

The “Arab Spring’s” Effect on Kurdish Political Fortunes

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ABSTRACT *The Arab Spring offered Kurdish political actors in the region significant opportunities to advance their goals. Particularly in Syria and Iraq, Kurdish parties took advantage of the weakening of central governments there. The Kurdish political movement in Turkey, along with its sister movement in Syria, has likewise used the struggle against the “Islamic State” to gain a lot of international sympathy and even support. At the same time, instability in the region has brought increased immediacy to the very real threats faced by Kurdish political actors, whether from hostile central governments or groups such as ISIL.*

The analysis presented here attempts to survey both the significant opportunities as well as the grave dangers faced by Kurdish political actors as a result of the changes related to “the Arab Spring.” The effects of the Arab Spring, especially where attempts to overthrow authoritarian governments went awry, were not limited to the Arab world. Kurdish populations, especially in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, were deeply affected by the changes sweeping the Middle East. Generally speaking, the instability shaking up the Arab world presented dangers but also great opportunities to change a regional status quo most Kurds find deeply unsatisfactory. Although still

suffering from deep internal divisions among themselves, Kurdish political actors have moved to take advantage of the increasing power vacuums in Syria and Iraq to advance their goals of self-determination.

In many senses, the “Arab Spring” appears to have benefitted Kurds in Iraq and Syria more than Arabs, who have fallen victim to grinding sectarian civil wars that have brought devastation, especially to Sunni Arab parts of these countries. While Kurds in Iran still appear somewhat removed from these events, unrest in Syria and Iraq appears to have spread to Turkey’s domestic political scene, where Kurdish and pro-Kurdish actors now appear

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locked into renewed conflict with the Turkish state. While the friction between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Ankara revolves around many factors independent of events in neighboring states, the international campaign against the Islamic State (ISIL) and the PKK's important participation in this campaign, have offered the PKK significant opportunities to strengthen its position vis-à-vis Ankara.

Kurdish Opportunities and the Winds of Change

With a few exceptions, modern Kurdish uprisings have generally occurred whenever the central governments in Turkey, Iran and Iraq have appeared weak.¹ Such a phenomenon could only be expected, of course, given the historic repression of Kurdish identities and Kurdish political actors in all the states with large Kurdish minorities. Weakness at the center offers Kurds on the political periphery the chance to carve out their own space and pursue varying measures of self-rule.

Syria

In the case of Syria, the uprising against the Assad regime that began in 2011 offered the Syrian Kurds their first real opportunity. As the Assad government withdrew its forces from majority Kurdish areas in the north of the country, various Kurdish political parties – long suppressed and living a precarious underground existence under the Ba'athists – quickly began jockeying to fill the resul-



A Syrian youth walks near a mortar shell lying on the yard of her school on the second day of the new school year on October 6, 2015 in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane.

AFP PHOTO / DELIL SOULEIMAN

tant political vacuum. Of these, the PKK-linked Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing (Peoples Protection Units, YPG) quickly became ascendant. With a large number of experienced fighters from the PKK, the PYD was able to take control of three Kurdish zones in northern Syria – Afrin, Kobane and Jazira – and declare “democratic autonomy” in these areas.

As the YPG's armed wing fought off rivals, especially amongst jihadi Syrian rebel groups, they also recruited some Arab tribes, Christians and Yezidis both into their militia and into the new governing structures of Rojava (“Western Kurdistan,” a term used by the Kurds to refer to the part of Kurdistan in Syria). The three PYD-controlled cantons quickly began setting up Kurdish language ser-

vices and schools while at the same time allowing other communities to set up their own schools and services and use their own languages.

The Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party accused the PYD of undemocratic practices and human rights abuses

As per the model envisioned by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, each canton likewise guaranteed prominent roles for women, instituting, among other things, a "co-leadership system" wherein every leadership position had to be occupied by a male and female co-leader. The PYD's hegemony in Rojava remained contested, however, especially by rival Kurdish parties (many of whom received support from the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP, in Iraqi Kurdistan) who accused the PYD of undemocratic practices and human rights abuses.² In 2015, Turkish government officials also accused the PYD of the ethnic cleansing of non-Kurdish populations from areas under its control, which the PYD vehemently denies.³

Whatever the truth of the criticisms of the PYD, the civil war and power vacuum in Syria led to an unparalleled, historic opportunity for Kurdish political actors there. The Syrian Kurdish experiment in self-rule remained

largely unnoticed by the rest of the world, however, until the summer of 2014 when ISIL burst onto the international community's consciousness. It was then that the world took notice of the Syrian Kurds' long-running fight against ISIL. Images of female YPJ (the women's wing of the YPG) fighters engaged against the reviled *jihadis* in particular earned Syrian Kurds and the PYD (and by extension the PKK as well) attention, credibility and accolades that they could never have hoped to achieve otherwise. The heroic defense of the isolated canton of Kobani against repeated ISIL assaults created Kurdish heroes both within the Kurdish nationalist imagination and in the eyes of much of the world. In Europe and the United States, political campaigns were launched to support the PYD and to remove the PKK from various terror lists, which caused great alarm in Ankara.⁴

When in August 2014 ISIL launched a massive assault against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, the dire circumstances the KRG found itself in ironically offered the Kurds the greatest moment of political unity they ever witnessed. The PYD, PKK and PJAK (the Iranian equivalent of the PYD) forces were among the first to come to the KRG's aid. While Turkey initially refused to take action to assist the KRG,⁵ these groups quickly joined with KRG *peshmerga* from the KDP, PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and others to turn back the jihadists' assaults in places such as Sinjar, Makhmour and areas around Kirkuk.

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Kurdish nationalists across the world rejoiced at the moment of unity that a dire external threat had provided. KRG President Barzani, long known for his antipathy towards and difficult relations with the PKK, even made a trip to one of their outposts near Makhmour (some 20 km south of the KRG capital in Erbil) to thank them for their assistance against ISIL.⁶ Although such unity has proven fleeting given the differences, competing interests, pressures and rival personalities of the various Kurdish political parties, the ISIL threat has in all likelihood permanently reduced the chances of the intra-Kurdish fighting that occurred so often in the 20th century—for the simple fact that Kurdish political leaders were starkly reminded of their need for each other's help.

Iraq

For the Iraqi Kurds, the instability resulting from the Arab Spring brought both dangers and unprecedented opportunities as well. In the dispute between the KRG and the Maliki government in Baghdad, the question of disputed territories between Erbil and Baghdad particularly bedeviled relations between the two. All the political parties of the KRG demanded

that the majority Kurdish areas south of their recognized Autonomous Region be given the opportunity to accede to Iraqi Kurdistan. Their reasoning was based on the fact that the recognized borders of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region were an arbitrary consequence of where Saddam Hussein had withdrawn his forces to in 1991, and not reflective of the majority Kurdish parts of Iraq. The Kurds sought foremost the incorporation of Kirkuk, with its large Kurdish population and extensive oil reserves. Although the KRG parties successfully negotiated the inclusion of Article 140 into the 2005 Constitution (an article that stipulates, among other things, that a referendum be held in the disputed territories regarding inclusion into Kurdistan), parties in Baghdad had no interest in “surrendering” Kirkuk or any other territories to Kurdistan's control. As long as they lacked Kirkuk and other territories in Iraq with large Kurdish populations, the Iraqi Kurds would be unlikely to secede from Iraq for fear of leaving both behind.

By 2009, the combined American military surge and recruitment of Sunni Arab “Awakening Councils” had tamed the insurgency in Iraq.⁷ More secure in its control of the country as a result, the Maliki government quickly began asserting itself more forcefully vis-à-vis the KRG. The issue of the disputed territories risked escalating as a result, and the balance of power appeared to favor Baghdad. Following the 2011 American withdrawal from the country, however, Maliki acted to severely

alienate Sunni Arabs in Iraq as well as Kurds. The Sunni Arab community thus became increasingly receptive to a renewed insurgency, just as the Arab Spring protests across the region began. As neighboring Syria descended into civil war, former insurgents who had been pushed out of Iraq just a few years earlier—especially al-Qaeda in Iraq—found a new haven to thrive and grow. In the case of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the group renamed itself the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham [Greater Syria] after relocating to Syria. After metastasizing in Syria, ISIL would soon return to Iraq with a vengeance.

With the sudden June 2014 ISIL offensive in Mosul, the whole equation in Iraq changed to the detriment of Baghdad. The Iraqi army in the north of the country collapsed with startling speed, allowing ISIL to capture Mosul (Iraq's second largest city) and much of the Sunni Arab parts of the country. As the Iraqi army fled its positions around Kirkuk and other areas with large numbers of Kurds, however, the KRG's *peshmerga* quickly advanced to take control of the abandoned positions. Almost overnight, the KRG found itself in physical control of virtually all the territory disputed between itself and Baghdad. Besides gaining control of the extensive oil fields around Kirkuk, the Kurds now had the lands they wanted should they need (or want) to secede from Iraq.

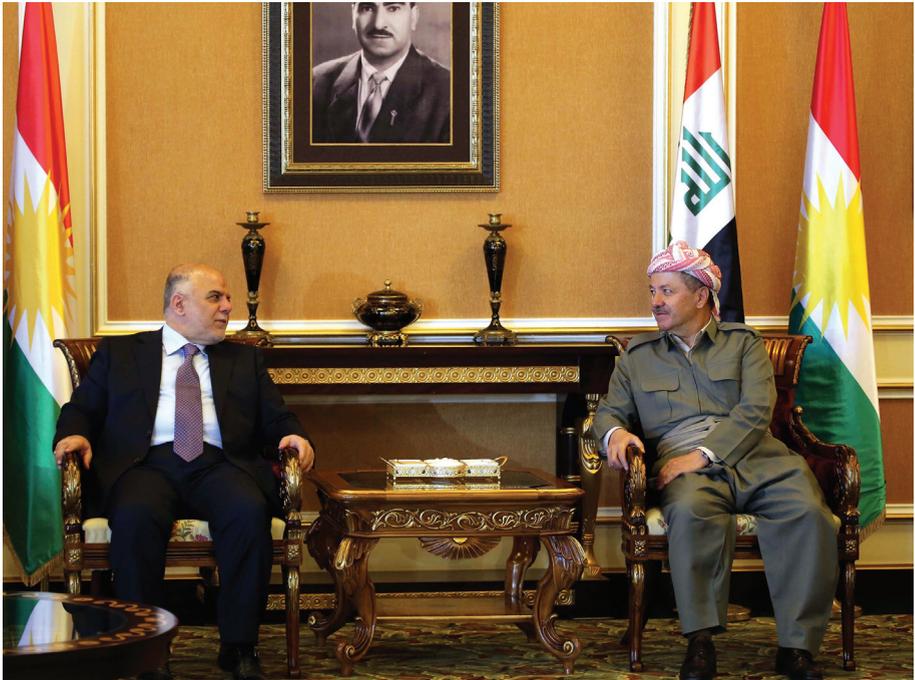
These Kurdish gains fell into question when ISIL turned its attention to Iraqi Kurdistan in August of 2014. With

help from American airstrikes and the aforementioned Kurdish fighters from Turkey, Syria and Iran, however, the Iraqi Kurds quickly blunted the ISIL offensive. Within a few months, they recaptured virtually all of the territories ISIL had seized from them in August, and even gained some additional areas vacated by the Iraqi army in June 2014. In the process of doing so, the KRG also greatly increased international (and especially Western) sympathy for itself. Arms and supplies poured in from the United States, Britain, Germany, Iran and a host of other states. Although initially slow to respond to the KRG's requests for military aid, Turkey also ended up contributing.⁸

Most importantly for Iraqi Kurdish aspirations, the rise of ISIL—which was directly related to the Arab Spring's effect in Syria—shattered the Baghdad government's power (in both a real and perceived sense). In the contest between Erbil and Baghdad, one actor's decline in power necessarily entailed the relative rise in the other's power. If Iraqi Kurds were to secede tomorrow, authorities of the Iraqi Federal Government would not be in a position to do much about it. In the meantime, the disputed territories remain under Kurdish control—including the oil fields around Kirkuk, which the Kurds are using to independently export to Turkey, much to the consternation of the "new" Haidar al-Abadi government. The incentive for Baghdad to compromise in the Kurds' favor on a host of disputed issues has thus increased considerably, to the Kurds' obvious

Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi met with the leader of KRG Mesut Barzani in Erbil on April 06, 2015 to discuss about the situation on Mosul.

AA PHOTO / EMRAH YORULMAZ



advantage. And just as it is doing for the Kurds in Syria, the military campaign against ISIL seems to be serving as a “trial by fire” to turn the Iraqi Kurds into a stronger political and military entity. The first part of Charles Tilly’s famous dictum comes to mind in this case: “War made the state and the state made war.”⁹

Turkey

As stated earlier, the Kurdish issue in Turkey revolved around issues independent of the Arab Spring, especially given that Turkey is not a state with a significant Arab population. However, the civil war in neighboring Syria eventually managed to find its way into the heart of Turkey’s Kurdish issue. For several years, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) had sought to attract Kurdish

voters by loosening authoritarian restrictions on Kurdish identity, language and culture. In this they were rewarded for a time, winning elections in many predominantly Kurdish districts of Turkey over Kurdish identity-focused parties such as the Democratic Society Party (DTP) and, after its closure, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

In 2014, however, events surrounding the ISIL offensive against the Syrian Kurdish canton of Kobane, which lies right on the Turkish border, seriously damaged the AK Party’s electoral health, to the benefit of the PKK-sympathetic People’s Democracy Party (HDP). In the fall of 2014, as ISIL laid siege to Kobane, Ankara appeared to do nothing to assist the town’s defenders (although

Turkey did take in large numbers of refugees from the area). Exacerbating this perception, Turkish government authorities actively prevented the resupply of Kobane, as well as the entry of volunteers from Turkey's Kurdish population to help defend it. Ankara feared that any assistance to the PKK-linked PYD in Kobane would ultimately strengthen the PKK, which had yet to withdraw all its forces from Turkey. Aghast at the fate of their kin just across the border, ethnic Kurds staged demonstrations across Turkey, some of which became violent. Ankara's resulting clamp-down on the demonstrations led to the deaths of some thirty protesters.¹⁰ The government's repression of the Kobane solidarity protests and its apparent indifference to the fate of the besieged town pushed many Kurdish AK Party voters into the arms of the HDP.

In June 2015, national elections in Turkey returned a disappointing result for the AK Party, denying the party a majority government for the first time since it took power in 2002. The HDP, with its Kurdish-issue focus, managed to pass the 10 percent electoral threshold for the first time (with some 13 percent of the vote), to gain 80 seats in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Critics of President Erdoğan claim that following this, Mr. Erdoğan decided to pursue a new election and to prize the Turkish nationalist vote over Kurdish votes, using the pretext of the PKK's killing of two policemen to renew the war against the PKK and to achieve a "rally around the flag effect."¹¹ AK

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Party supporters, in contrast, argue that the PKK never withdrew its fighters from Turkey as it had promised to do, kept conducting sporadic attacks in Turkey, and used the two years of ceasefire to arm itself more and prepare for a renewed campaign of violence.¹²

Without needing to assess the validity of either point of view, the Arab Spring developments and civil war in neighboring Syria clearly played a central role in the renewal of Kurdish-centered conflict in Turkey. The actual spark was a suicide bombing in the town of Suruç that killed 32 Kurdish and Leftist youths preparing to bring aid to neighboring Kobane. Kurdish parties blamed Ankara for the bombing, claiming the government had facilitated the bombers access to the site. The PKK initially responded by assassinating two Turkish policemen it claimed to be complicit in the attack (although the organization later retracted the claim of responsibility).¹³ Ankara responded to the killing of the policemen by launching sustained bombing campaigns against PKK camps in Iraqi

Kurdistan, and at the time of this writing the 2013 ceasefire appears completely defunct, with mounting casualties on both sides. As a result of the civil war in Syria and its participation in the fight against ISIL, however, the PKK may well be stronger this time around than it has been for many years. The organization also appears to have much greater international attention and sympathy than it ever did before, which could complicate Ankara's efforts. The fighting has apparently not cost the HDP, which remains sympathetic to the PKK, any of the historic levels of electoral support that propelled the party into parliament on June 7, 2015.¹⁴

The Dark Clouds of Change

In Turkey, the resumption of the war between the state and the PKK threatens everyone. The Turkish economy and the value of the Turkish lira have taken serious damage, and the future repercussions of the violence remain difficult to assess. Increasing societal polarization threatens to add ethnic strife to a political conflict that had largely avoided such demons since the PKK took up arms in 1984.¹⁵ Most Turks probably agree with President Erdoğan's accusation that the PKK used the two years following the 2013 ceasefire to stockpile weapons and better prepare for war.¹⁶ If so, the current fighting may significantly decrease the chances for another ceasefire and the provision of more of the rights most Kurds in Turkey are demanding.

Instability and political change offer some actors opportunities but also

include grave dangers and the gruesome death toll in Syria and Iraq has included many Kurds as well. In Syria, the Kurds benefitted from the fighting between Hafez al-Assad's Alawi-dominated regime and Sunni Arab –dominated rebel groups. If either of these two should ever prevail over the other, the political space Syrian Kurds found to pursue their ambitions will likely come into immediate danger as the victors attempt to assert their political authority over Syrian Kurdistan as well. Even in the midst of the current Syrian civil war, the threat from jihadi rebel groups has been severe for the three PYD-controlled cantons. Kobane almost fell in 2014, Afrin remains isolated, and hundreds of thousands of civilians have fled the three cantons. Turkey has threatened to take action if the Syrian Kurds achieve too much,¹⁷ although the exact nature of such action and what constitutes "too much" remains ambiguous. In any case, the Syrian Kurdish experiment in self-rule risks being crushed by an array of unfriendly forces, including various Syrian rebel groups, ISIL, Turkey and the Assad regime itself.

In Iraq, ISIL's war against the KRG resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands and, as of April 2015, more than 1500 *peshmerga* killed.¹⁸ The cost of caring for the refugees and fighting a war while being cut off by Baghdad from their share of the Iraqi national budget has placed great strain on Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the Iraqi Kurds gained a large amount of sympathy for their

campaign against ISIL, this has not translated into significant international support for Iraqi Kurdish independence and statehood. Haidar al-Abadi's government in Baghdad appears to interpret the 2005 Iraqi Constitution in much the same way that the previous Maliki government did, rejecting Kurdish control of their own oil and gas and demanding that the disputed territories around Kirkuk and elsewhere be returned to federal government control. If Baghdad regains some of its relative power, as it surely must one day, the threat such disagreements pose to the Iraqi Kurds may rise accordingly. If the governments in Baghdad (and Tehran) one day find themselves less occupied in fighting ISIL and other threats, they could have more energy to devote to containing Iraqi Kurdish ambitions.

Legitimate Kurdish Aspirations or Dangerous Adventurism?

Of all the Kurdish political actors, only those in Iraqi Kurdistan talk of their desire to secede and establish a state of Kurdistan. Even in this case, the rhetoric favoring independence is usually qualified, maintaining that this is the Iraqi Kurds' right should the Iraqi state fail or if Baghdad refuses to respect the provisions of the 2005 Constitution (as the Kurds view them). Given current trajectories in Iraq and Baghdad's weakness, the Iraqi Kurds may well achieve their state in the foreseeable future.¹⁹ In Syria, Turkey and Iran, however, no significant Kurdish political organization currently advocates for secession. In the former two cases, the

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dominant Kurdish political parties advocate for "democratic autonomy," a somewhat vague concept conceived by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan that involves increasing autonomy and direct democracy at a community-based level.²⁰

Taken at face value, such ambitions seem perfectly legitimate by international standards. On a broad rhetorical level, the international community favors self-determination and democracy. Given the PKK's Marxist-Leninist origins (some might say "Stalinist") and a history of bloody conflict with both the Turkish state and rival Kurdish and Leftist groups,²¹ however, there remains broad skepticism in Turkey and Syria towards the PKK's nature and ultimate goals (and by extension, those of the PYD and other PKK-aligned organizations). The PKK itself remains on the terrorist lists of Turkey, the European Union and the United States. The government in Ankara still refuses to speak directly with the group, much less recognize it or offer amnesty to its fighters in return for peace. Instead, AK Party government pursued a strategy of limited democratic reforms aimed at satisfying Turkey's ethnic Kurdish citizens enough to

dry up the PKK's support base. As discussed above, however, this strategy has failed –largely (but not exclusively) due to the events surrounding the siege of Kobane.

Nonetheless, whatever the true extent of change within the PKK and its allied organizations or the sincerity of these groups' claim not to be working towards the establishment of a Kurdish state, the Kurds' demands for more democratic rights, more recognition, more autonomy and more decentralization need to be addressed. These demands enjoy wide popularity amongst Kurds of all political stripes in all four states with large Kurdish populations, but Kurdish political groups will have to moderate some of their demands in order to strike a deal with their respective central governments. In any case, the region-wide changes related to the Arab Spring and the resultant Kurdish gains in Syria, Iraq and Turkey, may mean that the old approaches of "solving the Kurdish issue militarily" are even less realistic than before, not to mention ethically problematic. New approaches to relations between the governments of the region and Kurdish political actors will, unfortunately, require painful concessions and difficult choices for all involved. ■

Endnotes

1. David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). The PKK appears to offer a partial exception to this observation: Although the group was founded at a moment of Turkish state weakness in the late 1970s, it began its armed actions against state security forces in 1984, immediately

following three years of military rule and a moment when the state in Turkey could hardly have been considered weak or lacking resolve against dissent.

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