THE WAR REPORT 2017

KURDISH MILITARY FORMATIONS IN MIDDLE EASTERN BATTLEFIELDS

NOVEMBER 2017 I VICKEN CHETERIAN
ORIGINS

Three factors of Kurdish history must be underlined in order to understand the current dynamics of the Kurdish question. First, Kurdish autonomous states (Kurdish emirates), which survived for centuries on both sides of the Ottoman–Iranian division, were disbanded in the course of the twentieth century. When the Ottomans incorporated the Kurdish areas after their victory in the Battle of Chaldiran (1514), they preserved Kurdish autonomous political structures as border military forces against the Safavids and Qajars of Iran. Even in the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire destroyed the Kurdish emirates in its modernizing and centralizing drive, these policies were soon revised. Sultan Abdul Hamid II rearmed Kurdish tribes in what was called the Hamidiye Cavalry, again for borderland defence against the Russians.1 Even after the 1908 Young Turk revolution, when the Hamidiye Cavalry was initially dissolved, the old structure was soon revived under a new name: the Tribal Light Cavalry. Throughout the twentieth century, state interventions to suppress, modernize, assimilate or utilize Kurdish tribal military forces would cause many frictions, uprisings and wars.

Second is the diverse tribal, religious, ethnic, regional, social and political identities of what we came to call Kurds. Kurdish nationalism is a new phenomenon, largely influenced by older social structures, identities and differences. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but other religious groups also exist, such as Shiite Kurds (Feyli Kurds), Alevis, Yazidis, Ahl ul-Haq (also known as Yarsani or Kakaï), etc. Tribal and regional differences are equally important, and linguistic diversity (Kurmanji, Zazaki, Sorani, Palewani) often reflects ethnic and geographic specificities.2 Therefore, any expectation of uniform Kurdish political behaviour under an imagined Kurdish nationalist myth is potentially misleading.

Finally, Kurdish tribal confederations lived for centuries next to largely sedentary, urban or agricultural Christian populations, namely Armenians and Assyrians,3 whose numbers in what is today considered to be Kurdistan were greater than that of the Kurds. Yet, the Ottoman Turkish leadership in a series of deportations and massacres, in which some Kurdish tribes played an active role, exterminated those populations. The outcome was that, for the first time in history, Kurdish populations had continuity over vast areas of West Asia, reinforcing Kurdish nationalism: “With the disappearance of the Armenians, most of eastern Anatolia became almost exclusively Kurdish territory... A Kurdish nation state was now feasible.”4

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire led not only to

Kurdish nationalism is a new phenomenon, largely influenced by older social structures, identities and differences.

---

1 J. Klein, The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone, Stanford University Press, 2011.


3 In some cases, Assyrians, namely the Nestorians (Assyrian Church of the East) of Hakkari and the Syriacs (Jacobites) of Tur Abdin, had had nomadic and tribal social structures similar to those of tribal Kurds.


and Turkish authorities while the PKK carried out an armed struggle inside Turkey.

IRAQI PESHMERGA

Iraq was home to continuous Kurdish revolts. With the end of World War I and the establishment of the British Mandate, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, a sufi Qadiriya religious figure and member of the Barzanji tribe in Suleymaniyah, revolted against the British in 1919 and again in 1922–1924. One of his followers was the young Mustafa Barzani, who would later become the leading figure of Kurdish nationalism. With his brother, Ahmed Barzani, he took part in the anti-British revolt of 1931, and in 1945 he joined the short-lived Mahabad Republic declared by Qazi Muhammad in Iran. With the fall of Mahabad, Mustafa Barzani and a group of his followers escaped to the Soviet Union, only to return to Iraq after the 1958 overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy by Abdel Karim Qasim. Barzani is the founder of the KDP and, after relations with Qasim deteriorated, he led yet another revolt known as the First Iraqi–Kurdish War (1961–1970). A peace agreement signed in 1970 was not respected, much like earlier agreements, leading to yet another revolt, the Second Iraqi–Kurdish War (1972–1975). Mustafa Barzani would establish a strong leadership among Kurdish tribes thanks to his nationalist discourse but mainly his success in developing an irregular military force known as Peshmerga.

The defeat of Barzani in 1975, largely caused by the Shah of Iran reaching an agreement with Baghdad, led to internal divisions within the KDP, and one of its members, Jalal Talabani, founded the rival PUK, with its own military wing. The rivalry and in-fighting between the KDP and PUK has deep historic, social and regional specificities, the KDP having its power base in the North of Erbil while the PUK’s base is in the Suleymaniyah region. The PUK also had a more radical-left ideology and allied with Syria and Iran. Both the KDP and PUK leadership have been accused of nepotism and corruption. In the 2009 elections, a division appeared within the PUK for the emergence of a new movement named Gorran (Movement for Change), which managed to receive 51 and allied with Syria and Iran.7

The second was the military camps that proved extremely important after Turkish military threats to use violence against the Turkish state as well as possible allies. The bases in Iraq would provide a safe haven for the PKK activists and a logistic base for the Peshmerga. The bases in Iran would be used by the PKK to operate in the growing Kurdish diaspora, especially migrant workers and asylum seekers in Europe following the 1980 Turkish military coup and the severe repression that followed. These networks would prove valuable for funding and lobbying. The second was the military camps established in northern Iraqi Kurdistan’s Qandil Mountains, in the frontier triangle between Iraq, Turkey and Iran. The bases in Iraq would prove extremely important after Turkish military threats forced the Syrian authorities to expel Abdullah Ocalan and the PKK militants from both Syria and Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley in 1999. They would also permit the PKK to operate and develop its influence among Iranian Kurds.8

PKK violence can also be explained by the fact that it was attempting to revive Kurdish national identity, which was largely forgotten between the 1930s and 1980s. While the PKK was largely successful in recreating Kurdish national identification, it also – indirectly – contributed to the revival of tribalism among Kurds: to counter guerrilla violence, the Turkish government recruited, armed and financed ‘village guards’ – over 50,000 in the 1980s – reminiscent of the tribal

Mustafa Barzani would establish a strong leadership among Kurdish tribes thanks to his nationalist discourse but mainly his success in developing an irregular military force known as Peshmerga.

nal-view-kurdish-referendum-214218895.
300,000 Kurds deprived of their citizenship, there was no 

THE DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY (PYD)/ PEOPLE’S PROTECTION UNITS (YPG)

In Syria, while Kurdish basic political and cultural rights were violated by successive administrations, with up to 300,000 Kurds deprived of their citizenship, there was no Kurdish political activism against the Syrian state. Not only the PKK, but also the two major Iraqi Kurdish Parties, the KDP and PUK, used Syrian Kurds as a logistic base for their activities, thus cutting deals with the Damascus authorities. In other words, when mobilized, Syrian Kurds struggled for Kurdish rights either in neighbouring Iraq or Turkey but not for their own rights. One major explanation for this phenomenon could be that Kurdish presence in parts of what became Syria is relatively recent: Syrian Kurdish areas, especially those in the Jazira region (north-east Syria) were established in the twentieth century during the French Mandate.

Several questions arise in this regard: first, what is the nature of relations between the PKK and PYD today? Second, is the Syrian territory held by the PYD a priority project for self-rule, similar to the Kurdish entity in north Iraq, or will it serve as a logistic base for the PKK armed struggle inside Turkey? Is the PYD an independent structure from the PKK? To answer these questions, we have to consider both the historic dimension, as well as current political developments.

While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties. While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it has had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties.

While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it has had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties.

THE WAR REPORT 2017 | KURDISH MILITARY FORMATIONS IN MIDDLE EASTERN BATTLEFIELDS

For 400 years, Kurdish tribes have largely been loyal to the Ottoman sultans, guarding their eastern frontiers against the Iranians or Russians. Kurdish loyalty to the Turkish leaders was frustrated only when Mustafa Kemal betrayed his previous promises of Kurdish autonomy and dissolved both the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate. The PKK, but also the two major Iraqi Kurdish Parties, the KDP and PUK, used Syrian Kurds as a logistic base for their activities, thus cutting deals with the Damascus authorities. In other words, when mobilized, Syrian Kurds struggled for Kurdish rights either in neighbouring Iraq or Turkey but not for their own rights. One major explanation for this phenomenon could be that Kurdish presence in parts of what became Syria is relatively recent: Syrian Kurdish areas, especially those in the Jazira region (north-east Syria) were established in the twentieth century during the French Mandate.

Several questions arise in this regard: first, what is the nature of relations between the PKK and PYD today? Second, is the Syrian territory held by the PYD a priority project for self-rule, similar to the Kurdish entity in north Iraq, or will it serve as a logistic base for the PKK armed struggle inside Turkey? Is the PYD an independent structure from the PKK? To answer these questions, we have to consider both the historic dimension, as well as current political developments.

While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it has had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties. While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it has had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties. While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it has had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties.

For 400 years, Kurdish tribes have largely been loyal to the Ottoman sultans, guarding their eastern frontiers against the Iranians or Russians. Kurdish loyalty to the Turkish leaders was frustrated only when Mustafa Kemal betrayed his previous promises of Kurdish autonomy and dissolved both the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate.
The initial Kurdish revolts, such as that of Sheikh Said, were led by religious leaders, in the name of Islam, and largely orchestrated by former Hamidiye Cavalry members. Turkish–Kurdish relations deteriorated further after the Turkish military coup of 1980, in which over half a million people – including many Kurds – went through ‘filtration camps’ and torture, and the PKK armed rebellion starting in 1984, which led to over 35,000 dead and the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages. Yet, all of the above, from Sheikh Said to the PKK rebellion, could be represented as a conflict between Kurds of various social strata and ideological convictions (traditionalist-Islamist, nationalist, third-worldist, etc.) and Turkish nationalism. Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s accession to power with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its conservative-Islamist ideology opened new possibilities. In fact, the AKP argued that it was nationalism that divided Turks and Kurds (as well as other Muslim nations that were part of the Ottoman Empire), and that Islam could rally them once again, thus resolving the conflict of national character.

On two occasions, the AKP and PKK tried to negotiate a peaceful solution. The first was in 2009, after the AKP made some gestures towards Kurdish cultural rights, including the broadcasting of Kurdish-language television programmes by the official channel TRT. The parties began indirect talks aimed at major political reforms to give Kurds their cultural rights, local self-governance and an amnesty for their fighters, and at reaching a ceasefire accommodation. Yet, political repression against Kurdish political figures continued and the first groups of disbanded guerrillas were arrested, which ended the peace process. Guerrilla attacks on one side and repressive measures by government forces on the other escalated between 2010 and 2012.

The Arab Spring and the collapse of Syria opened up new perspectives. In January 2013, the parties to the conflict declared yet another ceasefire. Both Turkey and the PKK were busy with the developments inside Syria and were contemplating a possible alliance. If Ankara had given basic rights to the Kurds and allowed them to participate in the internal Turkish political processes, then Turkey could have succeeded in creating an alliance with the PKK–PYD in north Syria, much like the US has done in the same period. Yet, two developments put an end to the ceasefire and to the possible Turkish–Kurdish rapprochement. The first was the battle of Kobani. Erdogan, himself belonging to a party espousing political Islam, had strong sympathies towards Syrian Islamist groups, including the salafi-jihadi Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, and sustained an ambiguous stance towards ISIS. For many Islamists, including Erdogan, the jihadi groups were considered a part, albeit excessive, of the ‘family’ of political Islam. Therefore, when the ISIS attack on Kobani began in September 2014, creating 300,000 refugees and great anxiety among Kurds everywhere including in Turkey, the ambiguous Turkish position came as a shock to many Kurds. Erdogan, in a public declaration, equated ISIS with the PKK, while the Turkish foreign minister said, ‘How can you say that this terrorist organization is better because it’s fighting ISIS? They are the same. Terrorists are evil. They all must be eradicated.’

Many Turkish citizens of Kurdish ethnicity who traditionally voted for the AKP felt betrayed and did not vote for the ruling party in the June 2015 general elections, instead voting for the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP). The 2015 elections and their outcomes constitute the second turning point for Erdogan and Turkey’s Kurdish electorate. The events in Syria galvanized the Kurdish electorate around the HDP, which received over 13 percent of the votes and thus passed the 10 percent threshold for entering parliament. This was the first time a pro-Kurdish party achieved such success. This Kurdish triumph was at the expense of the AKP, which failed to get a parliamentary majority to pass Erdogan’s constitutional reforms. The Kurdish factor in internal Turkish politics was not acceptable to the AKP, nor to the majority of Turkish voters. The security situation deteriorated immediately after the elections. Soon, Kurdish-inhabited towns in southern Turkey, along the border with Syria and Iraq, became war zones. Hundreds of Kurdish activists were arrested, including elected parliamentarians and mayors of the HDP. Turkish–Kurdish relations were back at the previous level of antagonism, and even political Islam failed to provide a solution.

Since 2012, Kurdish armed groups have emerged as a major force in northern Syria.

The withdrawal of Syrian governmental troops from the area in July 2012 created a power vacuum, which two separate Kurdish political forces tried to fill: the PKK and its associate PYD/YPG, and the Iraqi KDP and its allies in Syria.

The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq:
One, Two or More Kurdish States?

On 1 August 2014, ISIS launched a surprise attack on Peshmerga positions in Zumar, a town north-west of Mosul, between Dohuk and Sinjar, and rapidly occupied it. On 3 August, ISIS launched another surprise attack on Sinjar, from where Peshmerga forces were withdrawn in panic without fighting, for fear of encirclement, leaving


21 Islamist is used in the sense of a political organization that holds an Islamic worldview and strives to introduce Islamic law.


25 On 20 July 2015, a pro-Kurdish solidarity gathering was bombed by ISIS, killing 33 and wounding many more. The HDP accused the government of not providing the necessary protection.

the local Yazidi population without protection. These attacks came two months after ISIS’ blitz of Mosul, where Iraqi army positions fell in a matter of hours, leaving large quantities of arms and ammunition to the jihadi fighters. In the following days, ISIS fighters took over the Assyrian town Qaraqosh in the Nineveh valley. What followed can be described as genocide: ISIS assassinated Yazidi and Shia-Turkmen men, kidnapped thousands of Yazidi girls and women, forcing them into slavery, and forced Assyrian Christians to convert, pay jizya (tax) or depart. Several thousand Yazidis, Assyrians, Shabak, Shias and Kakai (ahl ul-Haq) escaped their homes into internally displaced people camps in areas under Peshmerga control. Thousands of Yazidi civilians were trapped and encircled at the top of the arid Sinjar Mountain, where many vulnerable people perished because of lack of water, food or medication. A military operation by PKK–PYD fighters from Syria opened a small corridor to the north of the mountain, evacuating the civilians.

The ISIS attack and PKK counter-attack heightened already existing tensions between Kurdish political-military formations. The Peshmerga withdrawal in the early hours of 3 August 2014 has engendered bitterness among the Yazidi population, whose trust in the KRG has been shattered as much as their trust in their Arab neighbours to the south. On the contrary, the PKK military operation has made its fighters popular among the Yazidis. The Yazidi areas liberated from ISIS, including the town of Sinjar, are divided into two zones of influence, between the PKK on one hand and the KDP Peshmerga on the other.

Halfway from Erbil to Suleymaniya, the flags change from yellow to green, as do the posters of martyred fighters. This is the non-official border between the KDP and the PUK, which, in spite of both being part of the KRG, have distinct command structures. The two parts of the KRG have equally different political orientations: while the KDP is close to Ankara and has tense relations with Baghdad, the PUK has close relations with Baghdad as well as with Tehran. Although there are tensions today between the two sides, we are far from the bloody internal war of 1994–1997, which led to thousands of casualties. More recently, tensions rose around questions such as budgetary allocations and political and administrative posts including the KRG presidency. While the Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence revealed a political fiasco that backfired and led to the loss of territorial gains that Kurdish ANSAs had made in the ‘disputed territories’ the question of Kurdish sovereignty in northern Iraq and in the neighbouring states remains a challenge yet to be addressed, which will shape the map of the Middle East in the next decades.

27 On the history of the Yazidis, see Fuccaro, The Other Kurds.


CONCLUSION: A HIGH-RISK FUTURE

The referendum on independence in KRG areas reshuffled the political cards in the Middle East, but long-term challenges persist. Will the tacit alliance between the Syrian government and PKK–PYD survive the defeat of ISIS and the marginalization of al-Nusra and other forces? Is the new alliance between the US authorities and the PKK–PYD a tactical or strategic choice? Equally important, will the various Kurdish military forces refrain from inter-Kurdish violence in spite of their contradictory alliances with regional and global powers? The KDP is close to Ankara, while the PKK and PUK are struggling against Turkey and close to Baghdad–Damascus. While the PKK–PUK are close to Baghdad, the PUK is equally close to Tehran and the PKK-affiliated PJAK is at war with the Iranian government.

Probably the most fundamental challenge for all Kurdish political forces is the ideological shift in the larger Middle Eastern environment. Kurdish political forces operate on the basis of nationalism, to which the Kurds are latecomers.

The influence of jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and more recently ISIS has largely been taboo, although there is enough circumstantial evidence concerning the important influence of salafi-jihadism in all four areas of Kurdish political reality. In fact, the Iraqi Kurdish Ansar al-Islam was the group that provided logistic support to Abu Musi‘b al-Zarqawi when he first moved to Iraq with a handful of loyalists. The group also provided many of the fighters of Ansar al-Sunna, a radical armed group that fought against the US-led occupation of Iraq. Recent ISIS attacks inside Iran reveal the influence of jihadi ideology among marginalized Kurdish sectors of Iran. Will the young Kurdish nationalism be a shield against the Middle Eastern trend of Islamization and sectarianization?

Probably the most fundamental challenge for all Kurdish political forces is the ideological shift in the larger Middle Eastern environment. Kurdish political forces operate on the basis of nationalism, to which the Kurds are latecomers.

The influence of jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and more recently ISIS has largely been taboo, although there is enough circumstantial evidence concerning the important influence of salafi-jihadism in all four areas of Kurdish political reality. In fact, the Iraqi Kurdish Ansar al-Islam was the group that provided logistic support to Abu Musi‘b al-Zarqawi when he first moved to Iraq with a handful of loyalists. The group also provided many of the fighters of Ansar al-Sunna, a radical armed group that fought against the US-led occupation of Iraq. Recent ISIS attacks inside Iran reveal the influence of jihadi ideology among marginalized Kurdish sectors of Iran. Will the young Kurdish nationalism be a shield against the Middle Eastern trend of Islamization and sectarianization?

About the Author

Vicken Cheterian is a lecturer in history and international relations at the University of Geneva and Webster University Geneva. He is the author of War and Peace in the Caucasus, Russia’s Troubled Frontier, published by Hurst in London and Columbia University Press in New York, 2008. His most recent book Open Wounds, Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide was published in 2015 by Hurst (London) and Oxford University Press (New York).

THE GENEVA ACADEMY

The Geneva Academy provides post-graduate education, conducts academic legal research and policy studies, and organizes training courses and expert meetings. We concentrate on branches of international law that relate to situations of armed conflict, protracted violence, and protection of human rights.

THE WAR REPORT

As an annual publication, The War Report provides an overview of contemporary trends in current armed conflicts, including key international humanitarian law and policy issues that have arisen and require attention. This article on the situation in Libya will form part of the War Report 2017.