

# The Kurdish Crisis in Iraq and Syria and the right to self-determination

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THE KURDISH STRUGGLE in Syria and Iraq has witnessed number of recent changes, with clear contrasts in each country. The broad victory of the “yes” in the Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan region’s independence referendum on September 25 was rooted in the long historical will of the Kurdish people to establish a state. It was also the consequence of a violent history of oppression inflicted upon the Iraqi-Kurdish population by various previous Iraqi nationalist authoritarian regimes.

The massacre by chemical weapons against the Kurdish population of Halabja in 1988 by Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime [then supported by the U.S. and other Western governments — ed.] is particularly remembered. About 5000 Kurds perished in this massacre. This attack was part of Operation Anfal launched by the authorities in Baghdad during this period, which killed 182,000 people and destroyed more than 90% of the Kurdish villages.

The Iraqi referendum also demonstrated, once again, the failure of the models of the capitalist, chauvinist and centralized nation-states of the region, which have consistently repressed, erased, and/or denied the plurality of their societies by affirming the supremacy and/or domination of an ethnic group over others, a religious sect over others, or both at the same time.

In Syria, no solution for the Kurdish issue and an inclusive Syria can be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper “people” or “nation” and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in the country and elsewhere.

The destiny of the Kurdish people in Syria was and remains intrinsically linked to the dynamics of the Syrian uprising and therefore its future is in danger, just as with the rest of the protest movement. This is why we should not isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution.

Any possibility of self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria, as well as in Iran and in Turkey, has to go through common struggle with the popular classes of these countries against the various fractions of the bourgeoisie that dominate these states, whether they are from reactionary Islamic fundamentalism or nationalist chauvinism, or a mix of both.

That is why we must support the right of self-determination for the between 28 and 35 million Kurdish people in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. We need to denounce these authoritarian regimes, foreign international and regional measures and pressures that prevent Kurdish populations from

deciding their own future.

Iraqi Kurds' initial enthusiasm following the massive victory of the "yes" vote at over 92% in favor of independence on September 25 quickly gave way to multiple threats and military offensives against the autonomous territories under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) since 1992.

Composed of three provinces of northern Iraq, this broad swath of land stretching from the Iranian to the Syrian border with Kirkuk at its center — and claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad — was lost in mid-October. The loss included the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

Meanwhile the Iraqi government led by the Shia Islamic fundamentalist party al-Dawa, with the support of Turkey and Iran, are continuing their pressure to obtain new concessions from the KRG.

In Syria, the PYD (Democratic Union Party), through its armed wing, YPG that dominates the SDF coalition of fighters, has accumulated victories and controls new territories in Syria, mostly but not only at the expense of the jihadist group Islamic State (IS), with the support of both the U.S.-led International coalition and Russia. In November the SDF controlled nearly a quarter of Syria.

The last major success of the PYD was the expulsion of IS forces from Raqqa in Syria, although not without deep humanitarian cost for its inhabitants. This good situation, however, comes with threats from various actors issuing from Turkey and Iran, as well as the Assad regime.

## **Iraq, or the Fallen Dream**

On October 16, Iraqi forces and Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) captured the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields from the Kurdish forces. This action followed an agreement concluded between Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi and a faction of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a political rival of the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Kurdish peshmerga affiliated with the PUK and KDP either withdrew or fled. During his resignation speech on October 29, former President Masoud Barzani accused his political rivals of "high treason" for yielding territory, particularly Kirkuk, without a fight. The referendum and government backlash have also revealed deep divisions among the Kurdish political parties and increased them.

(Kurdish politics have been dominated for decades by the KDP, led by three generations of the Barzani family, and its main rivals the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by the family of Jalal Talabani, who died in October. The two parties fought a civil war against each other in the 1990s, but maintained an outward appearance of unity after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, with Jalal Talabani serving as Iraq's ceremonial president in Baghdad from 2005-2014 while Masoud Barzani ran the Kurdish autonomous region.)

On November 1, President Barzani resigned and passed on many of the powers of his office jointly to his nephew Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, the Speakership of Parliament, and the Judicial Council.

This resignation appeared at first to be a significant concession by Barzani's KDP, following the failure of the referendum, to relieve the impasse surrounding his extralegal retention of office, and raised the possibility of democratic reforms.

In fact, it is an attempt by the KDP to maintain its domination over the KRG, and for the PUK to hang on what remains of its long-standing and exclusive power-sharing relationship with the KDP in an

increasingly volatile and polarized political environment.

Barzani remains nevertheless influential as head of the ruling KDP and still sits on the High Political Council (HPC), a non-governmental body that emerged after the referendum that can act independently of the KRG's legally established institutions. [1]

More than 183,000 civilians have been displaced by the conflict, including 79,000 from the city of Kirkuk, which Baghdad conquered on the first day of its offensive. The KRG lost about 40% of its previously held territory as its forces withdrew from the disputed areas.

The Iraqi central government has continued to threaten the KRG and demand new concessions regarding its sovereignty. Baghdad wants control of all border checkpoints, including the Turkish frontier that has been controlled by the KRG since the Saddam Hussein era.

The KRG sought to defuse tensions with Baghdad with a ceasefire on all fronts, continued cooperation in the fight against IS and joint deployments in the disputed territories claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad.

The Kurdish defense department said the offer for joint control of frontier was part of a "deconfliction" proposal made to Baghdad on October 31. One of the border crossings, Fish-Khabur, is strategically vital for the landlocked KRG as the point where oil from northern Iraq crosses into Turkey.

The Iraqi government also demanded that the KRG stop exporting its own oil and hand over sales to the Iraqi state-oil marketer SOMO. Baghdad is actually discussing with Ankara to let SOMO sell Kurdish crude that arrives by pipeline.

Until mid-October about 530,000 barrels per day (bpd) arrived in Ceyhan, the Turkish terminal on the Mediterranean, via the pipeline. Half came from the KRG's oilfields, the rest from Kirkuk.

The Iraqi government was supported directly in its military actions by the neighboring states, Turkey and Iran. Ankara and Teheran actually fear that an Iraqi Kurdish independence process will have consequences for their own Kurdish minorities, who also suffer from the discriminatory and oppressive policies of these regimes.

## **Turkey and Iran**

Turkey, which had excellent relations with the KRG and the Barzani family and is the primary investor in Iraqi Kurdistan, denounced the referendum as a "terrible mistake" and reiterated its support for "the territorial integrity of Iraq."

Tehran pledged to stand by Baghdad and Ankara against the outcome of the referendum for the independence to Iraqi Kurdistan. Ali Akbar Velayati, chief adviser to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared that "Muslim nations will not allow the creation of a second Israel." The conservative press in Iran described the referendum as a "Zionist plot" to destabilize the region.

Similarly, he failed to answer whether, in case the Assad regime tried to wrest control from the authorities governing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the United States would support the SDF. On their side, PYD leaders voiced support for a longer-term role for U.S. forces in Syria once IS is defeated and until there is a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

By the end of November, there were new rumors Donald Trump's administration planed to ask

Kurdish PYD fighters in Syria to return U.S. weapons loaned for the fight against the Islamic State (IS) when the jihadist group was completely defeated, although this would not mostly occur on the short term.

Political and military collaboration among Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran intensified throughout this period against the KRG.

The Iranian regime benefited directly from its participation through the PMF in the conquest of Kirkuk by positioning itself to take control of oil exports from this region rich in oil. Under a new arrangement with Baghdad, Teheran will receive 15,000 barrels per day worth nearly \$1 million, rising gradually to 60,000 bpd. Iran and Iraq also revived a project to build a pipeline to carry oil from Iraq's Kirkuk fields to central Iran and onwards for export from the Gulf.

At the same time, the United States and European States opposed the referendum and the idea of independence. Western countries repeatedly reiterated their opposition to holding both the referendum and the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. They feared that these developments would lead to more regional instability, weaken the "war" against IS, and lead to unrest in disputed areas such as the multi-ethnic and wealthy city of Kirkuk.

Russia, which invested over \$4 billion in the Kurdistan region's energy sector, overtaking the United States as the largest investor, declared on its side "that the disputes between Baghdad and Erbil must be resolved by dialogue with the aim of finding a formula of coexistence within the Iraqi state."

On November 6, 2017, the KRG declared that it would respect the ruling by the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court, which declared that no Iraqi province could secede. "We believe that this decision must become a basis for starting an inclusive national dialogue between (Kurdish authorities in) Erbil and Baghdad to resolve all disputes," the KRG said in a statement.

However this did not prevent, on the same day, the Iraqi cabinet from proposing a reduction of the Kurdistan region's share of the 2018 draft federal budget to 12.6%. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein the region has been entitled to 17%. [\[2\]](#)

The reduced budget would dramatically add to the KRG's financial difficulties and is viewed as a punitive measure. Additionally the draft budget would distribute the Kurdish region's share directly to the three provinces, further undermining KRG's control over the allocation of funds.

In short, the Kurdish population of Iraq has suffered a new and terrible blow as most countries define their own interests in opposition to Kurdish independence.

## **Syria After IS**

Although mostly limited to the military field, the PYD in Syria has developed closer relations with the United States and Russia in the past few years. But recently relations became more tense with the latter.

Within the strategic framework of "IS first" and the complete failure to assist Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces to combat the IS, Washington increasingly supported the PYD and the YPG-led coalition known as the Syrian Democratic Forces established in October 2015. They were created officially as a response to fight the "terrorism represented by the IS, its sister [organizations] and the criminal Ba'th regime" according to its founding statement.

The SDF was actually established to provide a legal and political cover for American military support for the PKK-affiliated group PYD in Syria. U.S. support for the SDF continued in its struggle against IS in 2016 and 2017, while Russia prevented any direct confrontation between SDF and Turkish forces by creating de facto buffer zones between both actors in some areas.

The SDF was seen especially by the USA as the best actor on the ground to fight IS. The United States notably supported SDF units to expel IS from Raqqa and its surroundings. The cost in human terms, as previously seen with the Iraqi city Mosul, resulted in destroying more than 80%.

There is a humanitarian crisis with a serious shortage of food, medicine, electricity, drinking water and basic necessities. In the four-month offensive on Raqqa, between 1300 and 1800 civilians were killed. [3]

Some 270,000 to 320,000 people have been displaced by the fighting and are living in miserable conditions in overcrowded camps on the outskirts of the city. They will not be able to return until the city is cleared of the mines and explosives scattered by the IS, which might take months.

At the end of October, with the loss of Raqqa, IS controls less than 10% of Syrian territory — compared with 33% at the beginning of 2017. More than half lies in the province of Deir Zor, close to that of Raqqa. IS was the target of two separate offensives in Deir Zor: one led by the regime's troops and its allies, supported by Russia, the other by the SDF, supported by the United States.

The province of Deir Zor also suffered tremendously from these offensives and bombings. From September 10 to the beginning of November, between 660 and 880 civilians died, while more than 200,000 people fled the province.

The IS proto-state crumbled nearly completely at the end of 2017 under the pressure of multiple offensives in Syria and Iraq.

In mid-November the regime's army and its allies, Hezbollah and Iran-backed militias, with the assistance of Russian aviation, were fighting IS in desert areas near Albu Kamal, the last town the jihadist group held in Syria, near the border with Iraq. Albu Kamal was a major supply and communications hub for IS between Syria and Iraq, was a big prize for the Iranian-backed militias.

However, this succession of defeats has not prevented the IS from multiplying suicide operations and car-bomb attacks in different regions of the country. The jihadist group has also increased the abuses against civilians in the areas from which its soldiers are withdrawing.

PYD's Moscow representative Abd Salam Muhammad Ali, declared at the beginning of December that the SDF could be integrated into the Syrian army if a political solution that satisfied all parties was found. The leading Syrian Kurdish PYD politician, however, co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council Ilham Ahmed, revealed in September 2017 that PYD officials had already met with the Assad regime twice, but the Russian-brokered dialogue went nowhere.

Russia was unable or unwilling to override a Turkish veto of PYD participation in January 2017 peace talks in the Kazakhstan capital Astana, during which both the representatives of the opposition and of the regime rejected any Kurdish autonomy.

The rapprochement between the Turkish and Russian leaders, Erdogan and Putin, did not improve PYD's situation following the failed military coup of a section of the Turkish army in July 2016. That August the Turkish forces formed a coalition with the Syrian armed opposition forces in a military campaign called "Operation Euphrates Shield." They targeted both IS and PYD in Syria and their intervention was not opposed by Russia, the USA or Iran.

Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Nurettin Canikli even acknowledged in December 2016 that Turkey "would not have moved so comfortably" without the rapprochement with Russia, which effectively controls parts of northern Syrian air space. This demonstrated that Russian interests were not similar to the PYD.

Similarly, interactions between U.S. officials and YPG commanders remained largely informal. In January and September 2016, Brett McGurk, the U.S. special presidential envoy for the anti-IS coalition, twice visited YPG-controlled areas, Rumeilan and Kobani. He was filmed with YPG-PYD and SDF commanders but did not discuss the issue foremost on the PYD group's mind: U.S. protection and recognition of the self-rule area.

Not wishing to encourage Kurdish separatist ambitions that further upset Turkey, Washington also avoided providing economic support to PYD-controlled areas. After Ankara fumed over a U.S. decision to arm SDF fighters for the offensive on Raqqa, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, during May 2017 talks with Turkey's prime minister, voiced strong support for Turkey's fight against PKK militants.

The United States has maintained the PKK on its terrorist list throughout these years. This prevented PKK leaders from speaking directly to U.S. military commanders. (They did so through the PKK's YPG associates, in their capacity as SDF commanders.) In June 2017, Washington even pledged to take back weapons supplied to YPG after the defeat of IS.

PKK leader Riza Altun pointed out that U.S. behavior towards the Kurdish issue in Syria "is double-edged depending on its interests, and the relationship with Washington is therefore tactical in nature."

More recently, on October 31 Major General James Jarrard, the Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve commander declared that the United States would continue to support the SDF after the military defeat of IS, but he claimed to not know for how long.

Similarly, he failed to answer whether, in case the Assad regime tried to wrest control from the authorities governing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the United States would support the SDF. On their side, PYD leaders voiced support for a longer-term role for U.S. forces in Syria once IS is defeated and until there is a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

The PYD faced the contradiction that Russia and the United States were not ready to jeopardize their relationships with Turkey to support any Kurdish autonomy plan whether in Syria or elsewhere.

The rapprochement at the end of 2016 among Iran, Turkey and Russia threatened PYD's interests even more.

## **Turkey and Syria**

In October 2017 the Turkish army deployed once again in Syria, in Idlib province in northern Syria, setting up observation posts as part of a mission to control the SDF. Initially the mission was officially aimed at dislodging Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a military alliance dominated by the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra.

The HTS actually agreed not to interfere with Turkish operations along the border and is therefore relatively spared, for the moment, by Ankara. This Turkish military deployment, in collaboration with Syrian armed opposition groups, is part of the so-called de-escalation agreements reached with Iran



and Russia. The objective is to isolate the city of Afrin controlled by the SDF.

The Turkish pro-government daily Yeni Safak did not hesitate to use as a headline in one of its editions at this period: "Today Idlib, tomorrow Afrin." The Turkish government also placed opposition armed groups that it sponsors and supports in the areas.

At the time of writing, the Turkish forces continued their incursions into the northern territories of the country, while in mid-November Erdogan declared "We need to cleanse Afrin of the structure there called the YPG terrorist organization."

The Syrian regime's military advances also demonstrated Damascus' unwillingness to accept a rival actor in the territories recaptured from IS, as shown by the multiplication of clashes with SDF. The fact that for tactical reasons both actors avoided each other's major infighting in the past few years, [4] and that there are examples of on-the-ground tactical cooperation, do not change the fact that the two factions are strategically opposed.

In mid-June 2017, U.S. warplanes shot down a Syrian jet in the southern Raqqa countryside because it dropped bombs near SDF positions. In mid-September, Russian air forces targeted positions of the SDF, causing injuries, east of the Euphrates River in Syria near Deir Zor. Although Moscow denied bombing SDF forces, the U.S. coalition and the SDF argued otherwise.

The pressure on SDF forces continued to mount as they suffered a new attack carried out by Russian and regime forces against their positions in Deir Zor province on September 25.

On its side, the Damascus regime has repeatedly declared that it would not allow PYD to threaten the country's territorial unity and that "Those who will move in those directions know what price they have to pay."

A high regime official, Bouthaina Shaaban, actually declared that the Syrian government was ready to fight the SDF, characterizing them as an illegitimate foreign force just as is IS. For officials in Damascus, Raqqa is still considered an occupied city.

In the midst of worsening military and political tensions between Damascus and its allies on one side and the PYD, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem affirmed at the end of September that the Syrian government was open to negotiations with Kurds over their demand for autonomy within Syria's borders. This declaration was merely rhetoric, as it did not provide any political content to the meaning of "autonomy" used by officials in Damascus.

Walid Moallem's ambiguous statement sought short-term understanding with the PYD by possibly providing the Kurdish movement with a sort of political arrangement to try and avoid a scenario of complete separation similar to Iraqi Kurdistan.

It might also pressure the Turkish government, which sees a Kurdish autonomous region under the leadership of PKK's sister organization as a danger. The statement of the Syrian Foreign Minister was made on the same day of the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq, which was completely rejected by the Syrian regime.

Despite the cautious readiness of some PYD officials to engage in dialogue with the regime, Ilham Ahmed remarked that in both their meetings Damascus officials "did not appear serious" about talks on the future of the autonomous regions and the demand for a federal system for Syria. The Syrian regime through the voice of its dictator Bashar al-Assad has promised to restore the authority of the state over the entire national territory, including Raqqa.

## Conclusion

Support for self-determination, which can take diverse forms such as independence, federalism or recognition of the Kurdish people as an entity with equal rights within a state, must not mean being uncritical of the policies and collaboration with various imperialist countries by the various Kurdish leaderships of the Barzani clan, PKK/PYD or any other Kurdish political parties.

Of course this is not to say that we consider these forces as similar. We can express, for example, critical support to PKK/PYD — we can notably talk of positive policies regarding women's rights and secularism, among other things — while progressives should oppose the Barzani clan's neoliberal and conservative policies and their links with Israel.

However, collaboration by some Kurdish forces with imperialist forces can't be used to justify the refusal of the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people, as did some chauvinist leftists in the region. As the revolutionary Russian Vladimir Lenin said:

"The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another 'Great' Power in its equally imperialist interests, should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous cases of the bourgeoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism."

What is important to understand here is that Kurds in the past have been used by authoritarian regimes and imperialist actors to serve their interests before being sacrificed when these interests changed. This has occurred before and most probably will happen again.

In this perspective, the unity and independence of the popular and working classes without any forms of discrimination (race, religion, gender, etc.) in the region is of course the only way for the liberation and emancipation of all.

Workers' struggles alone will not, however, be sufficient to unite the working classes. Socialists in these struggles must also champion the liberation of all the oppressed. That requires raising demands for rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups.

Any compromise on the explicit commitment to such demands will impede the Left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society. This means also supporting the right to self-determination of the Kurdish populations throughout the region.

**Joseph Daher**

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**P.S.**

\* Against the Current n°192, January-February 2018:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/5176>



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## Footnotes

[1] The HPC is the “grand coalition” that succeeded the High Referendum Council, the body established to carry out the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region. It is comprised mostly of KDP members and a few PUK executives close to the KDP. It has no accountability to parliament or any other official institution, but nonetheless declared it would “protect the stability of Kurdistan from any type of threat” and represent the Kurdistan Region in Baghdad and abroad.

[2] The post-Saddam Constitution put in place a system guaranteeing the Kurds self-rule with a share of overall revenue proportionate to their share of the population. Since 2014, while the KRG held nearly all of northern Iraq’s oil infrastructure and sold enough crude to fund themselves, Baghdad stopped sending funds. But the Iraqi government offensive that recaptured the KRG oil-producing territory in October meant the Kurdish autonomous region was once again dependent on Baghdad for funds.

[3] More than 1,000 civilians (1,058) died under U.S.-led coalition bombings, 311 civilians were killed by IS and 191 civilians by SDF. IS jihadists have also used many civilians as human shields.

[4] PYD policies in Syria have been problematic on some issues such as its non-conflict orientation towards the Assad regime, support for Russian intervention in Syria and even benefiting in the beginning of 2016 from Russian bombing in the countryside of Aleppo to conquer new territories against FSA and Islamic opposition forces. There are also some accusations of human rights violations against Arab populations. In addition, it has practiced authoritarian and repressive measures against other Kurdish rival groups and activists.