known now as the Syrian National Army (SNA). Trump's motive is less sympathy for the Syrian Kurds and more desire to protect US geostrategic interests in barring Iran from dominating the region (a goal which coincides with Turkish Iraqi and Syrian interests) and protecting north-eastern Syria's oil for US interests. Nevertheless, in recent months, since the sudden fall of Assad in Syria at the beginning of December 2024, the SNA has taken Tel Rifaat and Manbij from the Syrian Kurds and threatens to occupy still more.

The second thing we should remember is that again, despite his frequent barbs against Turkey and its authoritarian president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump appreciates and values Turkey as an American NATO ally, and Erdogan himself as a fellow populist, illiberal, strongman ruler. This would suggest that Erdogan should play a patient, even waiting game regarding Rojava because in the long run Trump is likely to let Erdogan have his way with the Syrian Kurds as he did in October 2019. As one maxim explains regarding Trump's attitude toward the Kurds, "no permanent friends or enemies, only interests."

As Trump's new secretary of state Marco Rubio has emphasized, the focus of the US is to advance US national interests as defined by President Trump. Whatever it takes "to make American great again," as Trump himself has explained. Mike Waltz, Trump's new national security advisor, and Peter (Pete) Hegseth, Trump's new secretary of defense, surely agree with all this. If they begin to find fault with

[11] For an analysis, see Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, "The October 2019 Turkish Incursion into Northeastern (Kurdish) Syria: Its Background & Broader Implications," *Middle East Policy* 27 (Spring 2020), pp. 79-94.

Trump's approach, they quickly will find themselves bereft of employment as their predecessors Secretaries of State Rex Tillerson, and Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Jim Mathis, and National Security Advisor John Bolton, among many others did in Trump 1.0.

However, again all this is only up to a point. The Syrian Kurds have been and are going to have to continue to accommodate Turkey, but not to the point of giving up everything they have gained in the way of semi-autonomy since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. For one reason, in the long run, the new Syrian Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) government of Ahmed al-Sharaa will certainly seek to protect Syria's territorial integrity against any ambitious Turkish territorial over reach into northern Syria. While this bodes ill for the Syrian Kurdish hopes of semi-autonomy in the long run, at least in the short run, it protects the Syrian Kurdish existence, which will then have to be negotiated with the new rulers in Damascus, more of which below.

At this point, however, one must also consider the now lesser, but continuing roles of Russia and especially Iran, which both still maintain important long-term interests in the fate of Syria and the Syrian Kurds. Despite currently being tied down in its miscalculated war in Ukraine, Russia still will seek to maintain its Syrian Mediterranean warm water naval port in Tartus and its near-by air base in Khmeimem. Although weakened by the Israeli strikes against its air defenses in October 2024 and the defeat of its major proxies Hezbollah and Hamas by Israel, Iran remains a formidable player in the region and will certainly challenge the new Trump 2.0 administration. The new HTS Syrian government in Damascus is likely to abide Russia's and Iran's interests if only to balance them against Turkish, US, and Israeli pressures. It is and will continue to be a very complicated game!

However, the new Trump administration's main interlocutor in Syria will clearly be the new HTS government in Damascus. Already, this new player has begun seeking to bring the Syrian Kurds back into the greater Syrian fold. Indeed, its ultimate aims are to fold the Syrian Kurd's SDF/YPD militia into the greater HTS Syrian army.

Obviously, this HTS goal is diametrically opposed to the Syrian Kurds' determination to maintain their semi-autonomy by retaining their own independent militia. It remains difficult to see where a compromise could be reached on this, and easy to foresee how fighting between the two might eventuate. Clearly, the entire issue will present the new Trump administration with continuing challenges. However, in the end the new Trump administration is more likely to let matters evolve without actively intervening because again Trump disdains war in general and in his own words considers Syria in particular to be but "death and sand." As for the Syrian Kurds, Trump has dismissed them unworthy of US support because they did not support the US on D-Day when the US and its other allies invaded Nazi Europe on June 6, 1944. With hindsight like this, what valid predictions of foresight are possible?

Nevertheless, on March 10, 2025, the new HTS Syrian government of interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mazloum Abdi, the de facto Kurdish leader of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) signed an agreement theoretically integrating the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the national Syrian army and government. Of course, it remains to be seen if this agreement will actually be implemented. Even so, it dampens Turkish ambitions to eliminate the de facto Syrian Kurdish autonomy now legally recognized, theoretically incorporated, and protected by Damascus on the southern Turkish border. Of course, all this is a stretch given Arab Syria's historic animosity to Kurdish rights.

The Syrian Kurdish leader Mazloum Abdi, whom Turkey sees as an arm of the PKK, already has announced that the recent, so-called PKK peace process with Turkey does not apply to his SDF and AANES. However, sudden heavy fighting in and around the Syrian coast near Latakia between the remnants of Assad's forces and the new HTS Syrian government of Ahmed al-Sharaa early in March 2025 questions the future of the new HTS government in Damascus. All of this reduces the seeming importance of the so-called PKK peace process in Turkey. As for the KRG and Iraqi Kurds, their

prospects remain inextricably linked to the future of questionable Iraqi unity and the wider geopolitical restructuring of the Middle East following Israel's recent successful wars against Hamas and Hezbollah and degrading of Iran's defenses. The so-called PKK peace process in Turkey would seem at best a very secondary factor.

Finally, of course, there is Israel, which has already taken advantage of Syria's disunity and weakness by destroying much of what was left of its military and also moving even further into southern Syrian territory bordering on Israel proper. Unlike Syria and the Kurds, Israel remains a big deal for Trump. So, whatever happens to Israel, the new Trump administration will be heavily involved. Indeed, this might bring Trump to expand his earlier initiative on the Abraham Accords to mediating between his supposed Turkish ally and existential Israeli one over their potential differences in Syria including the Syrian Kurds and elsewhere.

No doubt too, Trump 2.0's decision to largely dismantle the US Agency for International Development (USAID)'s international development and humanitarian assistance program, withdraw from the World Health Organization, possibly launch a world trade war by imposing onerous tariffs on China and even such US allies as Canada and Mexico, among many other possibilities such as the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK), while even threatening US allies like Panama, Denmark, and Canada about seizing their territory will have negative blowback precedents for the entire Middle East as well as Rojava and the Kurdish issue. The new Trump administration's policies potentially present great problems for Kurdish identity.

Future

Everyone knows that in their hearts, the Kurds ultimately want independence. However, what does this mean exactly?[12] One pan-

[12] On the prospects of future Kurdish independence, see the thoughtful study by Michael Rubin, *Kurdistan Rising? Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 2016).

Kurdish state? Doubtful! KRG independence, while in Turkey, Iran, and even Syria, not even autonomy, but merely constitutionally guaranteed rights?

On the other hand, why not several different Kurdish states, at least the KRG and maybe the AANES (Rojava) in Syria. After all, there are some 22 Arab states and 6 Turkic states. So, if Kurdish unity is so difficult to achieve, why not at least 2 different Kurdish states, the KRG and Rojava?

Because the Iraqi Kurds supported the United States in its two wars against Saddam Hussein, the U.S. helped them birth the semi-autonomous, federal KRG. However, even the United States strongly opposed their advisory referendum on independence held on September 25, 2017. Indeed, in the name of stability, almost everyone in the world opposed even considering KRG independence except Israel and Iceland.

Seventy Two percent of the eligible voters in the KRG region cast ballots and 93% of them favored independence. But in the PUK stronghold Sulaymaniyah (Slemani), voter turnout was only 50% of the eligible voters and only 80% voted for independence. So, this means that in Sulaymaniyah, less than half the eligible voters favored independence. Instead, they saw the independence referendum as a premature, unilateral KDP initiative and so voted "no." The Iraqi Kurdish identity remained challenged by continuing disunity.

However, the Iraqi Kurds should not be discouraged at the lack of U.S. support. After all, look at Europe. Under Trump, the United States almost seems hesitant even to guarantee Europe's independence from Putin's Russia. So, if this is true for America's long time NATO ally, Europe, the KRG might consider itself fortunate to have whatever support it can get from Trump's America. This means if the KRG still seeks eventual independence, it must be patient and play the waiting game.

In the meanwhile, the KRG being a federal part of Iraq satisfies its powerful regional neighbors: Turkey, Iran, and Baghdad, plus the

United States. And also, just as important, being a federal part of Iraq, gives the KRG protection as part of Iraq, which seems possibly more today than what Europe has. On the other hand, if the KRG had independence, it might not have any protection at all. So, for the time being, the KRG remaining a federal part of Iraq gives it more protection all around, than dangerous independence would! Independence will only come if Iraq breaks up. This remains possible given how weak and divided Iraq is. However, again, unless and until Iraq collapses, being an autonomous, federal part of Iraq offers a better position for the Kurds than premature independence.

The future fate of the KRG in particular, remains inextricably linked to and dependent on the future of Iraq and the wider geopolitical restructuring of the Middle East as well as the Kurdish ability to achieve their own unity. All of these requirements for KRG independence will be difficult, but not impossible to achieve in time.

As already mentioned, recent heavy fighting in Syria indicates that the Syrian civil war is not necessarily over between Ahmed al-Sharaa's new HTS government in Damascus, and remnants of Assad's regime around the Alawite heartland in Latakiya. In addition, what will happen as the new Syrian government tries to assimilate the Syrian Kurds who have enjoyed a heady dose of autonomy due to Syria's fracturing during the civil war? Finally, Turkey and its proxies—the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA)—continue to attack the Syrian Kurds militarily organized as the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). Turkey clearly has long-term neo-Ottomanist ambitions towards incorporating parts of Northern Syria, which includes the Syrian Kurds.[13] Not to mention, if Iraq does collapse, Turkey surely will try to grab parts of the former Ottoman vilayet of Mosul, today's KRG.

In conclusion, the Kurds, especially in Iraq, have made enormous progress in recent years towards constitutional guaranteed economic, social, and even political rights as Kurds. However, much remains to

[13] On Turkey's neo-Ottomanism ambitions, see M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

be accomplished, elusive Kurdish coordination and unity being of utmost importance.