



# Internal Kurdish Coherence

Analyzing Alliances, Capacities, Threats, and Political Objectives  
of Kurdish Groups and Parties in Syria and Iraq 2015-2017

*By David Vestenskov & Andreas Høj Fierro*

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# Contents

List of Illustrations	v
About the Authors	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Acronyms	xi
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Aim of the Book	2
Research Design	2
Structure of the Book	5
<b>PART ONE: The Syrian Kurds</b>	<b>7</b>
The Kurdish Supreme Committee	7
Kurdish National Council Post KSC	10
Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Democratic Council	12
Syrian Democratic Forces' Major Military Campaigns	14
Rojava Proclaims Federalism	16
Reported Affiliation between PKK and PYD/YPG	19
International Actors' Positions toward the Syrian Kurdish Groups	21
Likely Side Effects from Continued/Enhanced Support to the SDF	24
<b>PART TWO: The Iraqi Kurdistan Region</b>	<b>27</b>
The Origins of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the KRG	27
The Kurdish Regional Government in Post-Saddam Iraq	29
The Economic Downfall of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region	32
ISIS Attacks Kurdistan – The Fall of Sinjar	34
The Iraqi Kurdish Capture of Kirkuk	35
The State of Press Freedom in Iraqi Kurdistan	35
Iraq's Political Development Post-ISIS	36
Relationship with Turkey	39
The Fallout of the Kurdish Region's Independence Referendum	40
<b>Conclusion: Internal Kurdish Coherence</b>	<b>45</b>
Iraqi Kurdistan	45
Northern Syria	46

Kurdish Transnational Coherence	46
Policy Implications	50
Epilogue	51
Literature	53

## List of Illustrations

Map 1.	Syria, Archive: RDDC	8
Map 2.	Northern Syria – Rojava Region, Archive: RDDC	17
Map 3.	Iraq, Archive: RDDC	28
Table 1.	Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC)	9
Table 2.	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party (PYD) / Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - People’s Protection Units (YPG)	10
Table 3.	Kurdish National Council (KNC)	12
Table 4.	SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) / SDC (Syrian Democratic Council)	13
Table 5.	Responses to the Democratic Federal System for Rojava and Northern Syria	18
Table 6.	International Actors’ Official Views on the Alleged Affiliation between the PYD and PKK	23
Table 7.	Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	29
Table 8.	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	30
Table 9.	Gorran (Movement for Change)	32



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# Acronyms

## **Iraq**

KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

## **Syria**

PYD	Democratic Union party
YPG	People's Protection Unit
YPJ	Women's Protection Unit
Tev-Dem	Movement for a Democratic Society
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KSC	Kurdish Supreme Committee
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Council
NC	National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

## **Turkey**

AKP	Justice and Development Party
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party

## **Iran**

PJAK	Free Life Party of Kurdistan
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## **Transnational**

KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
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# Introduction

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) shocked the world when it entered the world stage in 2014. Having seized very large territories in Syria and Iraq, its expansion within the Middle East seemed unrestrainable by the end of 2014. The Iraqi Army's initial effort to halt ISIS failed catastrophically, with soldiers fleeing their positions; and in Syria the various actors were caught up in a bloody civil war.

With US air support, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds were the main force acting as boots on the ground and managed to halt the ISIS advance at the Syrian town of Kobane,<sup>1</sup> which became a turning point for ISIS expansion. Simultaneously in Iraq, Kurdish Peshmerga forces stopped the ISIS advance only 50 kilometers from the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) capital Erbil. Halting ISIS advances in both countries was a significant achievement for the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, something which no other Syrian oppositional groups nor the Iraqi Army had been able to accomplish.

The Kurdish success against ISIS quickly won them acclaim from the West (especially the US and European countries) and rendered them the key ally in the continued US-led effort against ISIS. Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have since then won significant victories in their fight against ISIS. In Iraq, Kurdish groups have regained 95% of the Iraqi Kurdish territory initially lost, and in Syria, the Kurdish militia of Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) has led fighting to retake territories near the Syrian borders to Turkey and Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2015).

In Western media, the Kurds are often praised for their fight for human rights, gender equality, secular rule, and democracy, which is in sharp contrast to the horrific rule of ISIS (Watson & Tuysuz, 2014). An example is the Syrian Kurdish female fighters, frequently portrayed in newspapers' reporting on the conflict. The narrative often frames the Kurdish groups as a homogeneous entity with a democratic baseline that aspires to Western values. Furthermore, the Kurdish people are also described as a united populous that has been denied their basic political rights and suffered substantial abuses from the states in the region. One example of this is a general description from the BBC in 2016. The historical dimension in the BBC's description emphasizes that any move to set up an independent Kurdish nation-state has been brutally quashed, despite the victors of WW1 having made provision for a Kurdish state in the Treaty of Sèvres. In Syria, Kurds have been denied their basic rights and suppressed by the Syrian regime; and in Iraq, Saddam Hussein's brutal attack using poison gas on

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<sup>1</sup> Situated close to Syria's Northern border with Turkey.

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the Iraqi Kurds underlines the tortuous history of a persecuted people (“Who are the Kurds?”, 2017). There is no question about the suffering that Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have had to endure. This report does not intend to question said suffering.

The narrative about Kurdish groups has been highly affected by the development in the security situation over the last couple of years, and the Kurdish groups now represent heavily armed forces and serve as important allies in the fight against ISIS. The political party of Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD), and its armed wing (YPG), went from being a largely unknown group at the beginning of the Syrian conflict to become the leading actor in the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), defending and controlling large parts of Northern Syria and putting Turkey on high alert. In 2016, Kurdish Peshmerga forces expanded their territory to Kirkuk in Iraq, and after having halted ISIS advances they defended a more than 1,000-kilometer-long border with ISIS-held territory.

### Aim of the Book

In relation to the future security and political developments in Iraq and Syria, there is a need for developing more comprehensive knowledge of the different Kurdish groups in the region. This book’s objective is to examine the main Kurdish groupings and their affiliations and interactions with other Kurdish groups, as well as other key state actors in the surrounding region. By focusing on political goals, cooperation or rivalries, and political institutions, the report will contribute to knowledge about important actors and Western allies in the Middle East. Consequently, this book will seek to:

Examine the internal coherence between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities and their alignments in the fight against ISIS.

### Research Design

The authors have chosen an *explorative case study* as the research design for the study. The distinct phenomena of the internal coherence of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds is characterized by a lack of detailed preliminary research. As such an explorative approach is needed to investigate the phenomena. The study will generally be guided and limited by the research question, ensuring coherence and relevance for the data collection. The study explores the research question through available open sources in order to analyze and compare these sources with the groups’ self-stated political alignments, ideology and military alliances.

The study will examine the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups that were and are engaged in the fight against ISIS in order to provide an overview of the different Kurdish groupings operating in Syria and Iraq respectively. The key questions guiding the research are: *What are their political goals? Do the groupings display coherence internally? And what are their external alignments?* By asking these questions, the study will describe the political objectives and capacities of the groups thereby building a foundation for an assessment of the coherence within and among the groups.

Several Western democracies are part of the US-led coalition against ISIS, and the coalition actively supports Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups in their fight on the ground. This relationship works both ways, as they also serve as a very important ally by supporting the coalition’s fight in terms of putting boots on the ground. In a democracy, foreign policy per definition rests on the democratic mandate provided by the citizens. Hence, this study’s contribution is to policy-makers as well as the public, and it sets out to provide in-depth information on the Kurdish groups supported by the West. The ongoing nature of the conflict only further emphasizes the importance of a contemporary historical background about the Kurdish groups involved in the conflict. Future political decisions concerning continued support need to consider this knowledge if sustainable solutions are to be identified.

Because this study aims at providing contemporary information on the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, an exploratory case study will be applied as the research design. The case study will be empirically driven using open sources centered on information and sources rather than applying a theoretical framework that in its nature seeks to explain and simplify dynamics. This approach has been chosen in order to bring in as much information as possible without incorporating it into a theoretical framework. This carries a caveat in terms of non-coherence

in relation to the conclusion, but at the same time, the empirical approach complies well with the study's objective to describe a relatively undescribed subject, Bøgh Andersen, Møller Hansen, & Klemmensen (2010) and other scholars will be left with the task of applying the results from this study in a comprehensive theoretical framework. Consequently, this study aspires to bring forth the present data on the Kurdish groups in order to study in depth the various aspects, groups, and episodes, rather than having the study's analysis conducted within the closed framework of a theory. By not having the study undertaken within the framework of a theory, the study also comes with other limitations and caveats. Theory-based studies allow examination of causality and probability – traits, which this study therefore cannot achieve. Furthermore, a theory ensures that concepts are usually well defined, which enhances the researcher's ability to measure the desired objectives across various sources, increasing the validity and reliability of the study. Although the traits associated with a theory-driven study are appealing, the task at hand calls for a research design that can facilitate in-depth answers to the research question, rather than the most convenient theoretical fit. To provide a historical background and explain the internal coherence between the various Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups, operating an empirically driven case study is considered to yield the best results.

### *Case Selection*

Andrew Bennet defines a case as “an instance of a class of events of interest to the investigator” (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 17). This definition highlights the importance of the investigator's role in selecting the case rather than defining a case as a historical happening in itself. The case of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish groups and their fight against ISIS has been chosen in this context because it can be determined as an important aspect of a historical happening. The challenge in selecting a case based on *interest* and not statistics, or a most/least likely case, is the low generalizability associated with the study's results (George & Bennett, 2005). However, as stated, the study's focus is to describe the case and not to develop a generalized model for future application. The latter is the main argument for the chosen research design as the gains from an exploratory case study design exceeds the limitations and caveats.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The empirical data for the study was collected in the period January 2016 – July 2017. Since the study has an exploratory focus on the Kurdish groups involved in the fight against ISIS, the analysis has revolved around an inductive examination of the collected data. However, as the chosen case is an ongoing armed conflict, an Epilogue has been included in order to capture and reflect on the latest major developments in the region. Furthermore, the majority of the data was collected in the first half year of 2016, at which time there were few peer-reviewed academic articles on the subject. This is the main reason why the study to a large extent includes secondary literature from think tanks and newspapers rather than academic sources. Realizing this, it became an important part of this study to present other researchers and scholars with systematized knowledge of the conflict and the Kurdish actors fighting ISIS.<sup>2</sup> This entails that the data collection and subsequent analysis becomes central to the study's validity, which is the assurance that the study in fact examines the research question it sets out to answer (Bøgh Andersen et al., 2010). The empirically driven research design blurs the lines between data collection and analysis as they are interconnected. In the process of answering the research question, new aspects, not previously known, had the potential of diverting the focus of the research to explain new episodes in depth. To avoid this and to increase the study's validity, the study will measure the same phenomena across different primary as well as secondary sources.

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<sup>2</sup> After the completion of the data collection for this book, the academic literature has started to look into the relationships between the various Kurdish groups and factions. In the book “Iraqi Kurdistan, PKK, and International Relations (2017), Hannes Černy studies Kurdish ethno-nationalist actors by analyzing the relationship between PKK and Iraqi Kurdish political parties. However, parts of the emerging literature holds on to the notion of the Kurds as a coherent political group such as David L. Philips in “The Kurdish Spring” (2018). Looking ahead, Routledge is set to publish a “Handbook on the Kurds” in 2019, highlighting the renewed interest in the Kurds and their role in the region.



The analytical strategy is initially to identify and subsequently analyze reports on the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish groups' fight against ISIS. These secondary sources will serve as a backbone for providing a contextual frame and thereby an overview of the general Kurdish-led war against ISIS. Based on secondary sources, the analysis will begin to consider primary sources as close to the actors as possible in order to gain a better understanding of their role in and perception of the examined events described in the secondary literature. If the primary sources revealed new information or aspects, further research was then conducted to evaluate whether new contextual elaboration or additions were required for the secondary sources. In order to avoid losing the study's main direction or acquire too much information, the selection of the data was based exclusively on the premise of whether the data would help to answer the research question or not.

### *A Critical View on the Main Sources Used in This Study*

The secondary sources used in the study vary much and therefore face different caveats. The secondary sources can be grouped into three different categories: International think tanks, local media, and international media. The specific caveats pertaining to each category, as well as the efforts taken to address them, are described below.

The first category of secondary sources covers international think tanks such as International Crisis Group, the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, and Jane's IHS examinations of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish groups. The reports contribute with rich interviews from high-ranking Syrian and Iraqi officials and officers, analysis of the situation on the ground, and explanations of the historical context affecting the conflict. The International Crisis Group describes itself as an independent organization that seeks to prevent wars and shape policies that will promote a more peaceful world (International Crisis Group, n.d.-b). Western governments such as those of the US, Germany, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries support the ICG financially (International Crisis Group, n.d.-a). The Carnegie Endowment for Peace is an international think tank with offices around the world. Their stated mission is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of new policy ideas that can shape direct engagement and collaboration. Half of its funding stems from the initial gift of Andrew Carnegie, helping to ensure the think tank's independence and ability to pursue its mission (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018). According to a financial transparency study, both organizations scored a rating of 4/5 on transparency about who funds them and how much they receive (Transparify, n.d., 2015). This transparency is highly valued as a means of understanding their possible embedded and/or biased interests. The funding the International Crisis Group receives from Western democracies could influence its ability to avoid policy solutions that are biased and based on promoting solutions favoring the values of liberal democracies. A closer view at the authors behind the reports from the Carnegie Endowment for Peace shows that a majority of the experts used have been stationed in the conflict areas, but they have all received higher education from Western Universities, which naturally affects the analysis in a direction of Western perceptions. With this possible bias in mind, both organizations and their researchers have a reputation in the academic world as being highly skilled, and the knowledge and insights produced by them are often used as references in journals and newspapers.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the two think tanks above, Jane's IHS is a profit-based company, focusing on providing information, analysis, and expertise to enable smarter decision-making for their clients (IHS Markit, n.d.). An examination of the authors' LinkedIn profiles for the reports from Jane's IHS used in this study shows that they also have been educated at Western universities. As with the other sources in this category, they are potentially also biased towards analyzing the conflict from a Western perspective. The critical remarks in relation to the educational background of the authors of these sources is not to say that research from Western-educated researchers is always biased. However, it is important to mention since especially democracy, liberalism, and emancipation as objectives in themselves indeed can serve as caveats when studying Kurdish groups,

<sup>3</sup> "International Crisis Group (ICG), one of the most notable and widely referenced producers of knowledge about conflict areas, used extensively by policy makers, the media and academics" (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2014, p. 545). The University of Pennsylvania conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and civil societies around the world. Through a panel of experts from the print, electronic media, academic the most influential think tanks are chosen. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was chosen as the fifth and International Crisis Group as the 26th most influential think-tanks in the world (2016) underlining their importance in academia and the media (McGann, 2017, p. 46).

as well as the general security situation in Iraq, Syria, and the surrounding region. For this reason, local Kurdish sources have also been applied when possible in order to balance the data as much as possible.

The second category is local sources reporting on the events, such as the Kurdish newspapers Ekurd (n.d.) and Rudaw (n.d.). The journalists of these local media sources have a profound understanding of the context and presumably a better logistical and local network than internationally based media. A caveat they might face are legal challenges imposed on their media by the local government, limiting and obstructing their finances and freedom of expression. Furthermore, they can also be affected by an editorial line that is based on a given cause or role in the local areas. These sources should therefore not stand alone, as the independent media, notably in Iraqi Kurdistan is challenged. This subject will be written out in the chapter of this book describing the Iraqi Kurdish region. The local Kurdish medias will therefore be analyzed through the prism of the political party backing or financing it to limit potential bias on the study. An example of this, is the pro-KDP Iraqi news station of Rudaw, which was founded by former KRG president Massoud Barzani's son Masrour Barzani (Chomani, 2014).

The third category is international media's reporting of the situation, ranging from UK-based BBC to Qatar-based Al-Jazeera. When analyzing and fact-checking these sources, it is important to read them through the prism of their cultures. For instance, when referring to a Turkish source like Hürriyet Daily News, the articles' discourse and embedded interest must be critically assessed. As an example, Turkey's president has explicitly called for regime change in Syria and is currently involved in a violent conflict with the Turkish Kurdish organization Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK). Turkish reporting on the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds could therefore be influenced by these factors in another way than a UK- or US-based reporter's first-hand assessment. On-the-ground news reports from the BBC and Al-Jazeera are also not treated as impartial reporting in the context of the prior caveats mentioned, and it is therefore important to underline that the primary sources of this kind also will not stand alone in the analysis.

The primary sources used in this study range from the actors' and organizations' own means of communication such as uploaded videos, descriptions or proclamations made on their webpages. These provide the best reference to examine and thereby understand their political goals and perceptions. Whenever possible, the study will strive to find and include these sources. Caveats associated are rare in terms of how they have been applied – namely as primary sources. They represent the examined actors' interest, and due to the evolving accessibility and low cost of internet communication, they can be posted without having to adhere to other publications' embedded interest or rules. They are in their nature biased and can therefore never stand alone.

As mentioned above, it is our ambition that this book encourages further studies within this field. The empirical, explorative research design ensures that the study focuses its resources by diving into various sources' perceptions of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups' fight against ISIS, and thereby strives to provide a balanced account to the general public, future studies, and policy-makers. To fulfill this ambition, the study will be conducted using only English-language and openly accessible sources, which allows anyone to go behind the provided analysis by crosschecking the referred sources and hopefully identifying other possibilities for application of the sources on the various subjects presented. A caveat to be mentioned is, of course, that the above-mentioned ambition excludes articles written in Kurdish or Arabic which, from the authors' point of view, intentionally inspires (or provokes) multi-lingual specialists to take research on this area further. Taking this into account, it should be noted, that although the sources investigated are in English, a large majority are written by local newspapers and organizations who have sought to communicate to a Western audience. As this book is intended a Western audience, describing the internal coherence between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities and their alignments in the fight against ISIS through local anchored voices and institutions matches the studies ambition.

### Structure of the Book

To ensure a comprehensive examination of the internal coherence between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities and their alignments in the fight against ISIS the book is organized into two main parts: Part One analyses the alliances, capacities, and political objectives of various Syrian Kurdish groups. This part of the book also discusses the implications of PYD's proclamation of the Federation of Northern Syria and the alleged affiliation between the PYD/YPG and the PKK. Part Two then analyses in depth the alliances, capacities, and political

objectives of various groups within the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. This part of the book focuses on the internal dynamics of the KRG as well as the implications of the independence referendum.

Finally, the internal coherence among the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups as well as their transnational coherence is assessed in the conclusion. The conclusion also provides an overview of the policy implications of continued or enhanced support to these groups taking into consideration their levels of coherence.

## PART ONE

# The Syrian Kurds

In order to obtain an understanding of the ‘Syrian Kurds’ it is essential to divide this superficial term into smaller political institutional parts. In this part of the book, the alliances, capacities, and political objectives of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) / People’s Protection Units (YPG), Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC), The Kurdish National Council (KNC), the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), and the main military body of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are analyzed in depth. Finally, this part of the book provides an assessment of international actors’ positions towards the Syrian Kurdish groups and a discussion of the likely side effects of continued support to the SDF.

### The Kurdish Supreme Committee

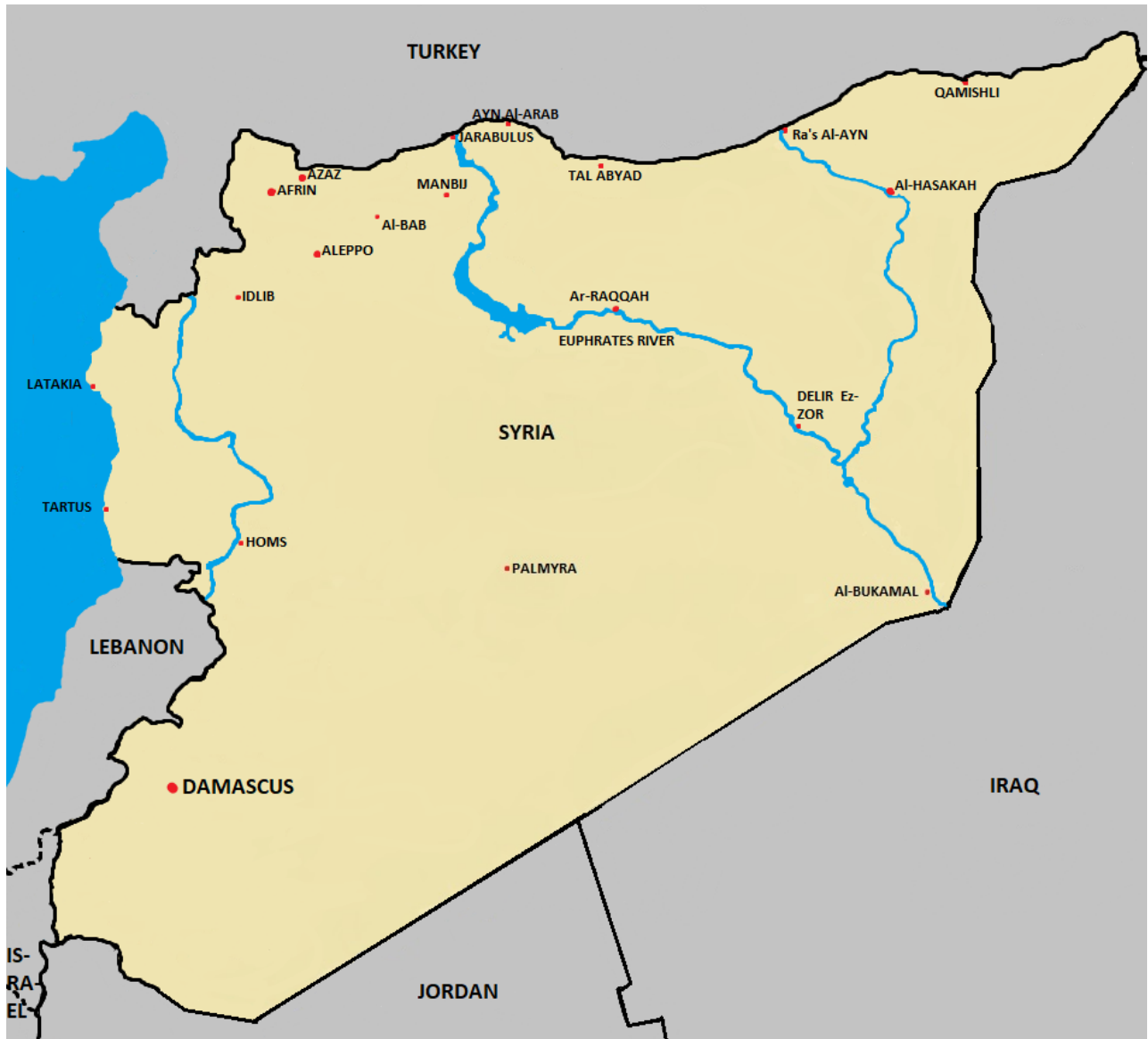
The Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC) was established in June 2012 in Erbil (Iraq) to unite the rivaling Syrian Kurdish parties of PYD and KNC and promote common Kurdish objectives (MacDonald, 2014; “Member of National Council,” 2013). This attempt to share power between KNC and PYD came to an end in late January 2014, when PYD unilaterally declared the democratic autonomous cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Jazira within the Kurdish-controlled area of Syria under the name of Rojava (Western Kurdistan) (Çelebi, 2016; Ford & Yassir, 2015). This breakaway had long been underway with tensions rising in the wake of the establishment of KSC. The two parties agreed to share the power equally, but this was never implemented and according to the KNC this was due to PYD’s attempt to take full control with the KSC (International Crisis Group, 2014). Conversely, it could also be seen as a political move by KNC to weaken PYD at a time of the latter’s political and military ascent.

In 2013, PYD and its military wing, YPG, largely controlled all Kurdish areas in Northern Syria both politically and militarily (“Member of National Council,” 2013). As of 2014, PYD/YPG had risen to a level that made it able to pursue its political project of democratic autonomy without the approval of KNC, which it evidently did. Since then YPG has been the strongest Kurdish militia in Syria capable of fighting off ISIS and Al-Nusra from Kurdish heartland areas (“KRG Says It Won’t Deal,” 2014; van Wilgenburg, 2013b).

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Map 1: Syria, Archive: RDDC.

PYD seeks to implement its political project of democratic autonomy in Rojava through an umbrella organization called the Tev-Dem that was organized in July 2011 (Kurdwatch, 2013). Tev-Dem is the governing body of Rojava and it runs schools, youth councils, women's organizations, trade unions, etc. The relationship between the Tev-Dem and PYD is described by the latter's co-leader Asya Abdullah as: "Our party is now politically leading the democratic revolution in Syria's Kurdistan while Tev-Dem is socially doing so. We are in search of a democratic society organized from below" (Ahmad, 2013, para. 15). Critics say the Tev-Dem is dominated and run by PYD and its allies rather than various independent parties as it officially claims (International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013; MacDonald, 2014). The governance system set up in Rojava is also accused of appointing courts personnel in the People's Tribunal based on party loyalty to PYD as the determining requirement (International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013). Furthermore, the three cantons are bound by the Social Contract of Rojava, which includes articles with left-wing political declarations, such as Article 30, which gives all persons the right to work, social security, health, and adequate housing (Kurdistan National Congress, 2014). This clearly indicates that the Tev-Dem governance system is at the very least strongly influenced by PYD and its decision-making.

The KSC has not achieved its objective of uniting the rivaling Syrian Kurdish parties of PYD and KNC. Below are some of the episodes that led to the increased tension and eventual split from a united Syrian Kurdish political body:

- KNC dissatisfaction with PYD's alleged ties and cooperation with the Syrian Government (MacDonald, 2014; van Wilgenburg, 2013b; van Wilgenburg, 2016b).
- Ideological differences between the two parties about how the new region should be governed.
- KNC's claims that YPG has abducted and tortured its members and violently cracked down on its protests (Barwari, 2013; Carnegie Middle East Center, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013).
- Proxy struggles between rivaling Kurdish leaders at the regional level ("Member of National Council," 2013).
- Iraqi KDP-leader Barzani's meddling in the conflict (International Crisis Group, 2014).
- The PYD does not recognize KNC's Peshmerga force and will not allow them to enter Syria unless they fight under YPG command (Shiwesh & Osman, 2015; Soz, 2016).
- The YPG forces have clashed with KNC-member organizations in minor but lethal incidents (van Wilgenburg, 2013a).

<b>Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC)</b>	
Established	The Kurdish Supreme Committee was established in June 2012 in Erbil (Iraq) to unite the rivaling Syrian Kurdish parties of PYD and KNC under the leadership of president Massoud Barzani (KRG) ("Member of National Council," 2013).
Territory	KSC influential territory covers the territory held by the Kurdish armed YPG and KNC's Peshmerga in Northern Syria.
Organizational Structure	KSC is to consist of an equal number of members from KNC and PYD in its councils ("Member of National Council," 2013; "Rojava: A Syrian Kurdish Democracy," n.d.).
Armed Forces	On paper, PYD's armed wing, YPG, and KNC's Iraqi Peshmerga fighters, but in reality, it is based entirely on YPG (International Crisis Group, 2014).
Political Goals	To administer and defend the captured territory in Northern Syria by dividing power equally between PYD and KNC (Ford & Yassir, 2015; "Member of National Council," 2013). To decrease tension and potential clashes between the various Kurdish forces operating in Northern Syria (MacDonald, 2014).
The end of the Kurdish Supreme Committee	According to International Crisis Group (2014), the power sharing deal remained a dead letter. The agreement to share power 50-50 was never implemented and the power balance within the committee quickly tipped towards PYD dominance and was de facto ended in 2014, when PYD unilaterally declared Rojava as three autonomous democratic cantons.

**Table 1:** Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC).

<b>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party (PYD) / Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – People’s Protection Units (YPG)</b>	
Established	PYD, a political party, was established in 2003 (International Crisis Group, 2014). YPG, a military organization, was established in 2004 as the armed wing of the PYD (Spyer, 2016). The PYD and YPG are closely intertwined and PYD’s political control of YPG is the reason these are treated as a single entity.
Territory	Northern Syria, the two territories of Kobane & Jazira. This area goes under the Kurdish name of <b>Rojava</b> (Western Kurdistan). The territory of Afrin was also under PYD’s control until Turkey under operation Olive Branch in January 2018 took control of it (Kucukgocmen & Dolan, 2018).
Organizational Structure / Armed Forces	PYD Co-leader: Salih Muslim Mohammed. PYD is the most influential Kurdish political party in Rojava (Syria). It has declared compulsory military service for men between the ages of 18 and 30 for the defense of Rojava (Baladi, 2016). YPG is the armed wing of PYD and consists of an armed force of approximately 40-60,000 fighters, including the YPJ (Women’s Protection Units) fighters (O’Hanlon, 2016; Perry, 2016a).
Political Goals	1) A federal, democratic, and secular Rojava. 2) Protecting Rojava militarily and politically from ISIS and political opponents to its political project. 3) Reunite Rojava’s territory.
Ideology	A democratic self-management society, based on decentralization, without discrimination against gender, religion, race, creed, or doctrine. A society with freedom of religion and respect for human rights: Every citizen has the right to work and adequate housing, social security, and health (Charter of the Social Contract in Rojava (Syria), 2014).
Perceived Threats	Internal: ISIS; al-Nusra; Free Syrian Army; the Syrian Regime. External: Turkey.
Competitors	KNC Kurdish National Council KDP Kurdish Democratic Party
Strong Alliances	SDF/SDC Tev-Dem PKK
Operative partners and alliances	US: Strategic, air-support and arms drops (Bradley & Parkinson, 2015; “Islamic State: Why Turkey prefers,” 2014; Perry, 2016a). Russia: PYD/YPG has made significant territorial gains after Russian air-attacks cleared their way by attacking ISIS and Rebel groups (Loveluck, 2016; van Wilgenburg, 2016a, 2016e). The Syrian Regime: PYD/YPG has taken advantage of the regime’s advance to seize territory (van Wilgenburg, 2016e). The regime and PYD/YPG have also managed to avoid large-scale conflicts and clashes, which suggests they could operate within a non-aggression pact (Loveluck, 2016).

**Table 2:** Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – Democratic Union Party (PYD) / Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – People’s Protection Units (YPG).

### Kurdish National Council Post KSC

The Kurdish National Council’s (KNC) power in Syria sharply declined as a result of its rivalry with PYD/YPG in what appears to have been a zero-sum game for political control of the Syrian Kurdish areas (Rojava). This has led the two parties to pursue their political goals for Kurdish autonomy in Syria through different means. During this rivalry, the KNC has struggled with internal political disagreement and frequent splits between its members. Many of these splits were due to personal disputes rather than political ones. Furthermore, the supporters of the different KNC parties are spread out across Rojava’s territory, further expanding the internal gap (Kurwatch, 2013).

In terms of military strength, the KNC’s armed forces, the Rojava Peshmerga, are situated in Iraq as they are denied entry to Rojava (Syria) by PYD, unless they join the ranks of YPG, which would effectively dismiss

KNC's potential military capacity in Syria (Arafat, 2016c; KNC Geneva Office, n.d.; van Wilgenburg, 2016m). To understand why the Rojava Peshmergas are barred from entering Rojava (Syria), it is important to take an old Kurdish rivalry between the two largest Kurdish groups the Turkish PKK and the Iraqi KDP into account. The Rojava Peshmerga and the KNC are backed by Barzani, the KRG's president (KDP). It is his elite Zeravani Force who have trained the Rojava Peshmerga brigade of approximately 5,000 fighters. Furthermore, Barzani has actively sought to promote the Rojava Peshmerga as an alternative option for the US to rely on to fight ISIS in Syria ("Barzani-loyal Rojava," 2017; "Dream on hold," 2016; Ignatius, 2016; "Rival Kurdish groups," 2017). A policy move that would increase Barzani's influence in Syria and relatively decrease PYD's, which he sees as identical to the PKK.

The relationship between the two Syrian Kurdish parties of KNC and PYD post-KSC appears to have been heavily influenced by old Kurdish rivalries and mistrust, rather than a common goal to combat ISIS under a unified banner of Syrian Kurds. In 2016, PYD was the strongest political group with military control of Rojava (Syria) through its armed wing YPG. This development has led the PYD and KNC to pursue different strategies. While PYD is implementing its political self-governing democratic system and managing the multi-ethnic armed group of the Syrian Democratic Forces, KNC is pursuing its political goals at the international negotiation table through various Syrian opposition groups. First, the KNC sought to advance its goals through the Syrian National Council (SNC) founded in Istanbul in 2011 to unite the various opposition groups to President Bashar al-Assad in Syria (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013). The KNC was a member of the SNC almost since its creation in 2011. However, the membership was not without disagreements as the Arab political groups within the SNC umbrella have rejected KNC's cardinal demand for federalism. The Arab political groups favored a unitary state, which led the KNC to break with the SNC in 2013 (Carnegie Middle East Center, n.d.). The same year the KNC signed an agreement to join the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NC) – a larger Syrian political opposition block, in which the SNC is also present (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012). The agreement recognizes the constitutional rights of the Kurdish people. It changed the name of the "Syrian Arab Republic" to the "Syrian Republic," which would recognize the pluralistic society of Syria and not solely the Arab population (Hemeidi, 2013; KNC Geneva Office, 2016b). The KNC's entrance to the NC has granted them an internationally recognized platform to advance their political goals. Although the NC continues to oppose the KNC's demand for federalism and frequently disagree on several topics, they continue to be a voice within the NC fighting to advance Kurdish issues (Allsopp, 2016; KNC Geneva Office, 2016f).

On February 27, 2016, KNC opened an office in Geneva to advance its political goals at the High Negotiation Committee (HNC), where it has a seat (KNC Geneva Office, 2016a). The HNC is a Saudi-backed umbrella organization, which represents the main Syrian opposition groups at the Geneva peace talks to end the Syrian civil war. It consists of the NC, KNC, independent groups and personalities and various opposition forces from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Daher, 2017). In September 2016, the HNC, laid out an executive framework for a political solution in Syria which was critically received by KNC. In a press release, the KNC stated "The HNC's executive framework will neither bring peace nor equality" and that "...this document is not part of the solution" (KNC Geneva Office, 2016g, para. 2). Thus, rejecting the framework as a danger to a democratic, pluralistic, and unified Syria due to its explicit listing of "Arab culture and Islam as sources for intellectual production and social relations" (KNC Geneva Office, 2016g, para. 3).

The KNC continues to struggle with the Syrian opposition represented in the High Negotiation Committee on the question of a federal state and ill-spoken comments about the Kurds (Arafat, 2016d; van Wilgenburg, 2016h). However, the KNC has managed to make progress in achieving the opposition's recognition of Kurdish culture, language, and other rights (Hamed, 2015; KNC Geneva Office, 2016e). In June 2016, the relations between NC and KNC faced another setback in terms of conflicting values and goals as KNC decided not to be a part of a newly NC-founded interim government for Syria. The KNC described the new interim government for Syria as inadequate and irresponsible and with a lack of involvement from women and different ethnic groups (General Secretariat of the Kurdish National Council in Syria, 2016).

In addition to the various disagreements between the KNC and HNC, which remain to be resolved, KNC's strategy to align with the Syrian Arab opposition is fragile and could backfire since the Syrian Kurds have frequently clashed with different groups of the Syrian Arab opposition. In 2016, an Arab opposition group that was part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) attacked the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheik Maqsoud in northern Aleppo ( van Wilgenburg, 2016k). This brought the KNC to make an official announcement of the attacks on



<b>Kurdish National Council (KNC)</b>	
Established	In October 2011, in Erbil Iraq, under the sponsorship of Iraqi Kurdish Regional President Masoud Barzani, former leader of the Iraqi Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) from 2005-2017 (Human Rights Watch, 2014).
Territory	KNC does not hold territory, but functions alongside the PYD/YPG in the areas controlled by Syrian Kurds.
Organizational Structure	President: Ibrahim Biro KNC is an umbrella organization of 12 parties, which holds assemblies to determine their political policies (KNC Geneva Office, n.d.). KNC struggles with unity and coherence across its Syrian parties.
Armed Forces	Rojava Peshmerga: Sharvan Derki, spokesperson of the Rojava Peshmerga described their military capacity as 5,000 soldiers, who are currently based in Iraqi Kurdistan and sponsored by KDP (“Barzani-loyal Rojava,” 2017; “Rojava Peshmerga deployed,” 2017).
Political Goals	Kurdish autonomy under a federal model in Syria without discriminatory laws and policies, such as the prohibition against the use of the Kurdish language (Carnegie Middle East Center, n.d.).
Ideology	A parliamentary republic system with rule of law, separation of powers, and equal citizenship as opposed to PYD democratic self-management. (KNC Geneva Office, n.d.)
Rivals	PYD/YPG
Alliances	KDP, NC and HNC.
Operative partners and alliances	KNC pursues a balanced relationship with Turkey. KNC blames PYD/YPG for upscaling a military conflict with Turkey (KNC Geneva Office, 2016c). KDP and NC are both strong allies of Turkey, which likely pushes KNC to take a balanced stand toward Turkey. After having condemned Turkey’s shelling of Kurdish areas in Northern Syria, a KNC representative said, “The council [KNC] asks PYD not to fight the Syrian national opposition and not to involve the Kurdish people [of Syria] in a war against Turkey” (Arafat, 2016a, para. 6).

**Table 3:** Kurdish National Council (KNC).

Sheik Maqsood, calling on all to denounce the attacks and claiming that the attacks were carried out by the al-Nusra Front and allies, in order to ease the tensions between different factions of the Syrian Kurds and Arabs. The KNC could lose legitimacy amongst Kurds if the Arab opposition they are collaborating with is linked to attacks on Kurds. Such a scenario may drive the KNC and PYD further away from a political solution or make the KNC break away from the peace talks, which would reduce the HNC’s legitimacy as representing Syria. However, as PYD has accused groups of the Syrian Coalition of continued targeting of Kurds in Aleppo, it is obvious that PYD found KNC’s relationship with the Arab opposition troublesome at best (Arafat, 2016b; van Wilgenburg, 2016l). While verification that these attacks were carried out by the Arab opposition aligned to KNC cannot be obtained, it nevertheless implies negative consequences for KNC to be associated with Arab forces when Kurds are attacked. This clearly shows a division between the Syrian Kurds on whether it is possible to work within the framework of an Arab opposition. As KNC is backed by Barzani, a further escalation between the KNC and PYD could spill over to divide the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds loyal to Barzani and the Turkish and Syrian Kurds loyal to PYD and PKK further, if no political compromise is found.

### Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Democratic Council

In 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance was founded to fight ISIS and defend the people of Northern Syria. Although it quickly proved successful in absorbing new groups and fighters of different ethnicities and religions into its ranks, the military bulk of SDF was YPG fighters (“Syrian-Kurdish SDF,” 2016). The SDF is not associated with the NC or FSA as their political and military goals differ. The US openly supported the establishment of the SDF and backed the alliance militarily through airstrikes, weapon supplies, and tactical advisors (Strack, 2015). In 2016, the SDF conducted approximately 25% of all operations against ISIS in Syria, hereby positioning it as a key US ally due to the ground presence of the group’s fighters. In the wake of this

position, the group has managed to expand its territory. At the end of 2017, the alliance controlled the majority of Northern Syria's border regions along the border to Turkey, except for a territory between the Kurdish region of Afrin and Kobane. This territory was controlled by ISIS until August 2016, when Turkey began "Operation Euphrates Shield" – a seven-month-long military campaign to clear 100 kilometers of ISIS-controlled territory along its border and halt the Kurds from uniting their cantons (Itani & Stein, 2016; Osborne, 2017). Turkey's intervention in Syria and the Syrian Government's successful campaign in retaking Aleppo and the surrounding territory have left the territories between the Kurdish cantons separated by Turkey and its military-backed FSA and Assad's forces (Hubbard, 2016; "Mapping out Syria's," 2017).

In December 2015, the mounting success of SDF advances led to the establishment of a political branch, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which along with SDF includes different ethnicities. The organization's members had to share the organization's secular and democratic values. The SDC is led by a joint Kurdish and Arab leadership. The co-leadership started as Ilham Ahmed, a Kurd, and former member of the executive committee of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEM-DEV) and Haytham Manna, an Arab and co-founder of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change – an organization in which PYD also is a member. Manna is also the spokesperson of the Qamah Movement, an SDF ally, and sources describe him as a secularist, human rights advocate, a critic of Islamist rebels, and in favor of the Kurdish secular social contract ("Haytham Manna Elected," 2015; Lund, 2015; "TEV-DEM.," 2015).

As mentioned above, the SDF and SDC consist of different ethnicities, which provides the possibility of e.g. sending Sunni Arab fighters against ISIS in areas with a heavy Sunni Arab population. Besides limiting SDF casualties, this approach contains a higher chance for a sustainable development as the Arab fighters naturally have more legitimacy than Kurdish fighters do in these areas (Strack, 2015). Though SDF was founded as a joint organization between Kurdish and Arab groups, many observers argue that YPG de facto has full control of the SDF alliance (Argentieri, 2016; Micallef, 2016; Osborne, 2016; Soz, 2016). In the beginning of 2016, YPG fighters made up a vast majority of the SDF forces. General Joseph L. Votel, commander of the US Special Operations Command assessed in March 2016 that 80% of the SDF fighters were Kurdish and from within the ranks of YPG. Other sources and articles suggest that up to 90% were YPG soldiers simply transferred into the rank numbers of SDF (Bertrand, 2015; Committee on Armed Services, 2016; Miles, 2016). Since then, the number of Arab fighters have soared and now constitutes 40% of the SDF fighting force according to Lieutenant

<b>SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) / SDC (Syrian Democratic Council)</b>	
Established	SDF serves as an umbrella organization, facilitating the military alliance in Northern Syria between 13 organizations of different ethnicities. The military alliance was established in October 2015 by these organizations and later designated as the armed forces of SDC (Strack, 2015). SDC is the political branch of SDF. It is also multi-ethnic and secular. It was established in December 2015 and is led by co-leadership between Kurdish and Arab representatives. ("Kurdish-Arab coalition in Syria forms political wing," 2015)
Territory	SDF controls a multi-ethnic territory in Northern Syria, bordering with Turkey for more than 400 kilometers. SDF has retaken more than 18,000 square kilometers of territory from ISIS (U.S. Central Command, 2016).
Structure	SDF consists primarily of Kurdish YPG units, with the other ethnicities representing a smaller contingent of the forces (Strack, 2015). SDC is a forty-two-member council, consisting of at least one member from every ethnicity represented in the organization. It is led by a Kurdish and Arab co-leadership ("Haytham Manna Elected," 2015; "Kurdish-Arab coalition in Syria creates political wing," 2015).
Armed Forces	The military capacities of SDF's groups make up a total of 50,000-55,000 fighters: 27,000-40,000 YPG and 20,000-23,000 non-YPG (Hennessy-Fiske, 2017; McLeary, 2017; O'Hanlon, 2016; Strack, 2015).
Political Goals	SDF/SDC's current stated strategic goal is to confront and expel ISIS from Syria and bring about a decentralized democratic political system in Syria (Al-Khalidi & Perry, 2015; Spyer, 2016; Strack, 2015).
Alignment to PYD	SDF's goals and perceived threats are strongly influenced by the PYD/YPG, which emphasizes democratic autonomy in Rojava (the Kurdish regions of Northern Syria). The SDF should therefore be viewed as an actor whose main political objectives are in close accordance with those of PYD.

**Table 4:** SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) / SDC (Syrian Democratic Council).

General Stephen Townsend, commander, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017). However, the number of Arab and Kurdish fighters in the ranks of SDF alone does not in itself determine the level of influence the different ethnicities in SDF have in the decision-making process. To understand who ‘calls the shots’ and makes up the main fighting elements of the SDF, the military campaigns and political achievements of the SDF must be analyzed.

### Syrian Democratic Forces’ Major Military Campaigns

In February 2016, Turkey responded to SDF advances across the Euphrates River by shelling SDF forces in Northern Syria, without differentiating between the Arab, Christian, or Kurdish fighters under the banner of the SDF, indicating that Ankara viewed SDF and YPG as the exact same entity (Seckin & Ali, 2016). As described above, this view of the YPG and SDF (as almost entirely overlapping) is shared by numerous sources. The strong PYD/YPG influence over the alliance also manifests itself when assessing SDF’s large territorial gains in Northern Syria and the current advances across the Euphrates and near Azaz. Co-President of the SDC, Ilham Ahmed, says military actions by SDF to unify Afrin at this time were underway in parallel with eliminating ISIS in these regions (Demirel, 2016b; “Kurdish-Arab coalition in Syria creates political wing,” 2015). However, this subsequently proved to be impossible.

PYD/YPG has explicitly stated its interest in uniting Rojava, and with the territorial advances in Northern Syria, it seemed even more likely that the SDF would give priority to this objective leaving the expulsion of ISIS from Raqqa a secondary objective. As there are coinciding elements in cutting off Raqqa’s supply route from Turkey, SDF was presented with an opportunity to pursue both objectives with the same operations, which naturally boosted SDF’s external as well as internal recognition (Spyer, 2016). In April 2016, SDF began preparations for an assault on the city of Manbij by setting up a war council as well as a civilian council appointed to govern the city once liberated. The Manbij assault was a bold move by the SDF because it is located between Kobane and Afrin inside the Azaz-Jarablus line and naturally, a redline was set up by Turkey to halt further Kurdish advances toward uniting the cantons (“Syrian Democratic Forces preparing,” 2016; van Wilgenburg, 2016j).

In May 2016, President Obama and President Erdoğan negotiated an agreement that allowed an SDF-led offence to capture the Syrian city of Manbij. According to the Wall Street Journal, Turkey consented to the Manbij offense led by SDF under the assurances that US Special Forces along with Arab members of the SDF played a vital role and that Manbij would be governed by an Arab council after the city was retaken (Abi-Habib & Coker, 2016). A month later, SDF began advancing towards Manbij backed by intense US airstrikes and accompanied by US commanders. Whether this was a result of Turkey taking a more relaxed stand towards SDF is rather doubtful. An unnamed US official told the Washington Post: “the Turks are ‘not happy’ about it” (Sly & DeYoung, 2016, para. 8) and Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that a guarantee from the US was provided to Turkey to the effect that no YPG units would remain west of the Euphrates after the assault on Manbij was complete (“US guarantees no YPG,” 2016). On August 12, 2016, SDF declared Manbij fully liberated from ISIS after 72 days of intensive fighting. While the liberation of Manbij served as an important victory against ISIS, it stirred up tensions between SDF and Turkey because the assault was mainly carried out by Kurdish YPG fighters, among other Arab fighters under the banner of SDF (Ensor, 2016). In the agreement reached between Erdoğan and Obama, the Kurdish fighters of YPG would have had to leave Manbij immediately after the assault and return behind the redline set up by Turkey (i.e. west of the Euphrates). A statement that was echoed by former Vice-President of the United States Joe Biden: “They (YPG) cannot, will not, and under no circumstances get American support if they do not keep that commitment (to move back across the river). Period” (Tharoor, 2016, para. 10). Whether or not the YPG elements of SDF would move back across the river, the advancements of SDF with US support across Turkey’s redline appear to have prompted Turkey to take direct action through its military operation “Euphrates Shield” in Syria to prevent PYD from uniting their cantons along its border (Tharoor, 2016). The Turkish military operation began on the August 24, only 12 days after SDF declared Manbij liberated, hinting at the stress the SDF Manbij offensive likely caused Turkey. While the US had promised Turkey the YPG elements would leave Manbij (which is an Arab majority town) to an Arab leadership and withdraw back across the redline, Erdoğan said on February 17, 2017: “We’ve told the Obama administration before that Manbij needs to be handed over to the Arabs, and they told us that the PYD/YPG was leaving, but unfortunately they never left” (“US military displays SDF,” 2017, para. 9).

On February 23, 2017, Erdoğan said that the Turkish-backed FSA forces would move to take Manbij after completing their mission in Al Bab (a former ISIS-controlled city 24 kilometers south of the Turkish border) (Toksabay & Gumrukcu, 2017). In the beginning of March 2017, fighting erupted around Manbij between SDF and Turkish-backed fighters leading the US military to deploy a small number of forces in and around Manbij to deter skirmishes between Turks and Kurds – both blaming each other for escalating the attacks (Babb, 2017). That the US had to deter erupting violence between Turks and Kurds indicates, as Erdoğan has stated, that the Kurdish YPG fighters had probably not completely left Manbij as promised.<sup>4</sup> However, two developments seem to have brought an end to the escalating situation and for the time being Turkey's ambition to throw out SDF from Manbij: US efforts to diffuse the situation and the deal between the Manbij War Council governing the city and Russia to hand over villages at the frontlines with Turkish forces to the Syrian Regime (I. Ali & Stewart, 2017).

In October 2017, the next large operational effort against ISIS came to be the successful assault on Raqqa (the prior de-facto capital of ISIS). Turkey had proposed a joint US-Turkish offensive to retake Raqqa. In October 2016, Erdoğan is to have told Obama: “We do not need terrorist organizations like the PYD and YPG in the Raqqa operation. Let us work together to sweep DAESH (the Arabic acronym of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) from Raqqa” (“Turkey to US,” 2016, para 2). This offer was not accepted by the US, which has continued to rely on SDF and its battle-hardened Kurdish element of YPG to take Raqqa as US boots on Syrian ground never seemed to be an option for the Obama Administration. SDF has also publicly rejected any Turkish role in the Raqqa offensive (Said, Perry, & McDowall, 2016). The Raqqa offensive was long underway – with US and SDF preparing to take Raqqa since October 2016, and the US having hoped to begin within weeks of that (Ackerman, 2016; Said, Perry, & McDowall, 2016). The assault on Raqqa began June 6, 2017, after SDF gradually had encircled the city. According to SDF, 50,000 troops were deployed and Arabs are said to have made up 60% of the fighting force (“Raqqa: Syrian Kurdish-led,” 2017). While the Arab fighters on the ground might have outnumbered the Kurdish ones, it appears the experienced Kurdish YPG fighters with the inexperienced Arab fighters struggling to assert their role carried out the majority of the fighting. The presumably secondary role of the Arab fighters to the Kurdish ones followed to some extent the same pattern in the Manbij offensive where YPG also took the lead (Davison, 2017; Said, 2017a). As a US official has commented to the Washington Post in May 2016 regarding the Manbij offensive: “Kurds are the main fighting force in SDF. We shouldn't be under any illusions about that” (Sly & DeYoung, 2016, para. 7). Another indicator of the strong Kurdish control over SDF is open intelligence sources stating that it is only YPG that can call in US-airstrikes to support SDF operations (MacDonald, 2015; Spyer, 2016; “Turkish army ready,” 2016).

For many Arab groups in Northern Syria it has been lucrative to join SDF because YPG is a disciplined and motivated force fighting ISIS effectively, and becoming part of the US-protected alliance could help them free their hometowns. However, according to a defecting Arab SDF commander, the PYD denied the Arab counterparts weapons and a chance to rule their newly liberated cities (Wilkofsky & Fatah, 2017). According to IHS Jane's, the Arab organizations chose to join the SDF partly due to their small numbers of troops and because the SDF is an alternative partner against ISIS instead of the Syrian regime. An alliance with the Kurdish group was the most attractive offer on the table for many Arab groups, which e.g. Haytham Manna, the leader of the SDC Arab block, has expressed (Spyer, 2016).

While most Arab fighters have joined SDF by choice, there have been alarming reports of forced conscription raids being carried out in Northern Syria to fill the ranks of SDF with Arabs and Kurds between 18 and 30 years of age as the demand for manpower rises with the increasing responsibilities due to SDF's territorial expansion (Gutman, 2017; Wilkofsky & Fatah, 2017). Reuters reports that many local Arab tribes from Northern Syria complain about being marginalized in the decision-making and that YPG discriminate against their population through the forced conscription of their youth (Said, 2017b). These tendencies hint that while YPG is the strongest military component in SDF, growing discontent from the Arab fighters and communities integrated into their political system of Northern Syria could severely escalate once their common enemy, ISIS, is defeated, if a political solution is not found.

As shown above, the YPG retains a strong hold on SDF's military capacity – but how has the SDC, the political wing of the alliance, developed along with SDF's military advances? On March 17, 2017, PYD proclaimed the

<sup>4</sup> Looking back, SDF violated the redline set by Turkey as the last military advisors from YPG left Manbij in July 2018 according to the Manbij Military Council (a member of the SDF) after a deal was brokered between the US and Turkey (Barrington, 2018).

creation of a federal Rojava, which covers the territory controlled by SDF, without the consent of the SDC.<sup>5</sup> Both co-leaders of the SDC rejected the PYD/YPG move toward a Kurdish-controlled federal province in Northern Syria. In the wake of this move, Manna stated: “I withdrew on March 19 from the presidency of the SDC and made it clear that I will not return until they rescind the March 17 declaration [the proclaimed federalism]” (Arafat, 2016e, para. 3). Afterwards, Manna withdrew altogether from the SDC in the beginning of April 2016 (“Syrian opposition figure,” 2016). To have a key ally’s political branch of a supposedly multi-ethnic military alliance excluded from such an important decision serves as an example of how powerful an actor the PYD in fact is, and how it has the ability to circumvent any member in SDC if it conflicts with PYD’s key interests. The SDF however, continued its missions as if this power struggle never took place, suggesting that it still is a strong multi-ethnic, independent force. However, as the data above shows, decision-making in the SDF adheres to the interests of the PYD and therefore cannot be separated from PYD’s strategy. Therefore, as Raqqa fell to a force led by SDF, it naturally became part of PYD’s political project for Northern Syria. Turkey was naturally concerned about the Kurdish expansion and the leverage the Kurds could gain in a post-conflict Syria (Bendix, 2017; Said, 2017a).

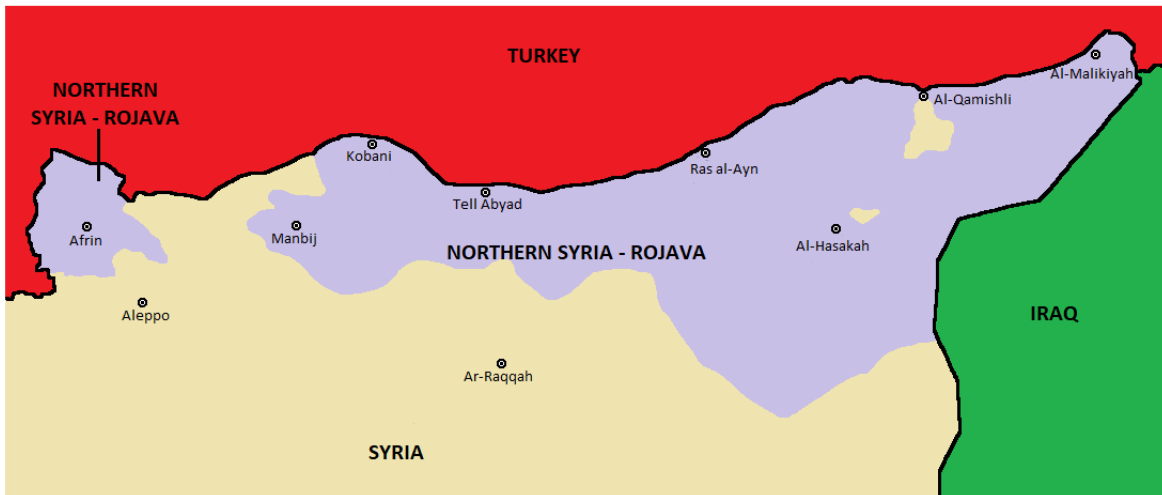
In 2017, the SDF enjoyed a high degree of international legitimacy through its pluralistic approach and acceptance of fighters into its ranks. Turkey on the other hand does not differentiate between YPG and SDF. The latter is most likely the reason why the US only have supplied SDF with light weapons and been cautious to supply heavy and advanced weapons (Strack, 2015). After the US airdropped the first weapons supply to SDF in October 2015, the US ambassador to Turkey was summoned to the Turkish foreign ministry to provide an explanation (Idiz, 2015). US State Department spokesperson John Kirby stated on October 14 that the US understands Turkey’s concern about the YPG and respects this concern, but as the US’s key priority in Syria was to counter ISIS, the US will continue to appropriately support the groups that are fighting effectively against ISIS inside Syria (Kirby, 2015). This resulted in Erdoğan officially expressing his continued concern and in February 2016, he among other things blamed US arms used by Syrian Kurds for a deadly bomb in Ankara that killed 28 people (“Turkey says US arms,” 2016). Ankara seems to have taken the US up on its stated main reason to continue its support of SDF as an effective force against ISIS by providing the US with an alternative ground force to counter ISIS through operation “Euphrates Shield.” An alternative force that the US so far has refused to rely on solely. The US has instead continued and expanded its operational alliance with the SDF under President Donald Trump (De Young, Ryan, & Gibbons-Neff, 2017).

When analyzing the SDF and SDC statements and moves, it should be viewed through the lenses of a heavy PYD/YPG influence, and the primary goal of realizing democratic autonomy in Rojava (Demirel, 2016a; Soz, 2016). A YPG officer in Hasaka told *IHS Jane’s* that “the Kurdish idea is not acceptable to the world, so it’s better to show that there are others here, so if people want to help Syria, they are not helping Kurds alone” (Spyer, 2016, p. 2). This statement should be seen in the light of the historical deprivation of the Kurdish people’s possibility to seek Kurdish statehood in the Middle East. In Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, the Kurds have never achieved self-determination and have had to take action and demand their rights and culture. It is very unlikely that an external nation such as the US, which cooperates with one of the four countries with a large Kurdish minority population, could speak out in support of Kurdish self-determination without grim reactions from one of these nations. It would be seen as a threat to their sovereignty. According to the YPG officer, the creation of SDF as an umbrella organization, which frames the Kurdish idea of self-determination as a group of different ethnic groups declaring self-determination would, allows nations sympathetic to the Kurdish cause to speak and act for their rights and arm them in their fight against ISIS.

### Rojava Proclaims Federalism

On March 17 2016, the PYD and its allies surprised the world by announcing a new Federation of Northern Syria, which would include the Kurdish territory of Rojava (the three Kurdish cantons) and the territory captured by the YPG and SDF over the last year leading up to the announcement, including the Arab towns Shaddadi and Tal Abyad (Salih, 2016; “Syrian Kurds officially declare,” 2016; van Wilgenburg, 2016f). If implemented, this would effectively turn the three cantons and captured Arab territory into a single federal system with a population of around 4 million people (Spencer, 2016; Taştekin, 2016a). A PYD representative in the

<sup>5</sup> The proclamation of Federal Rojava and Northern Syria will be described in depth in the next chapter.



**Map 2:** Northern Syria – Rojava Region, Archive: RDDC.

UK insisted their intention was to be “part of future democratic, federal Syria” (Goudsouzian & Fatah, 2016, para. 14) and not to declare full independence. Representative delegates from the new federation’s territory elected a council of 31 members to draft the plans to effectively implement the Democratic Federal System for Rojava and Northern Syria (Spencer, 2016). The council faced complex issues, such as drawing up borders, the structure of public institutions, quotas for ethnic groups, regulations, and women’s role (Taştekin, 2016a). To represent Rojava, Hediya Yousef, a Kurd, was elected along with Mansur Selam, an Arab from Tal Abyad, to represent Northern Syria as co-leaders of the Federation (van Wilgenburg, 2016g). The Federation was designated to be a non-ethnic project, which would include Arabs and Christians among other ethnicities in its leadership as the Rojava cantons did (Salih, 2016; Spencer, 2016; van Wilgenburg, 2014). The idea of federalism contained the vision of a model for a decentralized government throughout the whole country of Syria (Barnard, 2016). The territorial lines of this federation differs from the classical understanding as stated by Salih Muslim, co-leader of PYD, the strongest party in the Federation:

*There is no autonomous Kurdish regions, so there is no question of recognizing it or not. It is part of a democratic Syria... We want to decentralize Syria... The federalism we talk about is not a geographic line. Maybe tomorrow it’s going to be expanded into IS-controlled Raqqa and other places.*

(van Wilgenburg, 2016f, para. 5, 7)

This clearly underlines the PYD’s wish for a decentralized and federal Syria, but more importantly it rejects the idea that this move is to create a transnational Kurdistan.

The federal proclamation was announced parallel to the third round of the Geneva-talks<sup>6</sup> and was most likely a calculated strategic choice aimed at influencing its outcome. PYD has on several occasions not been invited to initiatives by the international community to end the Syrian crisis through peace negotiations (Miles & Irish, 2016). PYD is most likely not invited to the Geneva talks due to opposition from Turkey. However, PYD and SDF have also been left out of opposition group talks in Riyadh due to various opposition groups accusing them of being allies of the Assad government (Çandar, 2016; “Syria conflict: Government rejects,” 2016; “Syria conflict: Kurds declare,” 2016). As previously discussed, YPG has clashed violently several times with the opposition, and a PYD-party official said in 2015 in relation to the Riyadh talks: “We’re not concerned with the output from the Riyadh conference, and we will act like it never happened” (Khodr, 2015, para. 29). The continuous exclusion of PYD and SDF from the international peace talks has most likely affected how the group has thought about realizing their political goals.

In the initiative to solve the Gordian knot for a political solution for the Syrian conflict in Geneva, it seems unsustainable and to some extent unwise that the Syrian Kurdish party of KNC officially representing the Kurds

<sup>6</sup> The Geneva Talks are a UN initiative to end the Syrian conflict.

<b>Responses to the Democratic Federal System for Rojava and Northern Syria</b>	
KNC (Syria)	KNC is not against a federal model for the Syrian Kurds, but as President of KNC, Ibrahim Biro, said in an interview: “ <i>The problem is not if we not unite on federalism or not, the problem is that they [PYD] don’t accept to work together; they want to rule by themselves</i> ” (van Wilgenburg, 2016f, para. 32). Further Kamiran Hajo, chairman of the Foreign Relations Office of the KNC said: “Announcing federalism all of a sudden, lacking the urgently needed debate and democratic participation to possibly come to that decision, is just another form of dictatorship” (KNC Geneva Office, 2016d, para. 3) These statements further underline the continued disunity between the PYD and KNC.
KRG	The KRG government is taking a pragmatic approach in giving official statements on this issue due to its close economic relations with Turkey, who naturally is hostile towards the move (Goudsouzian & Fatah, 2016). KRG is backing the KNC who has shown great dissatisfaction with PYD’s unilateral proclamation of Federalism, and the Iraqi KRG president Barzani has stated: “There must be consensus on this among the Syrians themselves. When we declared federalism in the Kurdistan region, we didn’t do it unilaterally” (Zaman, 2016, para. 40). This response indicates support for federalism, but reluctance against a federation controlled by PYD.
US	At a daily press briefing on March 16, Deputy spokesperson for the State Department, Mark Toner, stated in a response to a question about a federal state in Syria: “I would just say we’ve been very clear that we won’t recognize any kind of self-autonomous – or self-rule, semi-autonomous zones in Syria” (Toner, 2013, para. 184).
Russia	Russian deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said according to Reuters that Syria could become a federal state if that model would “serve the task of preserving Syria as a united, secular, independent and sovereign nation” (Tsvetkova & Solovyov, 2016, para. 4). It is doubtful that Russia would risk further deterioration of its relations with Turkey by supporting it (van Wilgenburg, 2016c).
Turkey	A Turkish Foreign Ministry official has rejected the move and has stated: “Syria’s national unity and territorial integrity is fundamental for us. Outside of this, unilateral decisions cannot have validity” (Said, 2016, para. 11).
The Syrian Regime	The regime regards the federalism project as unlawful and something that could provoke a collapse of the country’s northern regions. According to PYD, they have had several clashes with the regime in Qamishli after proclaiming the federal project, reflecting its concern (“Kurdish declaration of federalism,” 2016).
The Opposition	President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and opposition Forces (NC) – Anas Al-Abdah said:  No party or any single component can take such a unilateral decision as the right to do so is owned by Syrian people as a whole. One of the primary goals of the Syrian revolution is to enable the Syrian people to freely decide the shape of their country without influence from any side. (National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 2016, para. 2)  Munzir Aqbeeq from the SNC has stated:  Steps taken by one party alone are unacceptable to the opposition, and are considered illegal. We do not recognize it, especially since this party controls a geographical area by force of arms, ruling by <i>fait accompli</i> without the need to obtain popular acceptance. (“Syrian Opposition Warns,” 2016, para. 2)  Riad Hajib, the head of the main Syrian opposition group in Geneva, High Negotiations Committee, stated: “Syria’s unity is a redline. This issue is non-negotiable and the idea of federalism is the prelude to the partitioning of Syria” (“Syria’s main opposition,” 2016, para. 2).
SDC	Co-leader Haytham Manna has stated, “One party within the SDC [the PYD] undertook this initiative separately, adding that the regional declaration contravened the aims of the SDC” (Barrington, 2016, para. 7). Manna responded by resigning from his post in objection causing the Kurdish-Arab alliance to lose a large part of its Arab political block.

**Table 5:** Responses to the Democratic Federal System for Rojava and Northern Syria.

is at the negotiation table on the side of the opposition in the High Negotiation Committee. As shown above, KNC has a relatively weak representation of the Northern Syrian Kurds compared to, e.g., PYD. From a wider perspective, it therefore becomes clearer why the PYD took the unilateral action of proclaiming federalism. PYD has been systematically left out of the negotiation rounds and has clashed militarily with parts of the Arab opposition to Assad. The Syrian actors have, through their unwillingness to invite PYD and SDF to the negotiation rounds, failed to recognize its power on the ground while instead inviting KNC, which has no military presence in Rojava to represent the Kurds in Syria. This left PYD with few options in a hostile environment due to the bloody civil war to realize its political project. The unilateral decision of PYD to carry out its political visions for Rojava and Northern Syria should therefore be understood in this context and as one of the last options, after having failed to be recognized as a legitimate actor due to regional power struggles.

Below are perceptions from key actors in the Syrian crisis to the declaration of federalism. Many of the actors directly reject it and show resentment for the action underlining the tension and resentment between the actors and how far there still is to go in a post-conflict Syria.

It should be stressed that the SDF is a vital and effective ally in combating ISIS and has retaken vast parts of the territory conquered by ISIS. However, the SDF advances near Azaz and the Euphrates River in 2016 appear largely to serve the goal of uniting the Federation with its enclave of Afrin. When SDF forces in February 2016 liberated the town of Al Shaddadi in Northeastern Syria, thereby freeing the region of Hasakah from ISIS, the same seemed to be the case. To further exemplify this, a statement from US General Votel in March 2016 can be applied. He stated that there currently was no plan to take the ISIS capital of Raqqa (Committee on Armed Services, 2016; Miste, 2016). which again emphasizes the fact that the main objective of SDF not necessarily coincided or was coordinated with the US and the coalition.

Supporting the SDF with weapons, military advisors, and airstrikes without addressing the asymmetrical power relationship between the Kurdish and other ethnicities could undermine SDF's ability to act autonomously of a PYD/YPG agenda. As described above, YPG is the backbone of SDF. A stronger SDF would most likely be applied by PYD as an asset to pursue Kurdish political goals while fighting ISIS. Supporting SDF therefore entails a high likelihood of empowering the PYD/YPG in realizing their main political objective of autonomy.

With this in mind, decision makers should take into consideration some of the likely side effects that strong support for SDF most definitely will have.

### Reported Affiliation between PKK and PYD/YPG

The following section sets out to analyze and discuss the alleged affiliation between the PKK and the PYD/YPG. The alleged affiliation is one of the main components in the deteriorating relationship between Turkey and the US and it potentially has major implications for the continued US and European support to the PYD. The armed conflict between PKK and Turkey has recently resurged and because Turkey lists PKK and PYD as the same organization they are fighting both groups. While the US and Europe support PYD's fight against ISIS they also list PKK as a terror organization. The struggle over the affiliation is therefore essential as the consequences of the US recognizing the affiliation would most likely result in the US having to cut official ties and list PYD alongside PKK as a terror organization. This is summed up in a statement by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan back in 2014:

*At the moment, the PYD is equal with the PKK for us. It is also a terrorist organization. It would be very wrong for America – with whom we are allies and who we are together with in NATO – to expect us to say 'yes' after openly announcing such support for a terrorist organization.*

(“President Erdoğan says PYD,” 2014, para. 3).

The relationship between a faction of the Syrian Kurds, who would move on to form the political organization of PYD, and the Turkish Kurdish political organization of PKK has its origins in the 1980s. PKK and its leader and founding member, Abdullah Öcalan, were allowed by then Syrian President Hafez Assad to establish bases from where they could plan and coordinate military operations into Turkey from Northern Syria (near Afrin). This was due to a territorial dispute between Syria and Turkey over the Hatay region, a dispute that escalated when Turkey started building a dam on the Euphrates River in the 1980s, which threatened part of Syria's water reserves (International Crisis Group, 2014).



In 1998, Turkey accused Syria of using terrorism, through the PKK's attacks in Turkey, to wage an "undeclared war." This led Turkey to threaten Syria with war unless the country did not ban and halt every form of support for the PKK. The threat led Syria to expel Öcalan, ban the PPK, and dismantle its bases in Syria (International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013; Steele, 2015). Many of the PKK fighters then moved to Northern Iraq while Öcalan took up exile in Kenya. In 1999, he was captured in a joint US-Turkish operation and is presently serving a lifetime sentence in Turkey (Makovsky, 1999; Steele, 2015).

During the almost two decades of PKK in Syria, the Turkish Kurdish movement influenced and mobilized a faction of Syrian Kurds to sympathize with their movement. This culminated in 2003 when PYD was established as a Syrian political branch of PKK, in an attempt to establish an organizational forum for the Syrian Kurdish sympathizers in the aftermath of the banning of PKK (Charountaki, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013; Mansour, 2015). The PYD established itself as a Kurdish movement during the Qamishli anti-government uprisings in 2004, which led to a brutal response from the Syrian regime (International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2009). This drastically weakened the PYD in the years to come until the massive uprising in 2011 (often referred to as the Arab Spring in a regional context) presented a new opportunity for a revival (Charountaki, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2014).

Amidst the Syrian conflict, the Syrian Government by and large withdrew its armed forces from the Kurdish areas in the North. The withdrawal presented an opportunity, which was seized by the PYD and its armed wing, YPG. PYD quickly established itself as the dominant Kurdish party in the region, controlling and governing large areas of land through the Tev-Dem (Movement for a Democratic Society) and allies (Kurdwatch, 2013). The Tev-Dem was set up as an inclusive model of decentralized administration in Rojava to fill the governance vacuum left by the Syrian Government's withdrawal. Syrian Kurdish opposition parties, such as the KNC, have criticized the Tev-Dem for being governed in an authoritarian fashion by PYD, with its governance model having strong ties to PYD's ideology (Sary, 2016, p. 11). The intra-Kurdish rivalry between the various Syrian Kurdish parties to govern through the Tev-Dem, and PYD's success in securing its dominance of the governing body, will be elaborated in the following chapters. But first, the importance of PYD and PKK relations must be investigated further. According to a Kurdwatch<sup>7</sup> report, the PYD was able to become the strongest Syrian Kurdish actor. This was enabled by a strong military core of PKK-trained cadres (Kurdwatch, 2013). Secondary literature affirms this, with several scholars arguing that PYD could not have set up the logistics for its civilian and military components without receiving assistance from the PKK (Bradley & Parkinson, 2015; Wimmen & Selcuk, 2013). Furthermore, multiple sources have reported that PKK fighters are fighting ISIS alongside YPG, and in some instances are even undertaking command positions within the YPG's forces (Cagaptay & Unal, 2014; Charountaki, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013; Lister & Ward, 2015; Steele, 2015). Some reports also inform of YPG fighters receiving training at PKK camps in Iraqi Kurdistan's Qandil Mountains. These reports speak of a deep involvement from PKK in the internal ranks of YPG, which could translate into large influence on Syrian Kurdish politics (International Crisis Group, 2014; Stein, 2016). The Atlantic Council has investigated the YPG's self-reported data for casualties and found that almost 50% were Turkish Kurds killed fighting ISIS in Syria, which strongly indicates that there is a firm link between Turkish Kurds and military engagement in the Syrian conflict (Stein & Foley, 2016). At a specific event, this was further underlined in 2014, during ISIS encirclement of the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane when PKK stated on their official website: "The youth of Northern Kurdistan (Southeast Turkey) should go to Kobane (Ayn al-Arab) and take part in the historic, honorable resistance" ("PKK calls on Turkish Kurds," 2014, para. 3). In continuation of this, a Kurdish fighter has also stated to the Wall Street Journal: "Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK, sometimes I'm an YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK" (Bradley & Parkinson, 2015, para. 20).

In a more individual context, the link was illuminated when PYD's current co-president, Salih Muslim, was arrested in 2004 during the Qamishli uprisings, and when subsequently released he went to a PKK camp in the Qandil Mountains. He returned in 2011 to take part in the initial anti-regime protests in Syria (International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013; Steele, 2015). Salih Muslim stated in an interview with Rudaw in response to PKK and PYD affiliation that "there existed no direct link between the PKK and his party" but merely a link "on an intellectual level" ("We embrace the ideals," 2016, para. 3). The PYD is currently implementing their

<sup>7</sup> Kurdwatch is a project of "European Center for Kurdish Studies" a private research institution based in Berlin (European Center for Kurdish Studies, 2017)

version of PKK leader Öcalan's ideology, known as 'democratic autonomy.' The PYD is very open about their shared ideological link with the PKK. A closer look at PYD's implementation of democratic autonomy in Syria shows that PYD's implementation is more pragmatic and adjusted to the Syrian context than what is the case with PKK's description of democratic autonomy. This is presumably because the Syrian Kurds have had to be more in tune with the larger multi-ethnic conflict environment in Syria to enhance their chances of success (Charountaki, 2015; Drott, 2014).

The ideological link between the PKK and the PYD was institutionalized by the PYD's membership of the Union of Communities in Kurdistan *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (KCK). The KCK is an umbrella organization operating under the leadership of Öcalan, and according to IHS Jane's, the KCK is the political wing of PKK and its legislative assembly, the People's Congress of Kurdistan, located in the Qandil Mountains (Iraqi Kurdistan). The PYD is a member of the KCK along with PKK and other Kurdish groups from Iraq and Iran (Cagaptay & Unal, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2014; Kurdwatch, 2013; MacDonald, 2014). At a PYD conference in 2015, the co-leadership read out a message from the KCK stating:

*PYD must get organized very well by strengthening and extending its democratic system. It must ensure a strong organization of all its cadres, workers and labourers under the umbrella of TEV-DEM*  
 ("KCK message to PYD," 2015, para. 5).

The statement above serves as an example of the ideological link between PYD and PKK, and it also shows the level of the relationship between the parties and their joint commitment to implement their shared ideology.

The KCK therefore serves as an organizational link between the PYD and PKK in regard to their common political goals. While this only sustains the idea of an ideological link, other actors engaged in Syria point at a much greater integration and coordination than the statements by Salih Muslim indicates.

### **International Actors' Positions toward the Syrian Kurdish Groups**

Based on the above analysis of the alleged affiliation between the PKK and the PYD, the different positions of the most influential international actors that are engaged in Syria towards this alleged affiliation are analyzed below. The section provides an overview of official statements from Russia, Turkey, Iran, US, the EU, and KRG.

Russia's relationship with the Syrian Kurds improved after Turkey downed a Russian jet in November 2015, thus enabling the two big powers to pursue what could be labeled as a Syrian-Kurdish proxy-war (Tisdall, 2016). In late May 2016, Turkish President Erdoğan accused the Russians of having supplied the PKK with anti-aircraft guns and missiles through Iraq and Syria, a claim Russia rejected. Russia, for its part, accused Turkey of hindering the Syrian Kurdish armed force of YPG in its battle against ISIS (Coskun & Toksabay, 2016). The deteriorating relationship between Turkey and Russia showed signs of mending when Erdoğan in late June 2016 sent an official apology for the downing of the Russian jet to Putin. Erdoğan hoped for a normalization of the relationship and reminded Putin of the potential for regional cooperation. The apology came at a time when the Turkish economy had been hit hard by the Russian sanctions and the Turkish-backed opposition in Syria was being weakened by the Syrian Government's advances near Aleppo, supported by Russian airstrikes (Sly, 2016; Stubbs & Solovyov, 2016). Erdoğan's hope for normalization between the two countries seems to have been realized because Putin, at a bilateral meeting with Erdoğan in May 2017, described the Russo-Turkish ties since 2015 as "getting back to a normal cooperative partnership" (Pinchuk, Ostroukh, & Soldatkin, 2017, para. 4). This rapprochement could limit or end the Russian support for PYD, ending a powerful actor who has spoken in support of the possibilities for a federal state in post-civil-war Syria. If Russia withdraws its support to the PYD, it would undermine the historically cooperative relationship between Russia and the Kurdish ambition for a nation state, along with the possible strong role of Russia in advancing Kurdish federalism in a post-conflict Syria. Russia could still in the near future step up its support for PYD if bilateral relations with Turkey deteriorate. This would serve as an attractive option for the PYD (Grove & Kesling, 2016). However, the new policy towards PYD by Russia after the rapprochement with Turkey has yet to be formalized, but Russia will most likely have to specify its Middle Eastern policy once the Syrian civil war ends, i.e., whether it will support Syrian Kurdish federalism or side with the regime and Turkey's outright rejection of Syrian Kurdish autonomy (van Wilgenburg, 2017). The Russo-Turkish relationship's impact on PYD's opportunities as a small

actor on the global scene seems to serve as an example of how the internal policies within the regional powers engaged in a conflict can have unforeseen consequences for the Syrian actors on the ground in the civil war.

The Iranian-Kurdish history is important to include briefly as the current Iranian Government struggles with rising discontent in its Kurdish population. After being brutally repressed by the Shah, it was neglected by the subsequent theocratic regime under Ayatollah Khomeini. Kurdish political parties in Iran remain outlawed; Kurdish areas are underdeveloped and poor; and according to Middle East Eye, political activists are routinely jailed and tortured. The situation in Iran could spark an uprising if not carefully managed by the Iranian Government (Neuhof, 2016; Zaman, 2015). To understand Iran's position vis-à-vis the PYD in Syria and its alleged affiliation with PKK, Iran and PKK's shifting cooperation must be taken into consideration. The Iran-PKK relationship has gone from warm to cold. According to an article by Michael Rubin at the Washington Institute, Iran has used PKK to undermine Turkish and US influence in the region (Rubin, 2003). Especially during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran sought to benefit from supporting the PKK to disrupt the Kirkuk pipeline and to help Iranian intelligence operations in Iraq (Kardas, 2009). In return, Iran provided weapons and a logistical framework. After the Iran-Iraq war, Iran was concerned with the growing PKK influence on Iran's own large Kurdish minority and sought to limit their level of influence. The relationship thereafter grew hostile and the Iranian Kurdish political group Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), was formed in 2004 as an offshoot of the PKK. PJAK resides in the Iraqi Kurdistan Qandil Mountains along with PKK, but Iran is its main area of operations (Bruno, 2007; Kardas, 2009; "U.S. brands PKK's," 2009). The Iranian Army cracked down on PJAK in 2011. Hundreds of its members were killed, forcing PJAK to sign a cease-fire agreement (Zaman, 2015). The historical tensions combined with the rivalry with Turkey could be the reason why it is very difficult to find official statements from the Iranian Government about the alleged link between PKK and PYD. Iranian views and or support for the PKK-PYD affiliation are most likely balanced due to the desire for maintaining a good relationship with Russia.

The Syrian regime's policy of not commenting officially on the alleged PKK presence in Syria is most likely in order to avoid further escalating its conflict with Turkey and because the regime's policy towards the Kurds is constrained by its alliance with Russia. In 1998, Turkey was ready to go to war with Syria in order to disrupt PKK's safe haven there. Turkey was outspoken in its support for the Syrian opposition and demand of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's resignation. At the time of writing, the Syrian regime has no strategic advantages in officially recognizing or addressing the issue of PKK presence in Northern Syria.

The European Union has PKK on its list of terrorist organizations while the European External Action Service had stated nothing officially about the PYD by the end of 2017. In January 2016, the European group GUE/NGL<sup>8</sup> held a conference on the EU, Turkey, and the Kurds to which it had invited Saleh Muslim, PYD, and Reward Resid, co-president of KNK, to participate (GUE/NGL, 2016a). The minutes of the conference show a very critical stance toward Turkey by the European Parliamentary group GUE/NGL and a request by the European group for the EU to mediate the conflict (GUE/NGL, 2016b). The EU's non-commenting on the alleged PYD-PKK affiliation appears to align with the US by listing the PKK as a terrorist group while not affiliating it with the PYD. An explanation could be that the European External Action Service strives to work by consensus, which complicates matters when 28 governments have to officially agree on complicated conflicts with various interests present (European Union External Action, 2016).

While the EU's official statements towards the Syrian Kurds have been vague, PYD has launched public campaigns within the individual European countries to gain legitimacy and support for their cause despite fierce protests from Turkey (Taştekin, 2015, 2016c). In April 2015, they opened an office in Prague with Czech governmental representatives present (Taştekin, 2016c; van Wilgenburg, 2016i). A year later, they opened an office in Stockholm (Kart, 2016). According to Zuhar Kobani, the PYD representative to Europe, the European countries de facto recognize Rojava by allowing PYD to open offices even though the countries officially abstain from doing so (Taştekin, 2016c). The most recent opening of a PYD office in Paris was followed by the Turkish president, Erdoğan, urging European countries to stop allowing PYD to open offices, arguing it would encourage attacks against the Turkish people residing in European countries as well as within Turkey itself ("Turkey calls on EU," 2016; "Turkey urges European," 2016).

<sup>8</sup> The European United Left/Nordic Green Left European Parliamentary Group

International Actors' Official Views on the Alleged Affiliation between the PYD and PKK	
Turkey	Turkey has expressed harshly that it regards PYD/YPG as an offshoot terror organization of the PKK ("Turkey's Erdogan denounces US," 2016).
KRG	In an interview with Al Monitor, in response to whether PYD and PKK are the same, the President of the KRG, Barzani, said "they are exactly one and the same thing" (Zaman, 2016, para. 46).
US	In a response to the affiliation between the PYD and PKK, Mark Toner, Deputy spokesperson of the US State Dept., stated that the US, "still view this as two separate entities." (Toner, 2013)
Russia	"Neither the PKK nor the PYD are considered terrorist organizations by either Russia or the United Nations Security Council" (Saeed, 2015, para. 2), Andrew Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Ankara stated. Russia refers to both actors as legitimate, according to The Guardianv (Tisdall, 2016). The Kurds have for more than 200 years played an important role in Russia's wars with Qajar Persia and Ottoman Turkey (Reynolds, 2016; Tabler & Cagaptay, 2016). Russia's position on the PKK/PYD affiliation should be seen in light of Kurdish and Russian cooperation historically.
Iran	According to Anadolu Agency in February 2016, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Hossein Jabari Ansari has abstained from calling PYD a terrorist organization, even when prompted ("Iran's ministry abstains," 2016). While no official statements on Iran banning PKK was found, Iran has banned all Kurdish political parties including PKK's offshoot PJAK (Neuhof, 2016).
Syrian Regime	The Syrian regime has been very quiet on the alleged affiliation between the PKK and PYD. In 2012, Gönül Tol found that the Syrian Regime is well aware and tolerates the alleged affiliation between PKK and PYD due to a mutual interest in destabilizing Turkey (Tol, 2012a).
EU	PKK is on the European Union's list of terror organizations (Council of the European Union, 2013). A search on PYD at the European Union External Action webpage yielded no results as of 2017. <sup>9</sup> Syrian Kurdish actors are only mentioned in a statement showing deep concern for their security and the humanitarian situation in Kobane (European Union External Action, 2014).

**Table 6:** International Actors' Official Views on the Alleged Affiliation between the PYD and PKK.

PYD's and PKK's ideological link serves as a strong bond between the two organizations. Their organizational ties and affiliations are in all cases very complicated. Even though they are both part of the KCK, this link does not in itself provide sufficient evidence to make the conclusion of a present, direct organizational affiliation between the PKK and PYD. The US, EU, Russia, and Iran have in stark contrast to Turkey and KRG President Barzani not publicly linked PYD and PKK as the same organizations. The EU's and US's continued support for PYD/YPG, through the Syrian Democratic Forces, is dependent on a clear distinction between the two organizations, since PKK figures on the list of terrorist organizations in both places. Turkey's demand to the US and EU to withdraw support for PYD/YPG due to Turkey's claim that PYD/YPG are the same organization as PKK, is limiting US and EU options for action while at the same time providing an opportunity for Russia and the Syrian Regime to seek influence within PYD. However, the sources cited above more than suggest that PYD and PKK have a very strong sympathy for each other and largely share the same ideology and political objective of democratic autonomy. Reports on fighters from PKK fighting alongside PYD in Syria sustain the argument that the affiliation is not limited to sympathy. Furthermore, taking history into consideration with the PYD being founded by PKK along with the above, indications of organizational links and even coordination seems very likely.

Finally, the international actors' views on this matter are greatly influenced by their interests and alliances in the Syrian war, which provide an incentive, especially for the US and the EU, to avoid even raising questions of the likely organizational linkage. If a clear argument was present with regard to determining that such a linkage was not present, it would most likely have been stated officially as part of an answer to a NATO ally's concern. An overview of the main international actors' views on the affiliation is provided in the table below.

<sup>9</sup> However, on June 15, 2018 the European Union External Action responded to a petition expressing its fears about the negative consequences of the operation launched by Turkey against the PYD (Ferrer, 2018).

### Likely Side Effects from Continued/Enhanced Support to the SDF

As the previous sections of this part of the book have demonstrated, SDF has been the preferred partner of the US and European countries in the fight against ISIS. However, there are certain potential negative side effects of this strategy. These are discussed below.

#### *Provoking Turkey*

An alarming side effect in supporting SDF could be that the SDF (and thereby YPG) advances its territorial gains along the Turkish border between the regions of Afrin and Kobane and attacks Turkish-backed groups amidst the advances. This would trigger even more hostile reactions from Turkey. Turkey's relationship with PYD/YPG has grown hostile over the last years as PYD through YPG and SDF has continued to seize more territory near the Turkish border and has violated the "red line" (the Azaz-Jarabulus line) near the Euphrates River set up by Turkey in pursuit of preventing a unification of the three Kurdish cantons. After the YPG/SDF crossed this line, Turkey initiated a military response in terms of shelling Kurdish positions in the province of Aleppo, near Azaz, and near the Euphrates River to stop the advances (Aboudadel, 2016; Nissenbaum & Dagher, 2016; Pamuk, 2015; Perry, 2016b; Rifai, 2016; "Turkish army ready," 2016; "YPG says it has crossed," 2016). After the liberation of Manbij by SDF fighters, Turkey scaled up its response from shelling to direct military action into Syria, largely motivated by the seemingly unceasing advance by the SDF near its border.

Turkey's actions should be viewed from in a long-term perspective, where a Kurdish-dominated entity in Syria could fuel further and intensified separatist ambitions among Turkey's Kurdish population, facilitate arms smuggling, and serve as a safe haven for PKK insurgents (Nissenbaum & Dagher, 2016; Seckin & Ali, 2016; Spencer, 2016). As mentioned earlier, Turkey regards PYD/YPG as terrorists and does not differentiate between PKK and PYD (and SDF, for that matter) (Ergan, 2016). Erdoğan has on several occasions called for the US to put the PYD/YPG on the terrorist list alongside PKK, but so far without any result. In February 2016, this resulted in the following statement from the Turkish President to the US: "Are you on our side or the side of the terrorist PYD and PKK organization?" ("Turkey's Erdogan denounces US," 2016, para. 14). It is of course obvious that the statement draws parallels to former US President George W. Bush's statements in the wake of 9/11.

Turkey is objecting to the newly proclaimed Rojava and Northern Syria Federalism and is concerned with the high number of YPG fighters in SDF (Idiz, 2016). The US support to SDF and the NATO alliance with Turkey has led the US to denounce Turkey's shelling of SDF forces while at the same time urging the Syrian Kurds not to expand their area of operation (Nissenbaum, 2016; "Turkey v Syria's Kurds," 2016). Turkey still seeks to empower local Arab tribes, who are not aligned to the Kurds, to advance against ISIS and continues to ask the US to drop support of YPG/SDF (Taştekin, 2016b). This Turkish strategy was strongly enhanced during Operation "Euphrates Shield", when FSA and the Turkish Army took Jarablus, and after a prolonged campaign against Al Bab among other ISIS strongholds (Zaman, 2017). Turkey thereby presented the US with an on-the-ground alternate force to SDF for countering ISIS. The US rejection of Turkey's proposal could be due to great power politics in the region. Russia does not wish to see a stronger Turkish presence in a post-conflict Syria due to Turkey's role in supporting various opposition forces to the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad – Russia's main ally in Syria. Several sources have also cast doubt on the effectiveness of the Turkish-backed fighters and the Turkish Army in combating ISIS in comparison to the SDF (Cockburn, 2017; Iddon, 2017; Tremblay, 2017). This could explain why the US is staying with SDF as the most efficient ground force to counter ISIS.

By supporting SDF, it can be argued that the West (primarily the US) has chosen a short-term approach to defeating ISIS, which apparently outweighs the interests of a key NATO ally in the region. However, at the same time, Turkey's contribution to prioritize the fight against ISIS was at best very reluctant in the first years after the initial progress made by ISIS. However, the likelihood of Turkey launching a ground offensive or aerial strikes against Syrian Kurds, while SDF serves as an operational ally to the US in the fight against ISIS is estimated as low. This is also based on the continued potential of Russia to deter Turkey with the deployment of anti-aircraft missiles in Syria (Nissenbaum, Peker, & Marson, 2015; "Turkey's downing," 2015). Additionally, the US and Russia have put pressure on Ankara to accept the PYD as a legitimate actor in the conflict – a request Turkey has ruled out (Yetkin, 2017). The danger of an escalated conflict between Turkey and SDF is very real and could go from cold to warm, which also was the case after ISIS was defeated in Raqqa (Gall, 2018). If the US and Russia in a post-civil war scenario back down from their support for SDF or are ambiguous

about its future recognition this will also most likely be followed by an escalation in warm conflicts between the different actors within Syria.

*Continued Western support in Post-conflict Syria: Further disrupting the Balance*

Continued Western support for SDF is disrupting the balance of power in favor of the Kurdish federal solution in a post-conflict scenario in Syria. The Syrian Kurds will possess weapons, receive military training, and be able to boost their organization through financial and advisory support, which likely will result in enhancing PYD and YPG confidence. There does not seem to be any incentive for neither the political party nor the military group to relinquish gains made.

An agreement between the opposition and the regime without the consent of PYD is therefore highly unlikely to be implemented in Northern Syria if it reverses the Kurdish ambitions for Syrian federalism. To what extent the Syrian Kurds would be willing to defend Rojava and its autonomy against a new united Syrian state structure is of course another question, which remains to be answered. However, no matter how or if a united post-conflict Syrian government is constituted, the question of Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria will have to be dealt with from a Syrian state point of view. So far, PYD and YPG have showed a firm willingness to pursue their political ambitions by proclaiming federalism even with various Syrian actors instantly rejecting it.

The developments on the ground have had profound implications for SDF's course of action as their strategy of gaining territory from ISIS has been challenged by Turkey's and Assad's military advances. This is because the legitimacy and international support for SDF's territorial advances in Syria have largely rested on SDF's ability to act as "boots on the ground" for the US-led coalition against ISIS. Their territorial advances into ISIS territory near the Turkish border have been supported by Russia and the US amidst heavy Turkish criticism of the latter and direct military actions to halt the SDF advance near the Euphrates River. With the territory between the Kurdish cantons of Afrin and Kobane-controlled by the Syrian regime, a Russian ally, and Turkey, a NATO ally, it seems highly unlikely that SDF can advance in this territory without meeting an array of unknown consequences for putting its two main operational allies Russia and the US between a rock and a hard place.

Turkey's operation "Euphrates Shield" and the Syrian regime's retake of Aleppo seems therefore to have put an end, for the time being, to PYD efforts through SDF to unite Afrin and Kobane without breaking away from their operational allies and putting themselves at risk of ending up completely isolated. Such a move could lead to the complete eradication of the political project of a federal Rojava by the stronger military powers of Turkey or the Syrian regime. This left the SDF to look south and to Raqqa with the oil-rich province of Deir al-Zor southeast of the city (Said, 2017b).

Looking a few years ahead, policy-makers must therefore keep in mind that perceiving the KNC as a uniform Kurdish voice in negotiations would be ignorant. One example of this was the third round of Geneva negotiations in 2016, where the KNC was invited as such a voice even though it was not representative of all, or even a majority, of the Syrian Kurds (van Wilgenburg, 2016d). In relation to the latter, PYD would definitely be a more legitimate and representative Kurdish organization. The two parties' (KNC and PYD) relationship can actually be described as a rivalry in terms of aspiring for political control in Northern Syria and they do not appear to be cooperating in order to share political power. This is best shown through the fact that PYD and its allies have been confident enough to unilaterally declare federalism and implement their ideology of democratic self-administration to decentralize decision making to local democratic councils. In general, Syrian Kurds are split on these issues, but PYD is presently providing security and liberating Kurdish and Arab towns in Syria through its armed forces (YPG) and therefore seems to be the most appropriate representative in the conflict.

A NATO country (e.g. Denmark) that supports the SDF must therefore be prepared to face the same dilemmas with which the US is struggling. On the one hand, a strategy to support SDF (de facto YPG) would support some of the most effective fighters and most likely ensure continued ground victories against ISIS. On the other hand, it would strengthen PYD's regional power position and likelihood of realizing its political goal of federalism and democratic self-administration, which will not only face criticism in Ankara, but also lead to internal Kurdish and Kurdish-Arab conflicts and political power struggles in the post-ISIS Syria.



## PART TWO

# The Iraqi Kurdistan Region

In order to obtain an understanding of the influential actors within the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, this part analyses in depth the alliances, capacities, and political objectives of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Kurdistan Democratic Party and Gorran (Movement for Change). In the following, the origins and internal dynamics of the Kurdish Regional Government are analyzed. The implications of the economic downfall of the region as well as the international fallout following the independence referendum are discussed in detail in this part.

### The Origins of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the KRG

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was established in 1991 when the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) initiated an armed struggle against the Iraqi Army. The momentum was a Kurdish popular uprising in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's defeat in Kuwait the same year. After the Iraqi Army had defeated this rebellion, they threatened to repeat the 1988 crackdowns on the Iraqi Kurds, known as the Anfal campaign, where chemical weapons were used against Iraqi Kurds (Haulman, 2000). The campaign had resulted in an estimated killing of 180,000 Kurds, with about 4,000-5,000 killed by chemical weapons (Human Rights Watch, 1993; Kurdistan Regional Government, n.d.-a; Poole, 2006). In the face of this threat, hundreds of thousands Iraqi Kurds fled to the mountain slopes of the Iraqi-Turkish border, leading to a humanitarian crisis, which the US under a UN mandate helped avert by dropping tons of humanitarian aid under operation "Provide Comfort." The operation later expanded into the deployment of 20,000 US and coalition ground and air forces to ensure the security of the Iraqi Kurds from the Iraqi military. In the last phase of Operation "Provide Comfort," US, British, French, and Turkish air power enforced a no fly-zone over Kurdish territory in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq. The Turkish engagement in this operation – besides from being a reaction to internal NATO pressure – was most likely to prevent thousands of Kurdish refugees to head for the border between Iraq and Turkey. If the crisis escalated, a heavy international pressure on Turkey to open its border for the refugees could have been an outcome. For internal security purposes, Turkey most likely wanted to avoid such an outcome (Haulman, 2000).

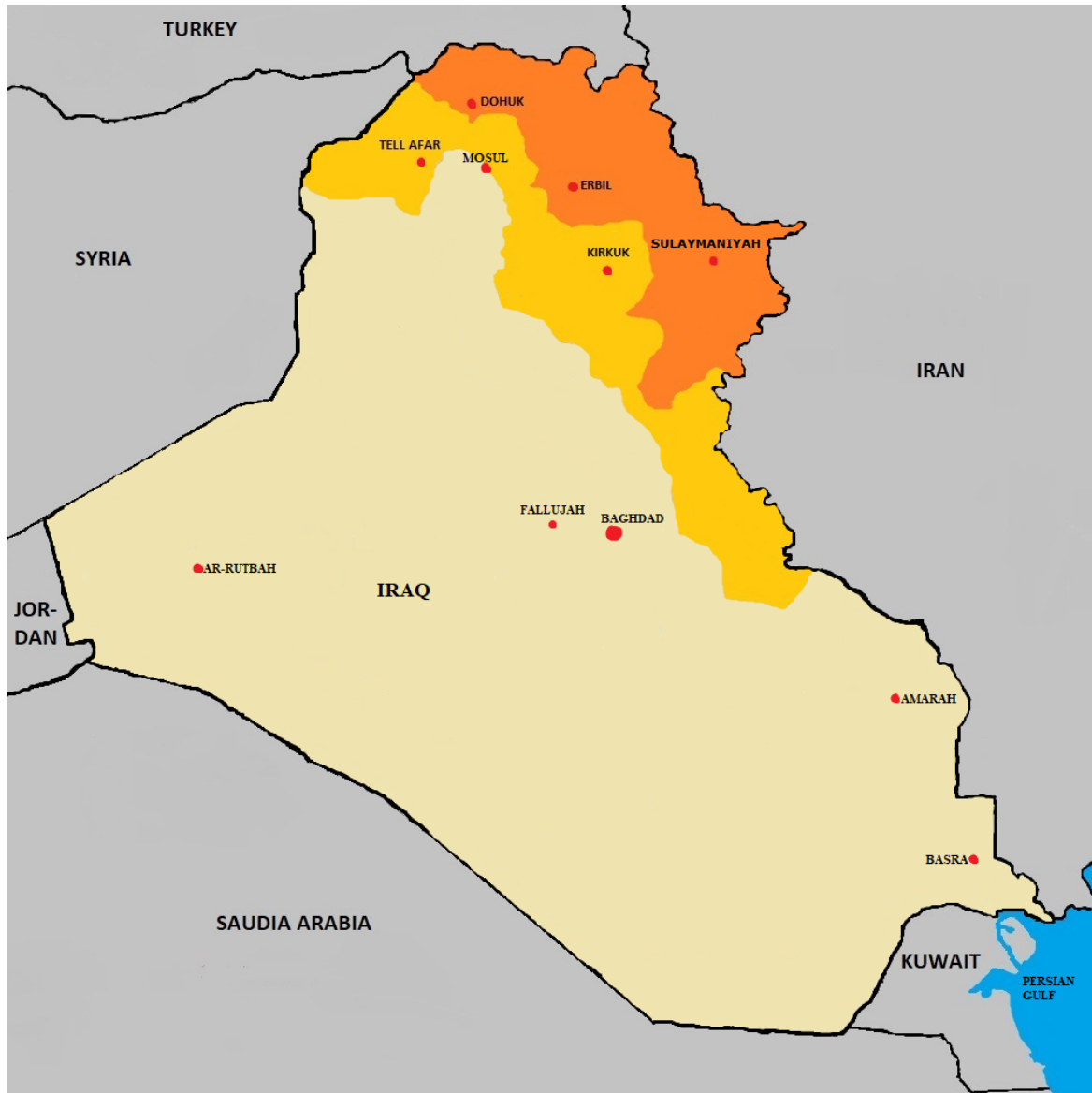
The result was a complete withdrawal of the regime administration and soldiers from the Kurdish region, which de facto implemented Kurdish autonomy over the territory (Hassan, 2015). In the aftermath of the withdrawal, the Iraqi Kurds established a parliamentary system that held its first elections in 1992. After the

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**Map 3:** Iraq, Archive: RDDC.

election, a power-sharing agreement between PUK and KDP took form. However, the implementation of the agreement struggled from the beginning concerning access to government posts and resources, which ignited an armed struggle between the two parties. This became the beginning of a deadly civil war within the Kurdish territory, which in the following years resulted in about 5,000 internal Kurdish casualties (Al-Khatteeb, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2015). The conflict reached its peak when the KDP invited the Iraqi Army to enter the no-fly zone and assist in ousting PUK forces from Erbil (Haulman, 2000; International Crisis Group, 2015; Lowrie & Blystone, 1996). The presence of the regime army in the no-fly zone forced the then US administration under the leadership of Bill Clinton to enforce the no-fly zone and initiate “Operation Desert Strike,” where it launched 44 cruise missiles against the Iraqi air defense infrastructure, effectively halting further Iraqi military advances (Haulman, 2000). The Kurdish civil war ended in 1998, when the leaders of PUK, Jalal Talabani, and KDP, Masoud Barzani, signed a peace agreement in Washington (“Iraqi Kurdistan profile,” 2017).

PUK shortly after established its own government institutions in Sulaymaniyah creating a competing set of governments and military institutions to the ones KDP had set up in Erbil. These separate government and

<b>Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)</b>	
Established	In 1946 by Mustafa Barzani, the father of former KRG president Masoud Barzani (Kurdistan Democratic Party, n.d.).
Territory	The Iraqi Kurdistan territory, but as the KRG administration continues to be divided the KDP administrates Erbil.
Organizational Structure	Internal elections to choose their leadership (Kurdistan Democratic Party, 2010). Leader: Masoud Barzani.
Armed Forces	In Iraq, the armed Peshmerga forces are allegedly united under the KRG's command. However, several accounts describe a split within the Peshmerga forces, which indicates that segments within the forces are first and foremost loyal to their party affiliation. KDP controls their party affiliated Peshmerga forces.
Political Goals	To maintain their strong government position within the KRG. To seek independence from Baghdad: In September 2017, they organized and held a non-recognized referendum. Although 93% voted in favor, the immediate actions taken by the Federal Government of Iraq to stop the referendum resulted in President Masoud Barzani stepping down and freezing the referendum results (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2017).
Ideology	A liberal constitutional democracy. KDP is center-right.
Rivals	Intra-Kurdish power struggle within the KRG: PUK/Gorran. Baghdad
Competitors	PYD PKK Turkey: Before the KRG insisted on holding the independence referendum despite Turkish opposition their relationship was warm and strong. What followed in the aftermath of the referendum has been a cold relationship with Turkey aligning their policy along Baghdad on the Kurdish issues (Uyanik, 2017).
Alliances	KNC
Operative partners and alliances	PUK-KDP: The two parties were engaged in a strategic-agreement until the 2013 election, when they ran on separate lists. KDP-Gorran: After Gorran's landslide election in 2013, KDP and Gorran formed a coalition government, without signing a strategic-agreement similar to that of PUK and KDP. This was disrupted in October 2015, when KDP sacked minister posts held by Gorran.

**Table 7:** Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

military institutions continued until the US mediated a joint regional government in Erbil after Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003. However, according to several analysts and observers, the PUK and KDP kept their separate institutions and ran de facto parallel systems where party loyalty far outweighed the integration of their institutions (Abbas, 2013; Dalay, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2015).

### **The Kurdish Regional Government in Post-Saddam Iraq**

From 2005, PUK and KDP shared the political power in KRG and in 2006, both parties agreed to unify their two separate administrations. The Kurdistan Region's economy was booming from 2005-11 (heavily dependent on the oil price) with foreign investments, double-digit growth, and a high employment rate (Shapland, 2015). One of the largest economic trading partners for the KRG was and remains Turkey. Turkey has made substantial energy investments in the Kurdistan Region and the strong affiliation is exemplified by the fact that Iraq in 2014 was Turkey's second biggest export market, with a large portion of exports going to the Kurdistan Region ("Islamic State: Why Turkey prefers," 2014). According to a Washington Institute policy analysis, the area governed by KRG was Turkey's third largest export market in 2013, with Turkish exports amounting to USD 8 billion, largely due to huge investment in the energy sector (Cagaptay, Fidan, & Sacikara, 2015).

<b>Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)</b>	
Established	In 1975 by Jalal Talabani.
Territory	The Iraqi Kurdistan territory, but as the KRG administration continues to be split, the PUK administrates Sulaymaniyah.
Organizational Structure	Internal elections to choose their leadership (“PUK deputies announced,” 2016). Leader: Jalal Talabani was the leader from 1975 until his death after a long struggle with illness in October 2017 (McDonald, 2017). The party is looking for new leadership (Pollack, 2016).
Armed Forces	In Iraq, the armed Peshmerga forces are allegedly united under the KRG’s command. However, several accounts describe a split within the Peshmerga force, which indicates that segments within the force are first and foremost loyal to their party affiliation. PUK controls their party affiliated Peshmerga forces.
Political Goals	To regain its political power after Talabani’s death, which has caused PUK to lose a large portion of their voter share to Gorran.
Ideology	A liberal constitutional democracy. PUK is more left-wing leaning than KDP while supporting a market economy (“PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan,” n.d.).
Rivals	Intra-Kurdish power struggle within the KRG: KDP/Gorran.
Alliances	Iran, PKK and PYD (van Wilgenburg, 2013c).
Operative partners and alliances	PUK-KDP: The two parties were engaged in a strategic-agreement until the 2013 election where they ran on separate list. Since then, the rivalry between the two parties has continued with two parties failing to agree on a common nomination for the Iraqi Presidency (a post reserved to a Kurd by the Iraqi constitution) (Ismaeel, 2018). Presidential list – KDP set their own. Gorran-PUK: The two parties signed a short-lived agreement in 2016 that ended seven years of separation after Gorran broke away from PUK (“PUK and Gorran sign,” 2016). The agreement failed to promote peaceful cooperation between the two parties and their relationships have returned to a state of rivalry (Fazil, 2018; “Full text of Gorran-PUK agreement,” 2016).

**Table 8:** Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

In 2006, KDP and PUK agreed to unite their two administrations under a reformed KRG (the so-called 5<sup>th</sup> Cabinet). This was followed up by a vow in 2007 in an attempt to implement a strategic agreement, dividing administrative and government positions between the two parties (H. Ahmed, 2012, 2014; IHS Global Insight, 2013). Although it appeared as if the old political and military rivalry was settled, a closer view at the reforms shows that the merging only was carried out to some extent in areas where both parties had mutual interests and that the separate, party-affiliated Peshmerga forces were not united (International Crisis Group, 2015; Kurdistan Regional Government, n.d.-a; H. Morris, 2014).

The Peshmerga forces’ strong disunity and party loyalty stem from the time after Saddam Hussein’s army forces were ousted from the Kurdish area in the 1990s. With the help of defected Kurdish officers from the Iraqi Army, PUK and KDP established separate military academies in the Sulaymaniyah (PUK) and Dohuk (KDP) regions respectively. The two parties each professionalized their own soldiers to become conventional forces with an officer corps and military training (International Crisis Group, 2015). Even after the US had toppled Saddam Hussein, they did not succeed in merging the two parties’ Peshmerga forces under a single Kurdish banner.

An attempt at unification was made when a Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was created in 2009 to comply with the stated political objective of unity from 2006, which consisted of both PUK and KDP party members. This allowed for some coordination between the forces, but officers continued reporting to their party leaders and their intelligence services remained completely separated. The intelligence services each operated with separate sources, received information from different regional partners, and most importantly, rarely shared information with one another. If intelligence was to be shared between the two parties, it was bound by

political motives and done very selectively. This type of (non-) cooperation still exists (International Crisis Group, 2015).

The strategic agreement lasted until the 2013 elections, when PUK and KDP ran on separate lists. This resulted in the KDP winning 38 seats, PUK 18, and a third party – Gorran (Movement for Change) – surprised by winning 24 seats out of the parliament's 111 (H. Ahmed, 2014; "IHEC announced final results," 2013; "Iraqi Kurdistan opposition party," 2013). The election disrupted the balance of power between PUK and KDP, and threatened the stability that had been a key driver in the impressive economic growth. The KDP and Gorran entered a government formation after months of negotiations but without signing a strategic agreement similar to the pre-existing one between PUK and KDP ("Understanding Between Gorran and KDP," 2014).

Gorran's key campaign causes were directed against corruption and party-based Peshmerga forces (International Crisis Group, 2015). In an interview with Rudaw in 2014, Yousif Mohammed Sadiq, then member of the KRG parliament for Gorran, stated:

*The aim of Gorran is to institutionalize the government, to put an end to the system of two administrations. We don't want to control the sphere of influence of the KDP or the PUK*  
(“Understanding Between Gorran and KDP,” 2014, para. 12).

Gorran received four positions in the cabinet as well as the post of Speaker of the Kurdish Parliament, most notable was the post of Minister of Peshmerga Affairs. While Gorran nominally possessed more strength than PUK, the party's actual power was and still is limited, since it does not have a 'private military' or security force as the other two parties have. This severely limits the scope of influence for Gorran and its ability to counter its government partner KDP (International Crisis Group, 2015; Sugarman, 2013). If Gorran is to play an important role in determining KRG politics, the state of party-loyal Peshmerga forces and administrative personnel has to be changed.

The election in 2013 also secured the KDP's wish to extend Masoud Barzani's presidency and form a coalition from a position of strength (IHS Global Insight, 2013). Barzani, who was elected President of the KRG in 2005, ended his second term in 2013 – which according to the constitution should have been his last term, as the presidency of the KRG is limited to two four-year terms (Kelly, 2010 p. 740). However, Barzani's second term was extended by the Kurdish parliament through a presidential law that allowed him to stay in power for two more years. Despite the result of the elections, the PUK continued to dominate Sulaymaniyah, with Gorran challenging it politically. Nevertheless, since Gorran possessed no security forces, the party has not been in a position to challenge PUK's security and patronage dominance of Sulaymaniyah. The KDP continued after the election to dominate Erbil and Dohuk (Shapland, 2015).

In the wake of Gorran's landslide election another challenge to the political balance in the KRG's political system evolved. The Kurdish region was getting embroiled in a very disruptive political conflict with Baghdad over its oil sales and federal revenues, only adding to the general instability in KRG territory (Fathallah, 2015). According to the Iraqi constitution of 2005, the KRG was to receive 17% of the national budget (Natali, 2015). However, in 2014 Baghdad froze and withheld some of these funds due to a conflict over Kurdish oil production and exports (Zaman, 2016). The conflict was rooted in KRG building a pipeline, thereby facilitating oil exports to Turkey independently outside of the Iraqi state oil company, Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization (Coles, 2014a). According to Baghdad, the revenue from this export should be deducted from the 17%, while KRG insisted that the two things should be kept separately. In 2014, the KRG Finance Minister stated:

*It has been years since the Baghdad government last sent the region's budget, which amounts to 17% of the general Iraqi budget. Instead, the central government was deducting up to 6% of the allocated 17% under the pretext that it was deducting the sovereign and governing expenditure.*

(Al-Haasoun, 2014, para. 9)

Then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stated in response to the Kurdish demand, "The equation is simple: you take 17 percent of the wealth, you hand over the oil you have" (Coles, 2014a, para. 15). The conflict mirrored the general Iraqi Kurdish dissatisfaction with Maliki's centralized politics and their partial indifference with Baghdad's concerns that the KRG's ability to sell oil independently would threaten Iraq's territorial integrity (Barbarani, 2015).

<b>Gorran (Movement for Change)</b>	
Established	In 2009 by former PUK member Nawshirwan Mustafa. Mustafa was the leader until he died after a long struggle with illness in May 2017 (“Gorran leader Nawshirwan Mustafa,” 2017; “Gorran Movement for Change,” n.d.).
Territory	The Iraqi Kurdistan territory, in Iraq, but as the KRG administrations continue to be split between KDP in Erbil and PUK in Sulaymaniyah, Gorran is without a party-loyal administration.
Organizational Structure	Internal elections to choose their leadership (N. Ahmed, 2012; Kurdistan Democratic Party, 2010; “PUK deputies announced,” 2016). Leader: Omar Sayid Ali (“New Gorran leader,” 2017).
Armed Forces	Gorran does not command armed forces. It has unsuccessfully sought to unify the Peshmerga forces under the sole command of the KRG.
Political Goals	To challenge the status quo of corruption, abuse of power, an economic monopoly, a public service crisis, and employment of suitable positions (“At First Convention,” 2013).
Ideology	Gorran is more left-wing and ideologically closer to PUK than KDP (Gorran, 2014; “PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan,” n.d.).
Rivals	KDP
Competitor	PUK
Operative partners and alliances	KDP-Gorran: After Gorran’s landslide election in 2013, KDP and Gorran formed a coalition government, without signing a strategic agreement similar to that of the PUK-KDP. This was disrupted in October 2015 when KDP sacked Gorran’s ministers. Since then, their relationship has deteriorated with Gorran opposing the largely KDP driven independence referendum (Fantappie, 2018). Gorran-PUK: The two parties signed a short-lived agreement in 2016 that ended seven years of separation after Gorran broke away from PUK (“PUK and Gorran sign,” 2016). The agreement failed to promote peaceful cooperation between the two parties and their relationships have returned to a state of rivalry (Fazil, 2018; “Full text of Gorran-PUK agreement,” 2016).

**Table 9:** Gorran (Movement for Change).

### The Economic Downfall of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region

The conflict over the national funds came at a time when the Kurdistan Region’s economy was in its worse shape since Saddam Hussein was overthrown. The region’s double-digit growth had been replaced by a fall of 50% in its import/export rates compared to the 2013 level due to the fall in oil prices in the subsequent economic crisis brewing in Iraqi Kurdistan. The crisis was also fueled by other factors and according to Yassin Rashid, an official in the Kurdistan Investors Union, besides Baghdad’s withholding of public funds, political turmoil in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the general instability in the Middle East also added negatively to prosperity in the Kurdish region of Iraq (Al-Haasoun, 2014).

While these factors most likely have had a negative effect on the economy, several other sources have ascribed factors such as corruption, patronage, and a misuse of public funds as key drivers in fueling the economic crisis. According to Transparency International’s latest report on the KRG (2015), the levels of corruption are:

*Relatively high compared to other countries in the region ... and rooted in the strong role that the two established political parties have in the political system, nepotism, a weak bureaucratic governance system and the task to ensure proper use of oil revenues.*

(Pring, 2015, p. 1)

In 2006, the US State Department described corruption as Iraqi Kurdistan’s biggest economic problem in a cable made public by WikiLeaks. The cable describes how the Kurdish population in the Kurdistan Region generally perceive KDP and PUK as extremely corrupt. The corruption within the KDP is described as centered around the Barzani clan while PUK corruption is described as centered on old Peshmerga ties. This system promotes a patron-client relationship where business is done within party lines and public contracts

are rewarded within the patronage network. The system is held up by the parties' control of their respective security forces, Peshmergas, who then enforce the illegal contracts (U.S. Department of State, 2006). In May 2016, Ali Hama Salih from Gorran filed a corruption suit against 20 senior Kurdish officials for misuse of public funds and land seizures ("Kurdish MP to file," 2016). The depth of the corruption is described in the vast articles on corruption published by Iraqi Kurdish newspapers. *E Kurd*, a Kurdish newspaper in a period of six months in 2016 wrote more than 45 articles on corruption in the KRG ("Corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan," 2016). A Carnegie Middle East Center report explains the political economy of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region as relying on economic monopolies and nepotistic networks to enrich the region's elite (Hassan, 2015). A claim supported by the International Crisis Group, which also describes the economic system of Iraqi Kurdistan as corrupted top-down and based entirely on party cronyism (International Crisis Group, 2015). Based on the above, it appears evident that the misuse of Iraqi Kurdistan's public funds through corruption and patronage networks is widespread, recognized, and documented.

The KRG has since the economic crisis in 2014 been struggling to pay salaries to public employees. In November 2015, the KRG's Head of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir said: "We are three months behind in paying the salaries of our own civil servants" ("Iraqi Kurdistan govt behind," 2015, para. 8). As the KRG uses an astonishing 70-80% (out of which approximately one third is allocated for the Peshmerga forces) of their monthly budget alone to pay salaries and pensions for about 1.4 million people in the Kurdistan Region, the withholding of public salaries and pensions naturally generates a dangerous dissatisfaction (El-Ghobashy, 2016; Hassan, 2015; "KRG says delayed salaries," 2015). In the wake of the withholding of salaries, deadly clashes have taken place in several large cities (Coles, 2016b; "Teachers' strike," 2015). In hindsight, it seems unsustainable and highly sensitive to fiscal fluctuations to spend around three quarters of the budget on public salaries, when revenues primarily are based on oil and resource allocation from the federal state. Since 2013, the world price for oil has dropped severely from above a barrel price of USD 100 to below USD 50 per barrel, challenging the KRG bid for independent financing through its vast oil reserves (Statista, 2018). A likely outcome of the crisis could be that the KRG must increase its revenues from the Iraqi state again or seek new ways to secure its financing independently from Baghdad. Additional factors that have affected the economy of the Kurdistan Region is the war against ISIS that has resulted in more than a million and a half refugees from Syria and Iraq having arrived in Iraqi Kurdistan, increasing the population of the Kurdistan Region by 30%, which naturally also puts pressure on the expenses (E. Butler, 2015; Coles, 2016b; "Iraqi Kurdistan govt behind," 2015; Kittleson, 2016; "Kurdistan selling oil," 2015; Uyanik, 2017).

In February 2016, after several months of protests in the streets as a result of KRG not paying salaries to its employees and not being able to pay international oil companies, the conflict between Baghdad and KRG appeared to have come to an end (EconSource, 2016). Baghdad and KRG agreed that KRG in the future would sell its oil through the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization in exchange for Baghdad paying the KRG employees' salaries, a deal which would have ended the KRG's independent oil adventure (El-Ghobashy, 2016; "Iraqi Kurdistan agrees," 2016; "Iraqi Kurds accept Baghdad's deal," 2016). The deal was to be implemented in the Iraqi Federal Budget of 2017. The proposed 2017 federal budget would allocate 17% of the Iraqi Federal Budget to the KRG in exchange for the KRG to export 550,000 barrels of oil a day from the Kirkuk and Iraqi Kurdish Region oilfields through the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization. In the final parliamentary sessions between the Kurdish and Iraqi political parties, the KDP suddenly decided to withdraw from the 2017 Iraqi Federal Budget sessions (Malazada, 2016). The KDP withdrew from the sessions because it claimed it would go against their aim of becoming economically independent of Baghdad through oil sales and because it distrusted Baghdad to finance the KRG's Peshmerga forces (Goran, 2016; Malazada, 2016). KDP's withdrawal was not a unified Iraqi Kurdish action because PUK, Gorran, Kurdistan Islamic Group, and Kurdistan Islamic Union all decided to vote for the 2017 Iraqi Federal Budget – thereby securing its approval. The vote showed a strong disunity among the Iraqi Kurdish groups towards Baghdad and political disagreement on how the KRG can pay its salaries.

Although the 2017 Federal Budget was approved, the KRG has raised concern that its Peshmerga forces have not received any money from Baghdad. In this regard, Barzani has said: "Since 2005, the Federal Government of Iraq has not enacted the financial rights of Peshmerga and the Kurdistan Region by making up different excuses" (S. Ali, 2017b, para. 9). Once again the financial relationship between the KRG and Baghdad is left in uncertainty with KDP seeking revenue independent of Baghdad, which is a core condition if the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is to become sovereign. Meanwhile, the opposition parties (PUK, Gorran, the

Kurdistan Islamic Group, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union) sought the relief that the Iraqi Federal Budget offered to help solve the Iraqi Kurdistan Region's economic problems and allow the government to pay its public employees and pensions.

### ISIS Attacks Kurdistan – The Fall of Sinjar

ISIS took the world by surprise when it swept across from Syria to Iraq and conquered Mosul in June 2014, Iraq's second largest city, and large swathes of territories with a majority of Sunni-Arab population. According to Iraqi officials, the Iraqi Army in Mosul was defeated after three days of sporadic fighting when roughly 30,000 Iraqi soldiers fled in face of an insurgent force of 800 fighters. This allowed ISIS to strip Mosul's military base for weapons, steal USD 480 million in banknotes and free thousands of prisoners to join their ranks (Chulov, Hawramy, & Ackerman, 2014; Ignatius, 2015).

As Mosul is situated close to the Kurdistan Region's borders, the threat from ISIS to the Kurdish Region was imminent after the city fell. In August 2014, ISIS managed to break its standoff with the Kurdish forces and rush their borders. They managed to capture areas inhabited by the Yazidi minority in Sinjar moving as close as 45 kilometers within range of Erbil in 2014 (International Crisis Group, 2015). A day prior to the fall of Sinjar, the city of Zumar with its rich oil fields was lost to ISIS after the Kurdish Peshmerga largely fled, as it later also came to be the case in Sinjar. The initial Kurdish defeats to ISIS surprised the Kurdish leadership, since Zumar was under the protection of the Peshmerga forces that had boasted they would be able to keep ISIS in check. With the loss of Sinjar only a day after Zumar, the image and reputation of the Peshmerga forces was shattered. A local Yazidi official from Sinjar stated in an interview with Al Monitor "They (Peshmerga and Security Commanders, ed.) fled before the people did," (Salih, 2014, para. 6) further underlining the inability of the Peshmerga forces to protect the area.

The Peshmerga's failure to keep ISIS at bay prompted the Kurdish leadership to appeal for international help. The KRG president Barzani asked in August 2014: "What we are asking our friends to do is to provide support and to cooperate with us in providing the necessary weapons that would enable us to defeat these terrorist groups" ("Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani seeks weapons to fight IS," 2014, para. 14). The US answered the call, halted ISIS advances in the Kurdistan Region with heavy air strikes on ISIS positions, thereby limiting ISIS's freedom of movement in the area. Additionally, the air strikes took out some of the heavy weaponry ISIS had looted from Mosul and subsequently used against the Kurds (Marcus, 2014; Pollack, 2014; Shapland, 2015).

Kenneth M. Pollack challenges the above statement that ISIS's advance was primarily halted by US air strikes by explaining why ISIS managed to overrun the Kurdish territory by identifying three key military factors: Firstly, he says it was because ISIS took the Kurds by surprise, since ISIS at the time seemed focused on an attack to the south towards Baghdad. Secondly, the territory of the Yazidi and other groups are not "core territory" for the KRG, which could have limited the Peshmerga's will to defend it. Thirdly, ISIS's heavy weapons gave them a tactical advantage against Kurdish lighter infantry. As the element of surprise passed, the Peshmerga regrouped their heavy weapons along newly emerged front lines with a focus on defending "core" KRG territory, which is what effectively halted ISIS's advance (Pollack, 2014). Whether Pollack's explanation is valid does not change the fact that the Kurdish defenses were broken. In hindsight, it appears the fall of Sinjar was largely due to the lack of information sharing on ISIS movement between the different party-affiliated Peshmerga intelligence services and the lack of ability of the Kurdish troops to cooperate. A week after the fall of Mosul, the KRG called for unification of all the Peshmerga forces, which even in the face of an existential war against ISIS, the KRG was not able to achieve, illuminating just how deep the Peshmerga split is (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2015; Shapland, 2015).

The Peshmerga disunity also appears in the fight against ISIS. PUK and KDP have handled the threat of ISIS by dividing the defense of KRG territory between them. The KDP loyal Peshmerga forces are in charge of north and west, while PUK defend the south and east. Iran appears to be supporting PUK while the US and Turkey are supporting KDP (Fumerton & van Wilgenburg, 2015). The regional powers' different backings of the parties of course also contribute to continuous internal split. For instance, US air strikes have been centered on the northern and western territory, supplying military training and weapons delivery through Erbil, thereby aiding the KDP Peshmerga forces, while the PUK forces in the south have received training and weapons from Iran (International Crisis Group, 2015; Kittleson, 2014). Reuters reported in September 2014 that the town of Amiri had been retaken from ISIS in a cooperative effort between Shiite militias, the Iraqi Army,

and Kurdish Peshmerga forces under the auspices of Iranian advisors. Amiri is situated south of the Kurdish territory, prompting the possible, strong cooperation between PUK and Iran and underlining the proxy factor (Coles, 2014b; Collard, 2014). At the end of 2017, there of course exists an alliance based on a common enemy, but as the threat from this common enemy declines the common ground might erode, which means other conflicts and tension in general are bound to happen. This calls for diplomatic actions between the major powers in terms of how stabilization in post-ISIS Syria should take place.

### **The Iraqi Kurdish Capture of Kirkuk**

Kirkuk has long been a contested region between Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds mainly due to its vast oil reserves. In the 1970s Saddam Hussein began evicting the region's Kurds and Turkmen and replacing them with Arabs. This was reversed during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the Kurds reached Kirkuk before the American forces and began seizing property and evicting the migrated Arabs ("Iraqi Kurdistan profile," 2017). The city has since had a clear majority of Kurdish citizens. A referendum vote to determine whether Kirkuk should join the Iraqi Kurdistan Region was supposed to be held in 2007, but never took place. Kirkuk has since then remained in limbo. The economic relations between Baghdad and KRG began normalizing in the first half of 2016 despite intra-Kurdish disagreement in the Iraqi parliament on the situation of the oil-rich region of Kirkuk, currently held by the KRG. However, a threat of instability in a post-ISIS scenario is still looming. After Barzani in the beginning of 2016 called for a non-binding referendum for a sovereign Kurdistan, which could include Kirkuk, the threat materialized ("Barzani renews call," 2016; Coles, 2016a).

After the fall of Mosul and the halt of ISIS advances in Iraq, thousands of Iraqi soldiers fled the military bases of Kirkuk in 2014, a move the Kurdish Peshmerga quickly reacted to by seizing the empty military bases and setting up a defensive perimeter around Kirkuk ("Iraqi Kurds 'fully control Kirkuk' as army flees," 2014; Parkinson, 2014). Kurdish Peshmerga forces from both PUK and KDP have since looted the Iraqi military's weapons and vehicles (Hawramy, 2014). This move seemed to play quite well in accordance to the Kurds' long-standing wish to incorporate the oil-rich region of Kirkuk into the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The KRG quickly began exploiting the oil fields from Kirkuk in defiance of Baghdad producing more than 150,000 barrels of oil per day (Alabbasi, 2015; Solomon & Raval, 2014).

It remains to be seen if the KRG can hold on to Kirkuk in a post-ISIS scenario, but Barzani has recently stated in an interview with Al Monitor that: "Article 140 of the constitution ... calls for a referendum on the disputed areas, in Kirkuk and in Sinjar. If the people say they want to be part of Kurdistan, their voices must be heard," (Zaman, 2016, para. 60) indicating that that KRG has no intentions of leaving the city. Kirkuk's participation in the KRG's independence referendum on September 25, 2017 was to be decided by the Councilors of Kirkuk who voted in August 2017 on whether to take part in the independence vote. The Kirkuk council consists of 41 members of Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen ethnicity. The vote session on whether to join the KRG's independence vote was nonetheless boycotted by Turkmen and Arab councilors who regarded it as unconstitutional, resulting in a narrow vote in favor by 22 out of 24 present councilors. The impartiality of this vote should be challenged as the Kurdish council members make up 26 of the total 41 council members, ensuring an ethnic Kurdish majority in the council. Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi, who called the move "wrong" and said political issues should not be handled like this, did not accept the vote ("Kirkuk votes," 2017). The Kirkuk vote did not add any legitimacy to its inclusion in the KRG's independence vote in the eyes of the Federal Government of Iraq and Turkey, who both described the vote as unconstitutional.

It is important to understand the actual level of disunity of the Iraqi Kurdish political actors amidst the popular independence referendum. Before addressing the fallout and consequences of the September 25 independence referendum, the political context within which the referendum took place will therefore be discussed in the next section.

### **The State of Press Freedom in Iraqi Kurdistan**

An important element in the political situation at the end of 2017 and in the immediate future is the role of the Kurdish press in relation to elections and its general relationship with the KRG-leadership. As mentioned above KRG will strive for independence, and this makes it important to view the legitimacy of the present leadership in terms of the mandate provided by the civilian population. As a proclaimed democratic rule of



government, the press per definition has a huge role in political debates and campaigns. Though free in theory, many issues arise when looking at the freedom of the press in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of the Middle East Division of Human Rights Watch (HRW), said in 2013: “These are dark days for freedom of expression in Iraq’s Kurdistan region” (Human Rights Watch, 2013, para. 3). HRW reported in 2013 that the KRG were detaining journalists without trial for several months for insulting or defaming public figures. These include instances of journalists reporting stories on issues from government corruption to party-political influence within the juridical system. This tendency has not improved since the war against ISIS began, in fact Kamal Chomani, a Kurdish journalist, told Al Monitor in 2017:

*When IS came, politics got even worse.... The Americans put [fighting] IS as the priority over everything else, and they stopped putting emphasis on development of civil society.*

(Kimball, 2017, para. 17).

According to him, the US’s unconditional support for KDP and PUK in the fight against ISIS has allowed them to become so strong that they can crack down on any dissident. As Justin Shilad, a Middle Eastern and North African research associate at the Committee to Protect Journalists puts it:

*Unconditional US military support does generally have the effect of indirectly contributing to a crackdown on local press when there is an implicit message that US military aid is not tied to or conditional upon respect for human rights.*

(Kimball, 2017, para. 21).

In 2015, Freedom House concluded that the press status of Iraq, along with that of Iraqi Kurdistan, was “not free.” Freedom House elaborated on this with several instances of Kurdish parties asserting their influence on the media by bribing journalists with money, land, or other rewards for influence. Journalists had also been sued by the KRG for reporting on corruption, despite the Kurdish Press law allowing journalist to investigate corruption.

While critical journalists face criminal charges, another problem is that there are very few media not aligned or directly funded by a political party in the KRG. Freedom House reports how the financing of media favors those loyal to the major parties, while independent media struggle to attract funds (Freedom House, 2015). Middle East Eye also reports this trend of the major parties asserting huge influence on their respective media clients (MacDiarmid, 2015).

With the latest moves in the KRG to limit the free and impartial press, such as KDP’s closure of the Gorran affiliated KNN and privately owned NRT in Erbil and briefly detaining six NRT TV employees, the freedom of press seems to have come under threat in the internal political conflict between the major political parties (Freedom House, 2017; “Iraqi Kurdish authorities shut,” 2015; MacDiarmid, 2015). Sheriff Mansour, representative of the Middle East and North Africa region to the Committee to Protect Journalists, said in 2015 about the Iraqi Kurdistan free press development: “It shows how vulnerable the Kurdish experience is in terms of easily returning to an undemocratic past in dealing with the press” (MacDiarmid, 2015, para.30). In 2014, the Committee to Protect Journalists published a report arguing that the problem in Iraqi Kurdistan is that the press law is not being enforced when it comes to journalists, citing several cases of critical journalists facing threats or trials for reporting on corruption (Abdulla, 2014).

### Iraq’s Political Development Post-ISIS

The political situation in Iraqi Kurdistan has been far from stable since the defeat of ISIS. Although the parliamentary extension of his 2013 presidency had terminated in August 2015, Barzani continued to act as president until his announcement of standing down from November 1, 2017, in the aftermath of the September 25 independence referendum. The executive power was subsequently handed over to his nephew Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. His executive powers were suspended by the Kurdish parliament in July 2018 (“Parliament votes to suspend,” 2018). Before Masoud Barzani’s withdrawal, there was no indication of when he would have stepped down, as his presidency had passed the KRG’s legal checks and balances (“Barzani will not extend,”

2017; IHS Global Insight, 2013; Kurdistan Regional Government, n.d.-c). Barzani's decision to stay in office beyond his mandate was supported by the government body of Kurdistan's Consultative Council ("Judicial Council," 2015). However, this was not a unified decision with public or parliamentary support behind it. Yousif Mohammed Sadiq, acting Kurdish Iraqi parliament speaker and politically affiliated to Gorran, said in an interview with *Al Monitor* in late August 2015 about Barzani's continuation as president: "This will be against the laws in Kurdistan. Law No. 19 passed in 2013... clearly says the president's term ends on Aug. 19 and cannot be extended" (Salih, 2015a, para. 8). In September 2015, shortly after Barzani's second extension in August 2015, the Kurdish newspaper *E Kurd* wrote an article based on a public opinion poll conducted with 500 Kurdistan respondents, which found that 51% of the population disagreed with his extension, suggesting a strong division within the population in Iraqi Kurdistan (Greenberg Quinlan Rosiner Research, 2015; Wing, 2016).

The political crisis has since ignited. In October 2015, several Gorran MPs as well as the spokesperson of the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament, Sadiq, were restricted from access to Erbil by KDP-loyal security forces. Sadiq later expressed at a press conference in Sulaymaniyah: "This is an occupation of Erbil... and an attempt to launch a coup d'état against the main source of legitimacy in Kurdistan, which is the parliament" (Salih, 2015b, para. 5). The event putting the statements in motion was protests in Sulaymaniyah, over the KRG failing to pay public salaries. This led to KDP offices being destroyed by protesters, which KDP claims Gorran was responsible for by directing people to attack their offices. KDP responded by expelling Gorran's four ministers from the cabinet, along with clamping down on media allegedly affiliated with Gorran (H. Ahmed, 2015; Coles, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2015; "Kurdish opposition Gorran," 2015). By the end of October 2015, Barzani and the KDP appointed new acting ministers. Gorran maintained that Parliament Speaker Sadiq cannot legally be removed except through a parliamentary vote, which has not taken place (Coles, 2015; Hawrami, 2016). In the aftermath of the crisis, the Iraqi Kurdish parliament has been paralyzed as its spokesperson and Gorran members have been effectively derailed from the political decision process. In January 2016, there were even reports of the KDP planning to prosecute Nawshirwan Mustafa, the leader of Gorran (currently living in London under self-imposed exile), for inciting violence and planning to target the KDP government headquarters ("Barzani's KDP intends," 2016; Chomani, 2016). In the midst of this, PUK has played a more passive role as the party is still struggling to unite around a new leader after its popular founder's (Talabani) retirement from politics (Pollack, 2016).

Amidst this political crisis, Barzani had actively attempted to affect the primary political agenda in KRG by calling for a referendum, to be held within Iraqi Kurdistan, on independent Kurdish statehood which took place in September 2017 (Sattar, 2016). *Al Monitor* asked Barzani in an interview in March 2016 whether this referendum was a ploy to divert attention away from the region's political and economic problems. He denied this and explained that the recent move was based on a longstanding disagreement with Baghdad's lack of respect for Kurdish autonomy and former economic crisis (Zaman, 2016).

The political crisis in the KRG is not likely to be resolved in any near future because the core issues of nepotism, corruption, and divided government and security forces run deep. There are signs of improvements since officials from KDP and Gorran say they are trying to resolve their political disputes. Ahmed Kani, from the KDP political leadership told Rudaw, "The situation in the Kurdistan Region today calls for a new agreement and a new approach with Gorran," ("Financial crisis and referendum," 2016, para. 2) on the financial crisis and independence referendum. PUK and KDP have also approached each other on the independence question, and in April 2016, they issued a joint statement in response to the political turmoil in Baghdad, showing their ability to unite when dealing with Baghdad ("KDP-PUK meet," 2016).

The new signs of improvements between the Iraqi Kurdistan's parties could be signs of their former political disputes being mended in order to face up to the regions' challenges. Although it appears more plausible that the political events in 2016 showed how important a factor loyal militia forces constitute in the KRG's politics. Gorran is a showcase example of how a democratically elected mandate was sacked by a KDP-party-loyal administration and militia force in Erbil. With PUK having struggled to set the agenda after their former leader and founder Jalal Talabani died, the KDP was able to take the leadership of the independence referendum through the control of the executive branch of government. It was not until a few weeks before the independence vote that the Iraqi Kurdish parliament gathered for the first time in over two years to approve the referendum ("Iraqi Kurdish parliament," 2017; Vickery, 2017). A parliamentary session which Gorran boycotted, signaling that politics in Erbil had not returned to normalcy and that the referendum might be taking place when the Kurdish Region was showing increasing authoritarian tendencies.

In the referendum process, Gorran and Kurdistan Islamic Group have represented the strongest opposition to the KDP and PUK two-party split administration and Peshmerga forces system that dominate the KRG. It is therefore vital to include how they view the independence referendum while having mostly been institutionally sidelined in the process through the effective suspension of the Iraqi Kurdish parliament from 2015-2017. On September 20, five days before the vote was to take place, Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group issued a joint statement saying: “The right of self-determination and the establishment of an independent state for Kurdistan is a natural right of Kurdistan’s nation.” While acknowledging the natural right of an independent Kurdistan, the statement also warned that

*Holding a referendum under the current complex circumstances marked by numerous crises and an uncertain future does not serve this strategy. Rather, it is a dangerous step for now and the future of our nation.*

(“Holding referendum now,” 2017, para. 3).

The two opposition parties continued to raise concerns that holding the September 25 referendum could lead to armed combat between Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces if Kirkuk and other disputed territories were included in the referendum. They elaborated that the vote could lead to the loss of these territories: “For which we (Iraqi Kurds) have sacrificed thousands of lives” (“Holding referendum now,” 2017, para. 7). Instead of Barzani’s unilateral call for the independence referendum without international support and fierce opposition from Baghdad, Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group thought independence should be sought through dialogue with international mediation. Most importantly, Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group held that the process should not have taken place at the time. They held that such a process should be postponed until unity within the Iraqi Kurdish Region, better party relations, restoration of legal institutions, and improvement of people’s living conditions had been achieved. Their call for postponing the vote was rejected by the KRG, whose executive branch is dominated by KDP and who saw it as a historical opportunity for the Kurds to seek statehood (“Holding referendum now,” 2017).

The independence referendum enjoyed wide popular support among the voters in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, especially after the US, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, the UN Security Council, and other international powers united against the referendum (Cook, 2017b; Fahim, El-Ghobashy, & Salim, 2017; Hardi, 2017; “UN chief voices concern,” 2017). However, critics of this popular vote have raised concerns that the timing of the referendum could have been a move for political survival by KDP and Barzani rather than an attempt to realize the Iraqi Kurds’ long striving for statehood. Steven A. Cook described Barzani’s call for independence as foremost to place his rivals (PUK and Gorran) on the defensive – as they would suffer political losses if they opposed the popular vote for independence (Cook, 2017a). Choman Hardi criticizes Barzani’s refusal to step down after his presidential term expired for dividing rather than uniting the people. She warns that state building and democracy building should not be considered separately. In her opinion, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region lacks the basic conditions necessary for statehood such as economic infrastructure, stable and independent legislative, executive, and judiciary institutions, as well as united Peshmerga and security forces (Hardi, 2017). These internal factors would have posed serious legitimacy problems for a sovereign Iraqi Kurdistan to be recognized as a democratic state. Although these are important factors, the question of the Iraqi Kurds’ independence must also be analyzed from a geopolitical point of view. If the Iraqi Kurdish population, who after WWI was forcefully incorporated into Iraq, successfully can declare independence from Iraq, it could serve as precedence for other large Kurdish ethnic groups in Turkey, Iran, and Syria to legitimately seek sovereignty. A move which would reshape the Middle East and tear up the borders of already weak states in Syria and Iraq and change the balance of power in the region, which would add to the instability of the latest decades.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region’s political crisis, economic downfall, high dependency on the Iraqi Federal Budget, and lack of international recognition as a sovereign state were serious obstacles, which were not solved before the Iraqi Kurds went to the polls throughout the Kurdistan Region and its disputed areas such as Kirkuk. At a national level, the preparations for the independence referendum took place at a time when the Federal Government in Baghdad had been embroiled in a political crisis following the failure of the Iraqi Parliament in May 2016 to appoint a new cabinet to govern the country (Behn, 2016; Fitch & Adnan, 2016). Furthermore, the Iraqi Government was at the time of the preparation for the referendum heavily involved in a huge military operation to retake Mosul from ISIS, undertaken from October 2016 to July 2017 (“How the battle,” 2017). A military mission, which also included Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces on the eastern front of the Mosul battle

(S. Ali, 2017a). After the Iraqi security forces had retaken Mosul and other key ISIS strongholds in Iraq, they were able to focus on the Kurdish independence referendum from a position of strength compared to when it was announced in 2016 (Arango, 2017). Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said in the days leading up to the referendum that it was unconstitutional and would only make it more difficult for the Kurdish region to engage in negotiations with Iraq. Furthermore, he stated that if the referendum was to result in violence, Baghdad was prepared to intervene militarily ("Iraq Leader Says," 2017; Rasheed & Jalabi, 2017).

None of the KRG's allies, apart from Israel, backed the move for independence. It is therefore not given that the referendum, which was non-binding, will ever result in a declaration of independence. However, it did show the opinion and wishes of the Iraqi Kurdistan citizens (MacDonald, 2016). If the KRG's referendum for independence was to become reality, it would need the support of Turkey, an unusual ally for a Kurdish actor, considering how Turkey has fought a 30-year-long armed conflict against PKK. Additionally, as pointed out earlier, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region's economy is based on oil export outside the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization and the Iraqi federal budget. If the Kurdistan Region were to become independent from Iraq, its financial security would rest on its ability to sell oil on the international market. By the end of 2017, this only been possible though the Iraqi-Turkish Pipeline which the KRG has used to sell oil independently through Turkey (Natali, 2015). This means that Iraqi Kurdistan's relationship with Turkey has become fundamental for its independence strategy. The next chapter will therefore highlight how Iraqi Kurdistan-Turkish relationship developed and how it has been affected by Barzani's call for independence.

### Relationship with Turkey

The overall relationship between Turkey and Kurdish groups is troublesome at best. It is therefore interesting that Turkey's relationship with the Iraqi Kurds has gone from cold to mildly warm in the last decade. When the Iraqi Kurdistan Region was declared semi-autonomous in the 1990s, Turkey was skeptical and feared it could fuel the separatist Kurdish movements (especially PKK) inside Turkey. However, after the US removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and attempt of democratizing Iraq, Turkey has actually stepped up its financial investments in the energy sector of Iraqi Kurdistan. There is of course a variety of reasons for these investments in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. An important one was that the KRG established a very business-friendly environment through legislation, which provided conditions that attracted Turkish capital. Another likely factor is that Turkey's energy cooperation with KRG also lessens its reliance on Iranian gas and Russian oil, thereby strengthening the security of the country's general energy infrastructure (Natali, 2014). A third factor is that the investments in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region's economy could have an internal security dimension. By introducing and helping the KRG to sustain a market economy as an alternative economic model to PKK's and PYD's Öcalan-model, which is inspired more by Communist economic theory, Turkey facilitates internal Kurdish division (Bechev, 2013; Hassan, 2015).

The close economic relationship is visible through Turkey's allowing of Iraqi Kurdistan to export oil through a newly built pipeline, bypassing Baghdad's federal system, and selling it from the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Another indication is that 70% of Turkey's export to Iraq goes to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region ("First tranche of Kurdish," 2014). Analyzing the trade between the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and Turkey, the economic relationship shows that Turkey's exports are primarily consumer and luxury goods and executing construction projects, which largely have benefitted Turkey's economy more in comparison to the economy of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, the economic benefit to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region from the trade seems to have disproportionately enriched KDP and PUK officials and their political partners through a nepotistic system that to a large extent enhanced KDP's rather than PUK's hold on power. Turkey's large consumption of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region's oil makes the KRG very dependent on Turkey and on oil prices (Aqrabi, 2011; Hassan, 2015; Natali, 2014). Changes in oil prices, as seen in the latest years, have implied severe negative consequences for the economy of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

The relationship between the KRG and Turkey leading up to the KRG's referendum was built upon Turkey's national interest in cooperating with the KRG in order to contain the growing role of the PYD/YPG in Syria near its southern borders (Cagaptay et al., 2015). Turkey's interest in containing PYD through cooperation with KRG was underlined when Barzani and Erdoğan met in the Turkish city of Diyarbakir in 2013 at an event labeled the "Diyarbakir encounter" to make a pro-peace statement together. According to Al Monitor journalist Cengiz Candar, this event was a "political marriage" between the KRG and the Justice and Development

Party, the party Erdoğan founded (Çandar, 2013). The event was until the last minute criticized by the Turkish Kurdish party Peace and Democracy Party as an electoral stunt by Erdoğan, because Barzani was invited by Erdoğan alone and not by any Kurdish party. The Justice and Development Party and the Peace and Democracy Party are electoral rivals. In 2013, they were blaming each other for the slow peace talks between the Turkish Government and PKK. At the meeting, Barzani said: “I believe the process [between Ankara and the PKK] will end in success and we should put all our efforts into it” (Uras, 2013, para. 12). The joint statement came at a time when the Syrian Kurds under the aspirations of the Syrian Kurdish party PYD were creating their own interim government in Northern Syria (Çandar, 2013; Uras, 2013). A move that was rejected by both Turkey and the KRG, indicating that their interests in this regard were aligned (“Interim assembly,” 2013; “PYD has authority only,” 2013). Nursel Aydoğan, a Peace and Democracy Party lawmaker in the Turkish parliament, claimed that Barzani was seeking to delay the aspirations of the Syrian Kurds in Syria. According to her, the “Syrian Kurds are not on the same page with Barzani. Öcalan’s line dominates 80-90 percent [of the Syrian Kurds]” (Uras, 2013, para. 24). This criticism, along with the joint statement between Erdoğan and Barzani, emphasizes the continued perceived rivalry between Öcalan and Barzani for a united regional leadership of the Kurdish population.

The strong relationship between Ankara and KRG was also illuminated when Kobane was under attack from ISIS. Turkey allowed Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga to enter Syria through its territory to assist the Syrian Kurds, while at the same time Turkey was working hard to keep its own Kurdish citizens out of Syria. Thus, it appears that Turkey does not perceive the KRG as a PKK affiliate, as it does with the PYD, but as a far more reliable and less threatening partner (“Islamic State: Why Turkey prefers,” 2014).

The mutually beneficial relationship also came into play when violence and tension again broke out between PKK and the Turkish Government in July 2015 after the Turkish Government launched airstrikes against PKK camps in northern Iraq (D. Butler, 2015). When Barzani addressed the clashes between the Turkish military and PKK, he took a very diplomatic role during his visit in Ankara stating that “the situation has to be solved in peaceful ways... maybe it needs time, but it has to be through dialogue and negotiation” (S. Ali, 2015, para. 8). Barzani said he was ready to play the role of a peace negotiator between the parties if needed (Khalidi, 2015).

The joint efforts and apparent mutual interests between Erdoğan and Barzani in containing the influence of PKK and PYD in Turkey and Syria have taken many shapes. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Barzani attempted to organize the Syrian Kurds to unite under his leadership by inviting the various groups to participate in the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC). KSC succeeded in formally including the powerful PYD in 2012 alongside the Barzani backed KNC with a promise to share the power equally (Ates, 2012). To Turkey, this was a chance to limit the influence of PYD’s growing position in Northern Syria. Turkey’s special relationship with Barzani and its large economic leverage toward the KRG provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to contain PYD through Barzani (Tol, 2012b). As noted, the power-sharing agreement was not implemented, and shortly after, the PYD/YPG took control of the Syrian Kurdish territories and declared semi-autonomous regions. This, along with the inability of KNC to reach an agreement with PYD to deploy its KRG-trained Syrian Peshmerga forces in Syria, left Barzani as an ally to the Turks without strong influence over the armed Syrian Kurds. Furthermore, Turkey has since begun its own military operation to contain PYD’s territorial advances in Syria and has halted them in uniting their cantons. All this in sum has reduced Barzani’s influence on the Syrian Kurds severely and thereby most likely reduced his value to Turkey as an operational ally in relation to Turkish interest in Syria, which includes containing PYD and ending the conflict with PKK, which has left more than 2,000 dead in south-east Turkey (Stein, 2014; “Turkey-PKK conflict,” 2017). Turkey has taken a hard stance on the KRG’s referendum along with Iran, Iraq, and US, hinting that their previous special relationship is deteriorating, and that a sovereign Kurdish state is unacceptable for Turkey. Prior to the vote, the Turkish parliament extended a mandate that allowed Turkish troop deployment in Syria and Iraq. Turkey’s President Erdoğan also threatened to stop the oil flow from northern Iraq and urged the KRG to abort the referendum (Cupolo, 2017; “Turkey threatens,” 2017).

### **The Fallout of the Kurdish Region’s Independence Referendum**

On September 25, 2017, the voter turnout in Iraqi Kurdistan and disputed areas was around 3.3 million, or 72% of eligible voters (“Iraqi Kurds overwhelmingly back split,” 2017). The electoral commission said 92% voted in

favor of a split from Iraq, giving the KRG a strong mandate from its citizens to engage in negotiations on independence with Baghdad and neighboring countries (“Iraqi Kurds decisively back,” 2017). Such negotiations did not take place as Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider Al-Adabi said he would “never discuss” the “illegal” referendum’s result and called on the KRG to cancel the result and its outcome if they wished to start talks (“Iraqi Kurds overwhelmingly back split,” 2017; “Iraqi PM urges,” 2017). Baghdad did not stop at only rejecting the referendum, the Iraqi Parliament furthermore called for deployment of troops to Kirkuk to take back the disputed oil fields, which most likely would erode the KRG’s independent oil economy, and suspended international flights to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (“Iraqi Kurds overwhelmingly back split,” 2017).

Neither at the international level did the KRG receive support to legitimize their referendum against Baghdad’s rejection. Key regional actors such as Turkey and Iran were fierce opponents of the referendum and united with Baghdad. Iran closed its airspace to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region on September 25 and has since moved tanks and artillery to the border of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and, together with the Iraqi military, conducted military drills and carried out war-games near the border (“Iran denies reports,” 2017; Jalabi, 2017). Iran’s actions illustrate a strong Iranian presence and support for Baghdad’s response to the referendum.

Turkey’s response signaled a severe change in its former warm relationship with KRG. Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said:

*We don’t regret what we did in the past. But since the conditions are changed and the Kurdish Regional Government, to which we provided all support, took steps against us, it would pay the price.*

(Barut & Evans, 2017, para. 5).

The statement communicated clearly to the KRG that the warm days of Turkish support and investment had suffered greatly by the independence referendum. The KRG going through with the referendum, despite Turkish warnings, prompted Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım to state that Turkey would no longer deal with the Kurdish authorities in Erbil, but rather conduct its business with the Federal Government in Baghdad. The prime minister added that Turkey would not act alone to stop the independence but instead work together with Iran and Iraq “to ensure the games being played in the region will fail” (Barut & Evans, 2017, para. 10). On the day, the referendum took place, Turkey and Iraq held joint military exercises on their border, and Turkey later threatened to close its border to the Iraqi Kurdish Region (“Turkey to close borders,” 2017). Turkey’s and Iran’s strong stands against an independent Iraqi Kurdistan are possibly due to the precedence an independent Kurdish state could set for other Kurdish ethnic minorities living within Syria, Iran, and Turkey. An independence call, successful or not, could revive the Kurdish national ambitions and fuel PKK’s current insurgency in Turkey or revive PJAK’s in Iran. It could also feed the ambitions of PYD of creating an autonomous or independent Rojava near Turkey’s border. Such implications would threaten Turkey’s, Iran’s, and Syria’s respective national security and territorial integrity. If the Iraqi Kurds were able to break away from Iraq despite its Federal Government’s strong opposition, it could lead to similar scenarios in Turkey, Northern Syria, or Iran.

The referendum’s large regional impact brought together the former rivals of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, who all have had strained relationships in the past but now shared a strong national interest in preserving their territorial integrity (Srivastava & Bozorgmehr, 2017). On October 4, Erdoğan, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met in Tehran for strategic talks. The agenda was how Iran and Turkey could act together with Iraq to prevent Iraqi Kurdistan from declaring independence. The two countries agreed to impose joint sanctions against the KRG. Rouhani and Erdoğan also issued a joint statement that they would work together to secure the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria and under no circumstances accept the issue of separatism in the region (Majidiyar, 2017). Their joint declaration on Syrian integrity is curious, as Iran is a determined supporter of keeping Assad in power, whom Turkey for years sought to overthrow. This implies that Turkey’s national interest of preserving territorial integrity within countries where large Kurdish minorities live outweighs the overthrowing of Assad. This national Turkish – and Iranian – objective is likely to persist and permeate all aspects of the final battles against ISIS and reconstruction of Syria and Iraq. NATO’s engagement in the region, and thereby Denmark’s, should therefore address this complex dilemma of relying on the effective Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces who have fought ISIS while at the same time hurting its relations with Turkey. NATO should develop a coherent strategy that prioritizes whom to stand firmly behind.

At the geo-political level, Turkey's improving ties with Iran (and Russia for that matter<sup>10</sup>) and deteriorating ties with the US over the Kurdish issue could affect the balance of power in the region. Turkey, a Sunni-majority state, would then be leaning towards Iran, a Shia-majority state and a regional competitor to the US. It remains to be seen how strong the Turkish and Iranian rapprochement is. As Ahmad Majidyar points out, a history of mistrust between the two countries is likely to erode the foundation for a strategic partnership (Majidyar, 2017). Anyhow, their rapprochement illustrates that the Turkey-NATO relationship is reaching a new critical level, at which the US's former policy of "kicking the can down the road" in regard to how to balance the effective Kurdish fighting effort against ISIS with Turkey's concerns should be reviewed in the near future. Regarding Iraq, the US has spoken against the referendum and refused to recognize it in line with Turkey. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that "the vote and the results lacks legitimacy" (Wilts, 2017, para. 2) and that the US supports "a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq." He further added that the US urges its "Iraqi partners to remain focused on defeating ISIS/Daesh," (Wilts, 2017, para., 7) once again highlighting that the key US priority in Iraq and Syria has been to defeat ISIS.

Despite the US call for relaxing tensions between Baghdad and KRG, tensions grew as Baghdad refused to recognize the referendum and began to move its Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces towards the southern borders of Kirkuk. A mobilization, which led KRG to deploy 6,000 additional Peshmerga forces to reinforce Kirkuk (MacDiarmid, 2017). After three days of armed standoff between the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi Security forces took full control of Kirkuk on October 16, 2017, with almost no opposition from Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters despite having been ordered to defend their positions "at any cost" ("Baghdad: Iraqi forces," 2017; "Iraq conflict: Peshmerga," 2017). After having retaken the city, Iraqi officers took down the Kurdish flag at the provincial council building and replaced it with an Iraqi flag. While some took to the streets to celebrate the Iraqi Army's return, others packed their cars and rushed to leave.

Kirkuk has left the US in a difficult position as it has trained both the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi Security Forces. In this regard, Trump has said: "We're not taking sides," (L. Morris & DeYoung, 2017, para. 5) adding that the US has a good relationship with both parties. A US statement on the Kurdish issue in the region that once again "kicks the can down road," creating frustration for a US ally, the KRG, who have been a strategic partner since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Sami Abdul Rahman, the KRG's representative in Washington, expressed his disbelief with Trump's statement as: "How can you not take sides? ... This is Iranian-backed militia, using American weapons, to attack an ally of the United States. I'm bewildered by the US government's position" (L. Morris & DeYoung, 2017, para. 14). His comment should be seen in the context of the Iraqi security forces' taking control of Kirkuk being heavily assisted by the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella group that contains Iranian-backed militia groups, highlighting Iran's support for Iraq in ensuring the Iraqi Kurds do not declare independence ("Baghdad: Iraqi forces," 2017; L. Morris & DeYoung, 2017). The situation in Kirkuk also illustrated the lack of a coherent US strategy to deal with the dilemma between sovereignty of the region's nation states and the wishes for autonomy and independence of the different Kurdish parties. On the one hand, by arming the Kurdish minorities in the fight against ISIS, the US could risk threatening the national integrity of the regional states. On the other hand, by not supporting the Kurdish groups' pursuit of their policy goals against regimes who have repressed them to different degrees, the US would abandon an ally it has armed and one that has been instrumental in the fight against ISIS. If this dilemma is not recognized at the highest political level and a coherent strategy is not developed, the US and supporting nations of Operation Inherent Resolve (which includes Denmark) could risk losing both the trust and allegiance of Turkey, Iraq, PYD/YPG (SDF), and KRG. A weakening of Turkey's commitment to the US world order and the NATO alliance would be a more severe loss for the US and its partners, due to Turkey's geo-political position and military capacities, in comparison to the risk of losing the operative and strategic alliances with the PYD, KRG, and Iraq.

After Baghdad had retaken Kirkuk, facing almost no resistance from the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, a blame game between PUK and KDP began. KDP accused PUK, whose Peshmerga forces constituted the majority of the Kurdish defense of Kirkuk of treason by having agreed to withdraw in coordination with Baghdad. In return, Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabani, leader of PUK's counterterrorism units, accused KDP and Barzani for

<sup>10</sup> Clearly there has been improvements since 2016, but the different stand toward Kurdish groups adds complexity to a possible future regional partnership.

their ill-conceived independence referendum as a scheme to wrest control of Kirkuk from PUK, who within Kirkuk is perceived as the dominant and popular Kurdish force (Çandar, 2017; L. Morris & DeYoung, 2017). Kirkuk came to be a case study of how deep the Peshmerga division and mistrust had continued to run within the KRG. It even happened a day after PUK and KDP publicly had rejected Baghdad's demand to cancel the outcome of the independence referendum in order to begin talks ("Baghdad: Iraqi forces," 2017). The loss of Kirkuk resulted in the KRG losing more than half their oil production (L. Morris & DeYoung, 2017) hammering the nail in the coffin of their quest for economic independence from Baghdad-based oil-revenue.

Subsequent to the loss of Kirkuk, on October 23, 2017, Iraq's media regulator, the Communication and Media Commission, decided to shut down Rudaw TV and Kurdistan 24, two Kurdish media based in Erbil ("Kurdistan Parliament: Decision," 2017; Sulaivany, 2017). The International Federation of Journalists condemned the ban as a politically motivated crackdown on media and expresses concerns regarding the politicization and lack of independence of the Communication and Media Commission (International Federation of Journalists, 2017). The ability of the Iraqi Security Forces to retake Kirkuk and other disputed territories without facing noteworthy resistance and the Communication and Media Commission's ban of two Kurdish media implied a shift in power between KRG and Baghdad post-referendum in favor of Baghdad. On October 25, KRG reached out to Baghdad, only a month after the vote, offering to freeze the results of the referendum for a promise from Iraq to halt its military activity, which had retaken huge swathes of previously Kurdish-held territories taken from ISIS. The post-referendum conflict resulted in tens of thousands of Kurds being displaced and scores killed. Hashed al-Shaabi, who is part of the Popular Mobilization Force and has played a major role in the territorial advances against the Kurds, rejected the proposition to freeze the result believing this to cause yet another internal conflict in Iraq. However, it is important to keep in mind that the Popular Mobilization Force according to Amnesty International allegedly has looted, set on fire, and destroyed hundreds of properties in Kurdish areas (Ensor, 2017; "Iraqi Kurds offer," 2017). On October 26, a day after the proposal to freeze the result, PM Al-Abadi rejected the KRG's offer and declared that he would not accept anything short of a cancellation of the referendum. Ali al-Alaq elaborated on Al-Abadi's rejection of the KRG's offer that accepting to freeze the result would create a "time-bomb" that the KRG "could throw at the government whenever it wishes" ("Iraq rejects Kurdish," 2017, para. 9).

It is important to stress that the KRG has not declared independence despite the strong mandate from the voters to do so. The independence referendum created internal turmoil in the KRG and the talks between Baghdad and KRG were not advancing. In the aftermath of the referendum, both parliamentary and presidential elections in the Kurdistan Region were set for November 1, 2017. However, on October 23, 2017, the Kurdistan's Electoral Commission declared that due to the failure of political parties to present candidates and the latest development in the region, the elections would be postponed until Iraqi Kurdistan's parliament fixed a new date for elections (Chmaytelli, 2017a). On October 24, the Parliament agreed to postpone the elections to 2018 at a session that was boycotted by Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Union. Gorran, who had been critical of the referendum process, demanded Barzani's resignation upon news of the postponement (Chmaytelli, 2017b).

In late October, KRG was in a severe political crisis with critics of the postponement of the elections calling for the president's resignation and the government's failure to reach an agreement after the independence referendum had backfired. Responding to the crisis, Barzani announced on October 28, 2017, that he would step down as president. Barzani read out to the Kurdish Parliament:

*After November 1<sup>st</sup>, I will no longer exercise my functions, and I reject any extension of my mandate.... I ask parliament to meet to fill the vacancy in power, to fulfil the mission and to assume the powers of the presidency of Kurdistan.*

("Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani to step down," 2017, para. 3, 5)

Following the parliament session, he went on national TV and said that the "three million votes for Kurdistan independence created history and cannot be erased," and also accused rivals of committing "high treason" ("Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani to step down," 2017, para. 8, 9) for abandoning Kirkuk without a fight. The latter comment divided the Kurdish region more than it united it and added fuel to the KDP and PUK blame-game.



Following Barzani's call for parliament to fill his vacancy, the Iraqi Kurdish parliament passed a temporary law to distribute the president's executive powers among the KRG's prime minister, cabinet, parliament, and judiciary. The law made Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani (Masoud Barzani's nephew) the chief executive authority and external representative of the KRG (Seckin, 2017). Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has since sought to open dialogue with Baghdad saying: "We don't think issues could be resolved militarily. They need serious political talk." He has expressed that the KRG is ready to negotiate within the constitution and hand over its oil deposits to the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization if Baghdad is willing to pay the full "17%" of the federal budget. Nechirvan Barzani thus takes a much more relaxed and open approach towards Baghdad than his predecessor to resolve the political crisis. Nechirvan Barzani also ended his plea by calling for new talks with Iran and Turkey openly asking for their help to solve the KRG's disputes with Iraq ("Barzani extends olive branch," 2017).

Without a stable and formalized agreement for dialogue between KRG and Baghdad, the future for the Iraqi Kurds does not look bright. At the time of writing no such dialogue or negotiation was taking place. A deal could be essential for the Iraqi Kurds as Baghdad has taken control of key border control points and is about to gain control of the important border town of Fishkhabour, through which the KRG sends its oil to Turkey. If Baghdad gains control of the oil infrastructure in Fishkhabour, it could at any time shut down KRG's oil export. This would significantly increase Baghdad's leverage in future budget negotiations as the Iraqi Kurds would not be able to export oil independently and thus be forced to engage with Baghdad. Iraqi control of Fishkhabour would also hinder Turkey's previous strategy of diversifying its energy support by being able to rely on KRG oil if the relationship with Iraq grew strained (Dubin, 2017). It seems that Turkey has prioritized its political energy security lower than ensuring the KRG did not call for independence.

Domestically, KRG's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani invited the previously sacked Gorran ministers to rejoin their positions within the KRG to ease the political crisis. Gorran's spokesperson Shorsh Haji clearly rejected the invitation: "The KDP and PUK and the Kurdistan government have failed in a big way. Not only did they bring failure, but they also brought catastrophe on our nation" ("Gorran rejects PM," 2017, para. 7). He added that Gorran demanded all of the KRG to resign and form an interim government to handle negotiations with Baghdad and prepare the 2018 elections. With their narrow majority of 56 out of the 111 parliament seats, PUK and KDP rejected this demand.

The independence referendum has had tremendous effects on the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and neighboring countries. Internally, it created a chaotic environment that postponed the presidential and parliamentary elections and divided the two dominant parties of KDP and PUK through their blame-game of who lost Kirkuk and its oilfields. Gorran as the leading opposition to the KDP-sponsored independence referendum was critical throughout the process, and its demand for the responsible politicians of the referendum to step down has been rejected by PUK and KDP. PUK and KDP managed to increase their seats at the 2018 election, despite the consequences of the referendum, as their extensive patronage networks and Peshmerga militias most likely was able to counter a successful electoral threat from Gorran (Seckin, 2017). Furthermore, Gorran's refusal to form part of the new government under Massoud Barzani's nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, left them in the cold to build a patronage network of their own. Even Massoud Barzani, a president who appeared to have a tight grip on the KRG, could not avoid his responsibility for the consequences of holding the referendum and had to resign. Amidst this, the KRG is caught up in an economic crisis and has lost more than half of the oil production it controlled before the referendum.

Externally, the Iraqi Kurds lost various operational alliances as a result of the referendum. Turkey, formerly their most important ally in the region, has shifted its weight behind Baghdad, and the US did not recognize the referendum. In the aftermath, Iranian-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraqi Security Forces have retaken disputed areas and pushed further to take control of the Iraqi Kurdish oil infrastructure and key border towns. In the process, thousands of people have been internally displaced within the disputed areas. The Iraqi Kurdistan that has emerged from the aftermath of the referendum is a divided area having lost autonomy from Baghdad due to both internal and external factors.

## CONCLUSION

### Internal Kurdish Coherence

The two previous parts of this book have examined the alliances, capacities, and political objectives of Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups respectively. In the following, the internal as well as transnational coherence among these groups is assessed. Finally, the conclusion discusses the likely policy implications of continued or enhanced support to these groups taking the levels of coherence among them into account.

#### Iraqi Kurdistan

The Iraqi Kurdish parties have almost since the dawn of their autonomy in the 1990s struggled to unify under a single government. The KDP and PUK fought a civil war in the 1990s over this issue. Their internal differences have led them to set up separate party-affiliated government institutions, as well as separate party-affiliated Peshmerga units. In 2006, both parties agreed to unify their separate governments, but several reports indicate this was never implemented. In the 2013 regional election, Kurdish citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan gave voice to their dissatisfaction with the ruling parties' alleged corruption and nepotism through a landslide election that secured Gorran, a new party, a powerful electoral position. Gorran worked to unify the two administrations until its minister posts were removed by KDP loyal Peshmerga forces in 2015 due to disagreements over extension of Barzani's presidential term. This political turmoil in KRG arguably fueled the polarization in a society with already low democratic institutional coherence. The failure of KDP and PUK to unify under a single regional government manifested itself in the form of the KRG's initial setback in stopping ISIS's advance into Kurdish territory. Furthermore, Masoud Barzani's call for a non-binding independence referendum deepened the political crisis and brought the level of collaboration between Iraqi Kurdish political parties to the lowest level in the post-Saddam era. The referendum process was largely KDP-led and opposed by Gorran. PUK chose to support the referendum, as it was widely popular among the voters, but was skeptical of KDP's intentions behind the timing of the referendum.

Our investigation found that the KRG at the time of the referendum had a dysfunctional parliament, a divided administration, a questionable democratic mandate for its president, severe restrictions on free speech and press freedom, disputed territories with Baghdad, economic problems, and strong international opposition to its move for independence. Although the Kurdish Region was facing these issues, 92% voted in favor of independence. Despite the popular backing for KRG to negotiate independence with Baghdad, the aftermath of the

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referendum brought forth the internal dysfunctionalities of the KRG politics as well as the distrust between PUK and KDP. The Iraqi Security Forces' retaking of Kirkuk without substantial resistance from PUK's Peshmerga forces 'defending' the city initiated a blame-game in which KDP accused PUK of betraying the region by collaborating with Baghdad and Iran. The KRG did not meet the Iraqi Security Forces' advancements into the disputed areas taken from ISIS and was not able to unite in opposition to Baghdad post-referendum. The referendum's backfiring for the Kurdish region resulted in President Barzani resigning from his post, leaving behind a political void, which has not been filled by the end of 2017. His nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, is now acting as head of state. Nechirvan Barzani sought to restart KDP's relationship with Gorran by inviting them to take part in an interim government, which they declined.

By the end of 2017, the KRG is severely divided politically at a time when their autonomy is being challenged by Baghdad. After having seized the oil fields of Kirkuk, Iraq has been securing border-crossings to Turkey in an attempt to gain the ability to block the KRG from selling oil independently, firmly tipping the scale in Baghdad's favor in future negotiations.

### Northern Syria

In Northern Syria, the rivalry between PYD and KNC for political leadership of the Syrian Kurds has ended with PYD and its armed wing, YPG, in a strong and almost unchallenged position. An attempt was made to solve the initial rivalry by uniting the parties in a power-sharing agreement sponsored by then KRG President Barzani through the KSC. The agreement derailed due to several factors such as PYD's rapid rise and military dominance through YPG as well as KNC's internal issues and frequent splits. It was run into the ground when PYD unilaterally declared the three Syrian Kurdish cantons as autonomous regions under the name of Rojava. The regions were to be governed under the ideology of democratic autonomy by the TEV-DEM, a body heavily dominated by PYD. Since then, the Syrian Kurdish parties have sought their aims through separate strategies. The KNC lost its ground presence in Syria and tried to seek influence in Geneva at the various peace talks together with the parts of the Arab opposition that were represented, but no significant progress was achieved. In parallel, PYD continued to consolidate its political project in Northern Syria by expanding its territories near the Turkish borders in an effort to unite the cantons. PYD is executing this through a strategy that on paper includes Syria's different ethnicities in militant and political groups such as SDF and SDC. On the surface, the groups appear to have a multiethnic leadership, but when taking a closer view, the SDF and SDC are dominated politically by PYD and militarily by YPG.

The Syrian Kurdish groups can arguably be characterized as being completely under PYD control since the group has managed to gather other groups under its security umbrella of the YPG. Since the population is more ethnically heterogeneous in Northern Syria than in Iraqi Kurdistan, the strategy of inclusion was a necessity seen from a PYD point of view. PYD has addressed these challenges through a security driven approach by creating and setting up local councils representing the ethnicity from a conquered area rather than seeking central political control of these areas. The post-ISIS situation in Northern Syria will of course push different political agendas to the surface. How PYD will manage this situation remains to be seen.

### Kurdish Transnational Coherence

Despite the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups' shared objective of fighting ISIS, there is not, as has been shown above, a uniform political front among these groups. They have different political goals that diverge sharply, despite their shared ethnicity, culture, and historical past. KRG promotes a business-friendly economic policy with a strong focus on foreign investment and a democratic system built upon electing representatives to a central regional parliament (Kurdistan Regional Government, n.d.-b). The dominant Syrian Kurdish party, PYD, promotes an ideology based on the anti-capitalist ideology of PKK's founder, Abdullah Öcalan, favoring direct democratic control and environmental sustainability in the economic sphere and a radical decentralization in the political realm. This illustrates that PYD and KRG have two very different approaches to organizing their society's political and economic systems.

In October 2014, the two Kurdish entities united at Kobane, when Iraqi Peshmerga came to assist the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS. Since then, operational and strategic coordination has been low and both

entities have focused on their own agendas in the fight against ISIS. This was particularly evident when YPG commanders refused the entry of Syrian-trained Peshmerga forces in Iraq under KNC command unless they were completely under YPG command. This move dwindled KDP's influence in Syria after the power-sharing agreement brokered by Barzani had failed.

Two factors seem to play a dominant role in relation to the lack of coordination and lack of a joint Kurdish front in the fight against ISIS. First, rivalry for Kurdish leadership and disagreements on political and economic issues. Second, different external alignments. As argued above, the relationship between PKK and PYD is strong and PKK most likely played an important role in PYD's rapid rise. Although PYD has gained from its relationship with PKK in many aspects, it came at the price of antagonizing Turkey, as the prospect of a PKK-friendly entity controlling territory near its borders with Syria is a non-crossable redline for Ankara. As the conflict developed, so did Turkey's opposition to PYD and SDF advances in Northern Syria. Turkey has taken many steps to halt Kurdish advances while a US-led coalition stepped up its collaboration with SDF despite outspoken Turkish concerns and attempts to create an alternative fighting force of Sunni Arab forces backed by the Turkish military to substitute SDF. This has left Turkey alone among its NATO allies in speaking about the alleged PYD-PKK affiliation. However, support in this manner arose when Barzani stated that PYD and PKK were the same, which did not help the Syrian Kurds' fight against ISIS as it supported the Turkish discourse of limiting the support for PYD due to the linkage to PKK. As PKK is on the European and US terror list, a clear link between PKK and PYD would result in restrictions on Western cooperation with PYD, severely limiting the US-led coalition's ability to support them.

Turkey's foreign policy during the conflict shows just how differently Turkey views the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups. According to Turkish foreign-policy thinking, PYD poses a threat and must be stopped while KRG largely has been treated as an important political and economic partner until it held the independence referendum. This could be interpreted as Turkey viewing the risk of Iraqi and Syrian Kurds beginning to coordinate and cooperate on a unified Kurdistan as very low. Translated into this study's context, it suggests that the transnational Kurdish coherence is low, which is further supported by the argument presented above on the different political ambitions among the different groups. Meanwhile tensions between Barzani and PKK in Iraq have also become increasingly problematic for KRG, as Turkey has taken a harsher stand on PYD and PKK. In the final phase of the fight against ISIS, Barzani urged PKK to withdraw from the Iraqi Kurdish territory peacefully, simultaneously with Turkey bombing PKK in the Iraqi Qandil Mountains again. Barzani feared the PKK presence could bring the Iraqi Kurds into the newly ignited conflict between Turkey and PKK ("Barzani asks PKK to quit," 2015; Tol, 2012b; Zaman, 2016). Such a situation could have a negative impact on the much-needed foreign investment to restart the economy in the Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, it would influence the security situation in the Kurdistan Region, which Barzani of course sought to avoid.

Looking at the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities' war against ISIS, it seems they are both pursuing their individual political goals, which in many aspects do not align. To unify Rojava, PYD must advance further along Turkey's borders at a time when tensions between PKK and Turkey are escalating into violence. KRG on the other hand saw an opportunity to strive for independence from Baghdad while having had control of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk amidst Baghdad's initial moderate fight against ISIS and later political instability. The war against ISIS in this regard appears to have illuminated the gap between the PKK and PYD on one side and the KRG on the other, and possibly widened it, instead of presenting an opportunity for the entities to unite politically against a common enemy.

The study's findings therefore indicate that it could be problematic to treat the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds as a coherent political entity. Both are seeking very different political goals, illustrated by their different relationships with Turkey. Despite the recent deterioration in the relationship between Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey, it is unlikely that neither part had interests in it turning hostile. Turkey has large economic investments in Iraqi Kurdistan and the KRG is opposed to PKK's presence in the Qandil Mountains. Turkey and KRG thus have mutual goals that they both could achieve through collaboration. So far, Turkey has mainly threatened the KRG and begun to talk directly with Baghdad while ignoring KRG. Turkey has also held talks with Iran on how to stop any Kurdish attempt to secede. If the KRG and Turkey's relationship normalize, both parties stand to obtain considerable security, economy, and energy gains from cooperation. However, their relationship may evolve. KRG's bid for independence did set a strong precedence for any Kurdish entity seeking independence: Such a scenario is deemed too great a security risk for Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, and they will take harsh measures to stop it.

The Iraqi and Syrian Kurds both struggle to adhere to core Western liberal values of free press, separation of powers, and freedom. However, the Iraqi Kurdistan's democracy has been severely challenged by Barzani's latest presidential term extension, the government's abuses of power, profound corruption, and the lack of a free press. In Northern Syria, KNC (and also Human Rights Watch) amongst others have criticized the conditions for the civilian population in Rojava and accused PYD of having committed human rights abuses against political opponents and for taking control of the central de-facto governmental and juridical positions. The same critique has been directed at the KRG. This underlines the major internal challenges within the Kurdish groups, which have started to surface in the post-ISIS reality in both Syria and Iraq. It remains to be seen if tensions have reached their peak.

This study's purpose has been to examine the coherence among Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish entities through the available empirical data. The findings suggest that the operations the Kurdish entities have conducted in the war against ISIS almost align with their own political ambitions. The Iraqi Kurds were quick to take Kirkuk from Baghdad, but reluctant in freeing other Arab dominated cities or to cooperate with the Iraqi Army in a mutual stand against ISIS as was seen in Mosul. In Syria, the SDF have expanded their territories well beyond ISIS-held territories at times with the help of Russian bombings against groups represented in the Syrian opposition. Clashes between SDF and non-ISIS groups clearly suggest that SDF is pursuing the political objective of uniting Rojava and naturally seeks external support that promotes this objective. The US-led coalition's coordination with the Kurdish entities in fighting ISIS is therefore most likely to be effective when their interest aligns with those of the coalition's, namely to counter ISIS. However, it is important to keep in mind that top priorities among the coalition, the Syrian Kurds, and the Iraqi Kurds often differ.

Taking into account how the US and European countries abstained from supporting the Iraqi Kurdish bid for independence after the Iraqi Kurds having been allies in the fight against ISIS, it is very likely that the Syrian Kurds (PYD) watched very closely how this played out. Some Iraqi Kurds were reported as feeling betrayed by the US's inability or hesitancy to stop the Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraqi Security Forces from re-taking Kirkuk and stopping the conflict from escalating. Lack of a clear strategy and explicit assurances can hurt the West's credibility among Kurdish groups. The US should therefore take into consideration that PYD (SDF) might feel abandoned by the US in Syria (where the US's presence is significantly weaker than in Iraq) after ISIS has been almost defeated. If such a scenario unfolds, and SDF-US relations turn bad, this could cause the SDF to look for other possible alliances and the US must therefore have a plan to swiftly regain the weaponry they delivered to SDF to ensure it will not be used against their NATO ally Turkey.<sup>11</sup>

A future Western policy to rebuild and reintegrate previous ISIS-held territories in Syria and Iraq, especially Raqqa in Syria, should therefore not solely rest on the goodwill and declared war against ISIS by the Kurdish entities. Throughout this study, differences in the political goals of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds have been identified. When formulating future strategies for stabilization in Syria and Iraq these differences should be taken into account to increase the sustainability of such efforts. Turkey's continued role in the region must also be included in such a strategy, as Ankara's concerns for the link between PKK and PYD and the threat this link poses to Turkey is not without reason. Continued or even expanded support to SDF might prove to be the best option on the table, but it is important to address the scenarios that such a strategy most likely will result in.

Furthermore, Iran's latest active role in the region is visible through its influence on the Kurdish issue. The Kurdish issue has opened up for the formation of an operative alliance between Iran and Turkey to ensure their own territorial integrity as well as their influence in Iraq and Syria. Iran has also emerged as an actor with influence on the Iraqi Kurdish PUK Peshmerga, which was seen when the PUK Peshmerga stood down when the Iran-controlled Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraqi Security Forces retook Kirkuk. In Syria, Iran holds large influence over Assad after having been a vital factor in the regime's survival. If Assad stays in power after the civil war, which at the time of writing seems very plausible, Iran (as well as Russia) is likely to have a significant say in how to deal with Rojava.

The Kurdish entities might serve as the only effective ground forces, plowing through ISIS-controlled areas and liberating the Syrian and Iraqi population, but as always caveats require consideration as multiple agendas

<sup>11</sup> The US-Turkey relationship has in the recent years deteriorated further, which partly has its origins in conflicting interest regarding the war in Syria and its consequences as well as on support to the Syrian-Kurdish group PYD. Read more: (Sazak, 2018).

are in play in both countries. In Syria, the PYD's interest in realizing the political project of Rojava has illuminated a key priority in their operations of taking strategic towns between their cantons while staying out of Raqqa, which is not a Kurdish heartland. The SDC and SDF took a leading role in establishing the Raqqa Civilian Council, which was announced in April 2017. In post-ISIS Raqqa, the Raqqa Civilian Council has become an important structure for stabilization efforts in the area and it has been supported by the US. However, the council has also been criticized by locals, who see it as a tool used by the Kurds to expand their authority over other ethnic groups – primarily Arab groups – that has a far stronger ethnic representation in Raqqa (Al-Hussien, 2017).

In Iraq, the KRG's corruption issues, economic problems, democratic deficit, and divided administrations have yet to be properly addressed. After the referendum, the KRG has been more divided than ever amongst its political parties and has faced a hard backlash from Baghdad, who seems eager to limit Kurdish autonomy and regional influence. The fight against ISIS forced to the surface deep internal problems within the KRG and Barzani's independence referendum has led the KRG to experience a sharp decline in regional and transnational Kurdish influence, economic power, oil reserves, and autonomy. Iran and Turkey have managed to turn the aftermath of the KRG's referendum into a clear warning to the Syrian, Iranian, and Turkish Kurdish ambitions.

Expanded logistical support and continued arming of Kurdish entities to continue pressure on ISIS, could be a miscalculation and play into enhancing other looming conflicts if the different Kurdish agendas are not taken into consideration. If the legitimacy issues of the KRG and the accusations of repression of opposition and nepotism are not addressed, but disregarded because of the Kurdish fight against ISIS, new security problems are bound to emerge. These issues of legitimacy can only be addressed through a demanding internal reform agenda. International actors can support such a reform agenda by making demands when oil is purchased.

With regard to the intra-Kurdish balance of power, before ISIS emerged the KRG was militarily and economically superior to the Syrian Kurds, and furthermore enjoyed regional support and international legitimacy. However, as of 2017, PYD (SDF) has risen to become one of the strongest actors in the Syrian civil war despite various attempts by Turkey and the Arab opposition to diminish the group's capabilities and influence. The evidence gathered throughout this investigation illustrates that Rojava is not suffering from the same internal political split as KRG because of its single-party government rule, exclusion of opposition, and ability to establish a united administration. However, it remains to be seen if the PYD is able to build a sustainable economy and inclusive society, if it is granted such autonomy by the Syrian government.

Turkey's slow military advancements and reliance on Russian concession to operate within Syria reduces Turkey's ability to dictate the terms and degree of autonomy the PYD (SDF) can achieve in Syria post-civil war. The US does not have the same ground presence within Syria as Assad, Russia, and Iran. Despite the fact that the US has provided a significant amount of weaponry to SDF, the advances of Assad and his allies could prompt PYD to seek concessions from international actors such as Russia and Iran rather than the US to obtain a degree of autonomy or achieve its stated goal of Syrian federalism.

In Syria, a Rojava as part of a federal Syria ruled by democratic autonomy could provoke actions from Turkey and be unwelcoming for Arab entities as well as Kurdish entities in opposition to the democratic and political system that PYD/YPG promotes. Therefore, a rushed policy solely based on eliminating ISIS through the Kurdish entities could end up not stopping but prolonging the underlying conflicts in the war-torn region. The US will have to carefully manage its relationship with PYD as increased support for the group, could prolong the conflict. The US should therefore balance the support to the PYD with political demands in exchange for continued support, which could influence the group in a more sustainable political direction.

To conclude, this study has found that the internal coherence of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities is very low and that their relationship in the fight against ISIS has been more characterized by rivalry than alignment. Kurdish political parties and groups within Syria and Iraq are each pursuing nationally defined and divergent goals. The Syrian or Iraqi Kurdish entities show little if any willingness to overcome internal power struggles to maximize their fight against ISIS. What has erupted out of the war against ISIS is Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities that most likely will prioritize fulfilling their own policy goals. A strong transnational Kurdish front with alliances between Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish entities is therefore highly unlikely to develop in the near future. A more probable scenario is continued rivalry internally and between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish entities.

## Policy Implications

In order to provide readers and especially policy makers with key points in an overview format the following extracts the six main policy implications from the conclusion that needs to be taken into consideration in future development of Western policies in Syria and Iraq.

- NATO's engagement in the region, and thereby Denmark's, should address the complex dilemma of relying on the effective Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces who have fought ISIS while at the same time hurting its relations with Turkey. NATO should develop a coherent strategy based on political priorities of whom to stand firmly behind.
- By arming Kurdish minorities in the fight against ISIS, the US and the West in general could risk threatening the national integrity of the regional states. However, by not supporting the Kurdish groups' pursuit of their policy goals against regimes who have repressed them to different degrees, the West would abandon an ally it has armed and one that has been instrumental in the fight against ISIS. If this dilemma is not recognized at the highest political level and a coherent strategy is not developed, the US and supporting nations of Operation Inherent Resolve (which includes Denmark) could risk losing both the trust and allegiance of all allies – namely Turkey, Iraq, PYD/YPG (SDF), and KRG.
- The study's findings clearly stresses that it is problematic to treat the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds as a coherent political entity.
- A future Western policy to rebuild and reintegrate previous ISIS-held territories in Syria and Iraq, especially Raqqa in Syria, should not solely rest on the goodwill and declared war against ISIS by the Kurdish entities.
- Expanded logistical support and continued arming of Kurdish entities to act as boots on the ground can prove to be a miscalculation and play into enhancing other looming conflicts if the different Kurdish agendas are not taken into consideration.
- A future rushed policy solely based on eliminating immediate security threats through the Kurdish entities could end up not stopping but prolonging underlying conflicts in the war-torn region.

## Epilogue

After finishing the manuscript of this book in early 2018, several major events occurred, one of them being the elimination of ISIS as a territorial movement in 2017 with the battle of Raqqa. This marked the final transition of the movement from a conventional state-aspiring movement to a classical terror group operating in the shadows and aiming its operations toward creating fear or support and not holding territory. However, ISIS as a group or a phenomenon is not gone as the group regularly claims responsibility for terror attacks in the region. In relation to the Kurdish internal coherence, this has indeed implied negative consequences, as the common enemy of almost all other actors is no longer present. US incitement to support SDF has therefore decreased, and the different Kurdish entities have naturally begun looking for other external support. At the same time, Turkey has seized the opportunity to secure its borders and even established safe zones within Syria, preventing Kurdish control of Afrin and the potential connection of Kurdish controlled areas in bordering Syrian territories to Turkey. By the end of 2018, the US is continuing its support of SDF as they clear out the last pockets of ISIS safe havens in Eastern Syria. However, there is underlying uncertainty about American commitment to SDF as Turkey continues to push for a change in US policy as the threat of ISIS diminishes. Meanwhile, Turkey and Bashar al-Assad threaten SDF with military action in Northern Syria. These challenges are most likely the reason behind SDF initiating talks with Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to work towards a democratic and decentralized Syria. However, it remains unclear if these talks will be able to advance as the Assad regime previously has denied a decentralized Syria.

On the ground, reports indicate that SDF has begun establishing defense structures to deter attacks against its territory. This is most likely a way to raise the costs substantially of a possible military intervention in the region as an aggressor could find himself entangled in a fight with an insurgency of a Kurdish well-organized and armed ethnic group who are defending what has been defined as Kurdish core territory. Furthermore, after having experienced autonomy, the Syrian Kurds will most likely not give it up so easily, which would further increase their morale to defend it.

In Iraq, KRG-president Barzani's initial political victory with the referendum on Kurdish independence in September 2017 illuminated the lack of international support to an independent Kurdish state. The lack of support from US and Europe proved to be particularly devastating for the Kurdish independence quest in the wake of the referendum. Furthermore, many of the issues in relation to internal coherence, corruption, and nepotism within KRG (as this book also addresses) became a focal point, culminating with the Iraqi move on Kirkuk where PUK-affiliated Peshmerga forces withdrew in spite of different orders from KDP president Barzani. This underlined the lack of not only political coherence within KRG but also lack of military coherence within the Peshmerga forces. The internal coherence between the two dominant Iraqi Kurdish parties of KDP and PUK is



decreasing as the threat of ISIS in Iraq has faded and Baghdad has limited KRG's autonomy. If left unresolved, it could threaten the power-sharing agreement that is the foundation of the KRG governing institutions. Arguably, this will wreak havoc, as there does not appear to be an alternative political system independent of the nepotistic party structures in place. Therefore, a change in the power relation between KDP and PUK can bring forth instability if one party seeks to challenge the other for dominance. Part of the increased tension can be explained by KDP eyeing weakness in a less coherent PUK after their leader and founder Jalal Talabani passed away last year and the party is struggling to unite behind a new leadership. On September 30 2018, the Iraqi Kurdistan held elections for its Parliament. Although the election was characterized by a low voter turnout and complaints of electoral fraud, KDP won most of the seats with 45 out of 111. PUK became the second largest party with 21 seats and Gorran third with 12 seats. The results continues to empower KDP as the party to lead the next regional government in KRG despite the region's failing economy, increased isolation and high corruption.

Looking ahead, the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish parties do not appear to be aspiring towards a transnational cooperation, although they all face increasing challenges with similar traits as their common enemy fades. The politics of the Kurdish political elites in Iraq and Syria focus on national issues, reflecting the low transnational coherence and reflects that the fight against ISIS did not promote coherence between the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish political elites.

In a region and in countries where the only thing you can be somewhat sure of is that the sun will rise tomorrow, further developments will without a doubt have outpaced the publication of this epilogue, as it has already done with the book. Nevertheless, we hope that reading this book has provided you with much more than a description of an ongoing security development in the era of ISIS. Rather, it is our hope that you have gained a comprehensive understanding of internal Kurdish coherence in Syria and Iraq that can be applied in future policy development as well as in future research and studies.

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The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) shocked the world when it entered the world stage in 2014. By seizing large territories in Syria and Iraq, its expansion within the Middle East seemed unrestrainable as the Iraqi Army fell apart and in Syria, various actors were caught up in a bloody civil war in the wake of the Arab spring.

With US support, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds became the main stand against ISIS acting as boots on the ground. The Kurdish success against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq quickly won them acclaim from the West and rendered them the key ally in the continued US-led effort against ISIS. In Western media and among Western decision makers, the Kurds as an entity are highly praised for their role in this fight. In addition, their fight for human rights, gender equality, secular rule, and democracy has also been highlighted as key features in assessing Kurds as a homogeneous entity that almost naturally shares strategic interest with the West.

This book, as it sets out to paint a more comprehensive picture of the different Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, concludes that these groups indeed have very different policy objectives and diverging regional partners of alliance thereby questioning the underlying assumption of a uniformed Kurdish entity. The book makes a significant contribution to a better understanding of the political goals, affiliations and rivalries of these important actors and Western allies in the Middle East.