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False Hopes? Prospects for Political Inclusion in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan

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Among those deeply affected by the Arab Spring were the Kurds—the largest ethnic minority without a state in the Middle East. The Syrian civil war put the Kurds at the forefront in the war against the Islamic State (IS) and drastically changed the future prospects of Kurds in both Syria and Iraq. This brief examines the challenges that hinder development of a politically inclusive culture in Syrian Kurdistan—popularly known as Rojava—and Iraqi Kurdistan. Political and economic instability in both regions have shattered Kurdish dreams for political diversity and prosperity since the early days of the Arab Spring.

THE RISING TIDE OF SYRIAN KURDS

The civil war in Syria has thus far bolstered the People's Protection Units (YPG) and its political platform, the Democratic Union Party (PYD); these groups have received both U.S. and Russian military support. In order to placate Turkey—which declared the aforementioned groups as “terrorists” due to their links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—American officials called U.S.-YPG relations “tactical,” “transactional,” and short-term; likewise, they also downplayed the PYD's links to the PKK. The threat of IS has led the American media to reimagine Kurdish fighters as the United States' “best allies” with a secular and egalitarian ideology; this view is often presented with a juxtaposition of a “malevolent IS” and “freedom fighter women.” The Rojava project,

i.e., unifying Kurdish cantons in northern Syria under a new local governing body, is depicted as a dream for egalitarianism and a liberal inclusive culture that counters patriarchic structures in the Middle East.¹

U.S. policy toward the Kurds, however, has become most puzzling since the 2017 defeat of IS in Syria. While the U.S.—to avoid alienating the Turks—did not object to the Turkish troops' invasion of the Kurdish canton of Afrin, the YPG began forging closer ties to Damascus—which led to complaints from some American officials that the Kurdish group “has turned into an insurgent organization.”² In fact, from the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Syrian Kurds have been most careful to not directly target the Assad regime, aside from some short-term clashes in certain places like Rojava, for two major reasons.

First, given the common enemies of the Kurds and the Assad regime, Damascus continued to pay the salaries of civil servants in PYD-controlled regions and pursued an accommodative policy.³ Rojava has been immune from the regime's air strikes since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. In addition, Damascus enabled Rojava residents to enjoy access to central government services such as public sector salaries, schools, health care, travel on civilian airlines, and the issuance of identity cards, passports, and property records. Given the Assad regime's resilience and high likelihood of staying in power for the foreseeable future, Syrian Kurds will keep



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this strategy of realpolitik. In the words of PYD's former co-chair Saleh Muslim, "The PYD is part of the Syrian revolution, but it is not prepared to be used as its soldiers."⁴

Second, Syrian Kurds pragmatically used PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's writings as an asset to gain international recognition, blurring the line between separatism and local governance. While denying their organizational links with the PKK, YPG declared Ocalan as the group's visionary leader. Ocalan's idiosyncratic theories on "democratic confederalism," "autonomy," and the "dangers" of the nation-state support Kurdish demands for autonomy in Syria while claiming that Kurds do not to pose a real threat to the Assad regime, as they do not seek independence. For Ocalan, Kurds should not aim to establish an independent nation-state structure because the modern nation-state is intrinsically a top-down project that is based on homogenization and assimilation—what Kurds have suffered most in recent history.⁵ Ocalan argues that capitalism enforces "the centralization of the state" and fascism is the "purest form" of nation-states.⁶ Thus, Syrian Kurds have tried hard to balance ideology and political opportunity—and to present their socialist worldview with an emphasis on democratic ideals that target a Western audience for support.

THREATS TO POLITICAL INCLUSION IN ROJAVA

Despite the aforementioned factors in favor of what Syrian Kurds call "the Rojava project," major challenges feed ethnic tensions between the Kurds and the Arabs and, therefore, threaten stability in northern Syria.

Being heavily Kurdish, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) currently have sway over 27% of Syrian territory in the north.⁷ In the Kurdish cantons of the eastern Euphrates, Kurds constitute only a slim majority of 55% and in some places such as southern Hasakah, Kurds rule over the Arab-majority towns.⁸ The SDF's ethnic composition has long been a point of discussion in Washington, D.C.; U.S. officials have provided conflicting numbers, pointing

out that Arab representation has increased over time.⁹ At the leadership level, however, Kurds dominate the SDF ranks and pursue an agenda of indoctrination. For example, in a recent graduation ceremony of 140 Arab fighters joining SDF following a 45-day training program, pro-PKK slogans such as "No Life without Our Leader!" were chanted as a pledge of allegiance.¹⁰

Ethnic tensions mattered less when there was a strong coalition between the Kurds and the Arabs against IS; some Arab tribes sought revenge against IS, while others have long been allied with the Assad regime. The post-IS era, however, has unleashed ethnic competition over limited local resources.

One factor that drives tensions is the oil fields. Kurdish cantons include key oil fields in southern Hasaka. The al-Shaddadi oil fields, for example, are located in predominantly Arab lands and are deemed especially valuable for Rojava's economic future. Before the Syrian civil war, Hasaka and Raqqa provided almost two-thirds of Syria's total oil extraction—251,000 out of 387,000 barrels per day.¹¹

Oil revenue is already significant for Rojava's economy and will be a major source of revenue if Kurds can initiate transactions with Damascus via the original pipeline. Negotiations with the regime, however, may not ease Kurdish-Arab tensions as some of the local Arab tribes have long supported Damascus. In fact, during the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Qamishli, the Assad regime offered armed support to Arab tribes in Jazira—namely Adwan, Jabbour, Ougaidat, and Tay—to quell the riots.¹² Despite the somewhat cordial relations between Damascus and the Kurds during the civil war, the Assad regime aimed to continue close relations with these Arab tribes. When Kurds began offering higher salaries to Arab locals after the SDF captured lucrative oil fields, the regime did not hesitate to conduct air bombings of Hasaka in August 2016 to defend its public image as the arbiter of Kurds and Arabs.¹³

In addition to oil, fertile agricultural land in the Jazira and Hasaka region may cause mayhem if Kurdish authorities choose to redistribute land to attract thousands of

landless peasants. Before the civil war, the region produced 43% of Syria's grains and 80% of its cotton.¹⁴ Although the region is considered Syria's food basket, the Assad regime did not invest in it when farmers faced severe water shortages in the past two decades. Years of drought and increasing consumption of water on the Turkish side pressured the farmers whose traditional agricultural practices such as gravity feed systems demand extremely high water usage. The regime promised to develop modernized irrigation techniques following the 2004 Kurdish revolt, but this was never implemented. According to Fabrice Balanche's research based on French Ministry of Agriculture statistics, the Hasaka province witnessed a 25% decrease in cultivated areas between 1995 and 2008, causing a steady outflow of the region's population into urban centers such as Aleppo and Damascus.¹⁵ The regime's food and fuel policies—extracting maximum resources while deliberately not establishing industries—were consistent over the years, making the region subservient to the state. Thus, access to water and resources will remain as the key flashpoint in the Kurds' relations with the central government.

It is unclear how the local population will perceive the redistribution of land under the YPG. The YPG believes in a communal system of government that provides food and fuel security and education through local councils. The communes take care of most functions of a modern state; in many ways, local autonomy in Rojava appears to constitute a type of socialist revolution. Some local residents, however, have begun to raise concerns, complaining about the decision-making authority and unaccountability of YPG leaders.¹⁶ There is also criticism of YPG's strict budgetary control over the communes and its practice of channeling funds and humanitarian aid in exchange for the recipients' loyalty to its authority. For dissident Kurds, such problems may be a failure of the YPG's socialist ideology; however, for dissident Arabs, such conditions are also seen through an ethnic lens—that is, the failure of Kurdish rule.

The YPG's ideology may on occasion appeal to anti-establishment Arab youths who are alienated from their tribes; however,

the ideology is particularly attractive to Kurdish youths due to its Kurdish nationalist flavor, which does not resonate with Arabs.¹⁷ Moreover, the Arab tribes' fear of Kurdish irredentism will be reinforced as long as the SDF structure facilitates indoctrination of PKK ideology. The Syrian regime's "Arabization" policies since the 1970s have changed the demographics of the region; therefore, the Arab tribes' anxiety regarding the "re-Kurdification" of Rojava under YPG rule is not baseless. The YPG's earlier practice of forced conscription of Arab boys and girls (under the age of 18) is still fresh in the memories of local Arabs.¹⁸

THE RISE AND FALL OF IRAQI KURDISTAN

The Arab Spring and ensuing meltdown of the Iraqi security architecture have led to dramatic changes in the fortunes of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is the most thriving region of the post-Saddam era. Kurdistan was often praised as a virtual island of stability—a reference to its secular character and immunity to Shia-Sunni sectarian tensions.¹⁹ The 2011 Sulaymaniyah protests inspired by the Arab uprisings, however, revealed institutional fragility. To quell the protests, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) approved a parliamentary bill that consisted of 17 points of agreement between the government and the opposition, including a promise for structural economic reforms and to fight against cronyism and corruption.²⁰

The institutional problems, however, have remained a major problem.²¹ Although the KRG has introduced some measures for accountability in the oil sector, the opposition has claimed such steps are too little too late. Iraqi Kurdistan faced a major danger when IS directly threatened to invade Erbil. The war against IS caused not only a shrinking economy but also a domestic refugee flow: internally displaced people now represent one-third of Kurdistan's population of 5.2 million.²² Mass outrage about the economic downturn grew as the KRG failed to properly pay public employees and unconstitutionally postponed presidential elections several times.²³

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As the IS threat vanished, the KRG's push for an independence referendum in September 2017 was a major gamble. On one hand, it could boost the ruling elite's legitimacy and authority—and indeed, the referendum galvanized the national sentiment among Kurds in Iraq and beyond. On the other hand, failure could seriously undermine the KRG's legitimacy. High emotions turned into major frustrations when the Iraqi military undertook operations in the territories around Kirkuk, areas of dispute between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. The Kurdistan region not only lost massive oil revenues but also faced an economic embargo, including the blockade of international flights that was imposed by the central government.²⁴

Specifically, after the loss of Kirkuk to Baghdad, the KRG's oil production fell from 550,000 to 250,000 barrels per day.²⁵ The dire outcomes have led the ruling parties to accuse each other of treason, while opposition parties forcefully demanded the resignation of the government. In a historic decision and with deep embarrassment, Masoud Barzani left the presidential office in November 2017.

In December 2017, protests, thousands strong, once again rocked Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. In clashes with security forces, five protesters lost their lives and a hundred were wounded. Given that protesters set fire to the offices of the ruling parties, namely Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the late Iraqi President Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Kurdish authorities justified their harsh measures on security grounds. The crackdown on the opposition media was particularly violent, with hundreds arrested.²⁶

The Sulaymaniyah protests revealed a deep split in Iraqi Kurdistan following the independence referendum. The Kurdish opposition parties, specifically the Gorran Movement and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal), have withdrawn their ministers from the government. The opposition accused the KDP and PUK of failing the nation before and after the independence referendum, demanding dissolution of the current cabinet and formation of a national

representative committee to pursue negotiations with Baghdad until the Kurdish parliamentary elections, scheduled for September 30, 2018.

By pitting opposition-stronghold Sulaymaniyah against Erbil—the seat of the government and home to Barzani—Baghdad will continue to benefit from the intra-Kurdish divide. Kurdistan's multifaceted and structural problems signal major future challenges and vulnerability of the region to outside interference.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

In the post-Arab Spring era, Kurds have become a critical player for U.S. policy toward Syria and Iraq. In Syria, a key question for Washington is how to maintain political inclusion under the SDF structure. In immediate danger is the Kurdish-Arab alliance in the absence of a front line against IS. In Iraq, the United States should also focus on political inclusion and therefore help Kurds to achieve structural reforms in political accountability, economic resilience, and transparency in the oil sector. The lack of U.S. support on these issues will imperil stability in the region.

Ensuring political inclusion will be a daunting task for the U.S. officials in Rojava, especially due to Turkey's open war against the Syrian Kurds. Washington took a positive step in supporting Arab local representation by helping to establish a new political party, the Future Syria Party, to shape Raqqa's future with its inclusive motto, "Democratic, Pluralistic, Decentralized Syria."²⁷ Turkish officials, however, were quick to express their cynicism—they perceived it as yet another PKK-led organization with a new brand name.²⁸ Once the Islamic State's capital, Raqqa is now under SDF rule, but how Kurdish leaders will guarantee political inclusion where Arabs constitute majority is a mystery. The assassination of Omar Alloush, a key figure for reconciliation between Kurds and Arab tribes who served as a member of the Raqqa Civilian Council, is a recent example of targeted killings that seek to exploit ethnic tensions.²⁹

Moreover, it behooves the Trump administration to pursue long-term policy goals in Iraqi Kurdistan with an understanding that current instability in Iraqi Kurdistan is deeply related to the institutional problems of political inclusion. After the referendum fallout, Kurdish prospects for democracy have become even more fragile due to Baghdad's "divide-and-rule" strategy toward the Kurds. Ad hoc deals by different Shia militia leaders reaching out to various Kurdish actors with different Peshmerga forces invite further instability. Washington can helpfully remind the Iraqi central government that settlement on the disputed territories and other key issues with Kurds cannot be peacefully resolved without ensuring stability in Kurdistan.

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