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NO FRIENDS BUT THE MOUNTAINS

The Fate of the Kurds

Terry Glavin

It is out of the Middle East's current nightmare that the old dream of a united Kurdistan is drawing new breath. Kurdish independence, if not in whole then at least in some combination of its disconnected parts, may well be the one thing worth salvaging from the region's killing fields. A firmer alignment on the part of the US with Kurdish interests would certainly salvage something from the shambles of American foreign policy in the Middle East, too.

But if the Kurds' time has at long last arrived, their own pragmatism and a distinctly utopian strain of politics are combining to confound even their most fervent overseas champions. It's not at all certain that anything like statehood is what the Kurds immediately want or need, and in any case, President Obama's opaque and haphazard approach to the Middle East, having already cost him the confidence of so many of his key administration officials, has also cost him the trust of the Kurds.

Numbering perhaps twenty-five million people throughout their homelands in the mountainous region that lies astride the borders of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, the Kurds are arguably the most populous

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people on earth without a nation-state to call their own. It is also of interest, given the detachment of US policy toward them, that they have been far more favorably disposed to the United States than any people in the region outside of Israel.

Still, their old expression “the Kurds have no friends but the mountains” has regained such value among them lately that it is worth noticing where it comes from, why it persists, and why the Kurds now have Americans foremost in mind when they say it.

The last time the Middle East was in a disarray comparable to the current bedlam was during the chaotic aftermath of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which was to establish the borders of Syria and Iraq, the Kurds were offered their own country. The promise of a sovereign and democratic Kurdistan was then broken by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which circumscribed the territorial sovereignty of Turkey.

What followed was a macabre progression of persecution, ethnic cleansing, and wars of extermination waged to recurring and varying degrees, sometimes consecutively and sometimes concurrently, by each of the four nation-states (Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey) where the Kurds ended up as captive populations. The Kurds responded by mounting protracted uprisings and insurrections, sometimes even fighting as proxies for one or the other of those same countries during their occasional wars with one another.

The greatest Kurdish misfortune at the moment, however, is to be situated at the intersection of an increasingly bloody and dystopian Arab world, the outward-reaching ruthlessness of Khomeinist Iran, and the belligerent Islamist nationalism of Recep Erdogan’s Turkey. As if to compound the Kurds’ burden of bad luck, Sunni-Shia hatreds are sending seismic shocks through fault lines that lie directly beneath their feet. Most Kurds happen to be Sunni Muslims.

The United States remains committed to its policy of a unified Iraq, but within the Kurdish leadership itself there are forces in play that have produced a panoply of strategies that do not depend on any US effort in the cause of cross-border statehood.

At one end, Massoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)

dominates Iraqi Kurdistan and controls the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government. Its history includes a stint as a de facto Soviet client against Iran and another brief stint as a Khomeinist proxy during

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the Iran-Iraq War, for which the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein later viciously punished the Kurds, slaughtering tens of thousands in his Anfal campaign, most notoriously in his nerve-gas bombing of Halabja.

Over the years, the KDP has evolved into a populist and nationalist party. It has eclipsed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan of Barzani’s lifelong adversary Jalal Talabani, who was Iraq’s first democratically elected president in 2005. The KDP’s

lukewarmness toward pan-Kurdish independence comes from a wariness about the compromises its success would require vis-à-vis Iraqi Kurdistan’s neighbors, not least the Kurds’ belligerent Turkish adversaries in Ankara.

At the other pole is an array of parties and armed groups inspired by Abdullah Ocalan, the charismatic insurrectionist whose Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) led an armed uprising that spiraled out of control during the dark days following Turkey’s military coup in the early 1980s and carried on intermittently until 2013.

Because the PKK is outlawed in Turkey, NATO countries list the organization as a terrorist entity, and indeed some of the PKK’s early conduct would fit the description of “terrorism.” This complicates matters as well for the Syrian Kurds, whose dominant Democratic Union Party and Local Protection Force (YPG) guerrillas are intimately linked with the PKK. Ocalan also enjoys the loyalty of a militant constituency in Iran’s Kurdish underground.

Just as Massoud Barzani now has more important things to worry about than the challenge of carving out an independent Kurdistan from the four states that enclose the Kurdish homelands, Ocalan’s

thinking has also radically evolved over time. He is no longer the Dear Leader figure of a classic and brutal Marxist-Leninist third-world liberation movement, and has lately taken on the persona of a kind of Kurdish Nelson Mandela.

Just as Mandela was imprisoned for eighteen of his twenty-seven years behind bars on Robben Island off the South African Coast, Ocalan has been imprisoned since 1999 on Imrali Island, in the Sea of Marmara, off Istanbul. Ocalan's politics have lately drawn from such diverse sources as the works of the late American libertarian-socialist philosopher Murray Bookchin. Ocalan's movement in Turkey has adopted a focus on a form of nonviolent democratic decentralization. And it's working, at least in its emphasis on democratic control of municipal and regional governments and avoiding direct confrontations with Erdogan's government in Ankara.

But the main thing that preoccupies Kurds across the political spectrum now is a more immediate and necessary focus on the priority of survival. This isn't a historical anomaly. It is only rarely that the Kurds have enjoyed any reprieve from their calamities.

There was the tiny, briefly lived, Soviet-backed Republic of Mahabad, in the Kurdish region of Iran, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, but when the Soviets withdrew from Iran the Kurdish separatists were massacred by Iranian government forces. During the 1979 revolution that overthrew the shah, the Iranian Kurds sided with Ayatollah Khomeini in the hopes of restoring some autonomy for themselves, but the Khomeinists went on to crush the Kurds, executing thousands. Iran's Kurds remain brutally suppressed, capable of only the most intermittent and small-scale guerrilla resistance.

In Turkey, several Kurdish rebellions erupted through the early twentieth century, and each in its turn was brutally crushed (to merely speak the Kurdish language in public was until only very recently a crime punishable by a prison sentence). A truce between Ocalan's PKK and Ankara has been mostly holding since April 2013, following a three-decade uprising and counterinsurgency that took the lives of at least thirty thousand people. Thousands of Kurds were summarily executed or "disappeared." At least one hundred thousand were imprisoned. Another

million were uprooted while the Turkish government busied itself destroying an estimated three thousand Kurdish villages, many of them obliterated in bombing runs by the Turkish Air Force.

Until the events of this past summer, Iraqi Kurdistan had enjoyed the longest and most fruitful period of Kurdish freedom. A Kurdish safe haven began to flower in northern Iraq in 1991, owing to the Anglo-American enforcement of a no-fly zone in the denouement of the Gulf War. Following the “shock and awe” of 2003, every hope that the administration of George W. Bush held out for Iraq was realized in full in Iraqi Kurdistan.

While the rest of Iraq has descended into fratricidal Sunni-Shiite bloodletting, the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has continued to set down deep roots, almost entirely at peace, despite Baghdad’s efforts in disruption and containment. But everything changed last June, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s Islamic State (also called ISIS or ISIL) arose out of the ruins that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had made of his country and the bedlam that Baghdad’s Shi-ite-run death squads and Sunni suicide bombings had made of Iraq.

After Baghdadi broke with al-Qaeda and declared himself the successor to the Prophet Muhammad and leader of the world’s Muslims, his brutal caliphate was soon in control of a third of Syria and a third of Iraq. By September of 2014, he was commanding a jihadist army variously estimated at up to thirty thousand front-line fighters, perhaps a third of them foreigners, all equipped with heavy weapons, practically limitless ammunition supplies, and fleets of tanks and armored Humvees looted from Iraqi and Syrian military bases. Baghdadi’s Islamic State was also flush with perhaps a half a billion dollars’ worth of stolen currency, on top of daily black-market oil revenues exceeding \$3 million.

A US-led multinational coalition of Arab League and NATO allies formed to carry out airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq, but Erdogan’s Turkey, still a NATO member in good standing, thumbed its nose at this policy. Erdogan was routinely honored in White House pronouncements as a key US ally even while he persisted in supporting the most unsavory, anti-American, and anti-Kurdish Islamist proxies. Erdogan appears to be as determined as ever to keep his own boot firmly planted on the necks of Turkey’s Kurds and the Kurds of northern Syria.

The United States’ decision to intervene against the Islamic State was prompted by the rapid advance of Baghdadi’s fighters across the

Nineveh Plain toward Erbil, the KRG's headquarters in Iraq. There were also tens of thousands of Kurdish Yazidis—followers of an esoteric, pre-Abrahamic monotheism—who were trapped and encircled on Mount Sinjar. They'd begun to die of exposure and thirst, and Obama ordered some last-minute humanitarian airdrops for them.

But it was mostly due to the efforts of Kurdish YPG guerrillas from nearby Syria that the Yazidis were saved from the massacres and enslavement that had already carried off so many thousands of them in the preceding days. The American intervention was a hesitant, reluctant, eleventh-hour affair that came only after public opinion polls had begun to show that even his Democratic Party base was giving Obama a failing grade on this moral and political crisis.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had revealed that she'd opposed Obama's stubborn anti-interventionism as far back as 2011, when full-on support for Syria's pro-democracy rebels might have made a difference. Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta had said much the same thing. So had former CIA chief David Petraeus.

Robert Ford, Obama's ambassador to Syria, resigned because he couldn't support the official White House fiction that there had never been any anti-Assad forces worth backing. Obama's senior adviser on Syria, Frederic C. Hof, jumped ship for strikingly similar reasons. Meanwhile, Assad crossed Obama's "red line" on chemical weapons by merely switching from sarin gas to chlorine gas, without consequence, and his regime's air force kept on bombing its own cities as the Syrian death toll inched closer to two hundred thousand.

When heavily armed Islamic State fighters swarmed out of Syria, Iraqi soldiers abandoned their posts without a struggle, and the Kurdistan Regional Government's outgunned Peshmerga ("those who face death") were routed. It was only when the eyes of the world were on Mount Sinjar, and the Islamic State's heavily armed fighters were within a couple of hours of Erbil, the KRG capital, that Obama acted.

All this has been something less than a confidence-building exercise among the Kurds, perhaps especially among the Syrian Kurds of Rojava, the long, narrow, and broken band of de facto Kurdish autonomy that runs along the Turkish frontier from the smoking tombs of Aleppo in the west to the Tigris River and the semi-autonomous KRG of Iraq in the east.

The Rojava Kurds see enemies on all sides—the Assad regime, Baghdad's Islamic State, Erdogan's Turkey. Even so, the Kurds' PKK-backed

YPG guerrillas have mounted the most effective resistance of all the region's non-state actors to both the Assad regime and to the Islamic State's marauders. While the YPG guerrillas were fighting with black-market weapons, moreover, the United States was giving them every indication that they were doomed to fight on alone, helpless and friendless.

That deadening sense of betrayal had already caused the implosion of the Free Syrian Army, even though the FSA was nominally backed by the United States. The Kurds knew exactly what the FSA fighters were feeling. A resignation to the prospect of American abandonment prevailed among a cross-section of Kurdish leaders I spoke with last September in Iraq, Turkey, and Northern Syria. It came out perhaps most clearly during a conversation with a Kurdish guerrilla commander at a remote hilltop post in Rojava's Jazeera Canton, in the northeastern quadrant of Syria's Kurdish rebel zone.

The young commander, Adam Derike, had only a few days earlier led a successful assault on an Islamic State column an hour south of where we met. He said he had no expectation that the Syrian Kurds would get help of any consequence from the United States or from any of the Western democracies. "The Islamic State is fighting humanity. We take our orders from the people, and we are fighting for humanity," he said. "But all the time, if you are fighting for humanity, you are fighting alone."

Even when the US-led airpower coalition began hitting Islamic State targets in Syria, it was only after the Arab League's coalition members said they were signing up to hit targets there, and not in Iraq, where Obama had initially intended to confine the coalition's airstrikes. And the US approach to the Syrian catastrophe, while having shifted away from stubborn abstentionism, is most likely too discredited to be rescued by a mere "reset." After three years of unrestrained war on his own people, and his heavy reliance on Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, Assad has reduced Syrian society to a Hobbesian nightmare of "fighting-age males" engaged in mercenary combat on behalf of a multitude of Islamist militias. Syria in 2014 resembles nothing so much as Afghanistan in 1994.

Iraq, too, is already so far gone that it is difficult to envision anything resembling a functioning unitary state arising from the ashes for at least

another generation, and only then with massive “international community” intervention. As in Syria, the IRGC and its Shiite militias are the heaviest hands at work there.

Obama’s extreme reluctance to do anything that might jeopardize his foreign-policy priority of rapprochement with Tehran is a key factor the Kurds are taking into account in their attempts to anticipate American reaction to any initiatives they might undertake on their own behalf.

Abdulsalam Ahmad, co-chair of the Kurdish provisional government of Rojava, told me that Syria’s Kurds would welcome an invitation to participate in the US-led coalition. “We have put up strong resistance to ISIS, and for this we should be part of the American alliance to fight ISIS. But the Americans are not listening.”

Whatever philosophy might animate Ocalan’s followers in Rojava, they’ve managed little beyond establishing a provisional parliament in 2012, with elections intended to be held every two years. “For more than fifty years, the Assad regime has suffocated the people, and now we have been able to take a breath, to begin to take control of our territories and make our own way here,” Ahmad said. But recently institution-building has taken a backseat to survival against the Islamic State’s onslaughts, along with the work of handling the influx of displaced civilians who have fled the fighting.

Rojava’s population has nearly doubled since the Syrian uprising began in 2011. The first arrivals were fleeing Assad’s barrel bombs. The more recent arrivals are fleeing the Islamic State’s mass executioners. They come from all of Syria’s confessional traditions, including Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Kurdish Yazidis, and Shiite and Sunni Arabs.

For the Kurdish leadership in Iraq, the priority of survival demands compromise and an attention to expediency that cannot be squandered on an on-again, off-again, generations-old national liberation struggle, with all the complex recalibration it would require of the Iraqi Kurds’ triangulated relationships with Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran (to say nothing of the implications for their relationship with the United States).

Owing to the Iraqi Kurds’ delicate relationship with Ankara, it has been risky enough to provide the Rojava Kurds with bread and to maintain commercial traffic across the floating bridge that spans the Tigris River at Samalka, connecting Iraqi Kurdistan with Rojava’s Jazeera Canton. It was only with Ankara’s last-minute approval that a contingent of KRG Peshmerga fighters was able to pass through Turkish territory to

make its way to Kobane, the Kurdish town on the Syrian-Turkish border that was besieged by heavily armed Islamic State fighters last summer.

After one hundred and sixty thousand Kurds fled across the Turkish border from Kobane and the remaining population was facing the threat of “another Mount Sinjar,” the US weighed in with airstrikes in late September last year, weeks after the coalition bombing campaign began and only after solidarity protests sprung up in cities all over the world. Pro-Kurdish riots had broken out across Turkey, and US Secretary of State John Kerry had found himself acutely embarrassed by his own inability to explain why Kobane was not an American concern.

At the same time, back in Iraq, in the Kurdish city of Duhok—well within the KRG’s jurisdiction and at least a hundred miles from any significant Islamic State forces—survival had become the Kurds’ top priority. The city’s population had swollen by a third to about 1.7 million, owing mostly to Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrian Christians fleeing the tumults in the south. About a third of the new arrivals were Yazidis from the Mount Sinjar area who had decamped to the city since August.

The refugees were housed mainly in the district’s schools, community centers, parks, mosques, and underneath highway overpasses. “Right now, we are fighting the terrorists, and we are trying to take care of all these people who have run away from ISIS,” Duhok Mayor Mohammad Amin Osman told me.

In July, the KRG announced its intention to conduct a referendum on full Kurdish sovereignty and a declaration of independence. The week before I arrived in Duhok, the referendum was called off. Barzani said he was canceling it because of the Islamic State’s onslaught and because it was necessary for the Kurds to allow negotiations with the incoming Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi.

At the headquarters of the Peoples’ Democratic Congress in Diyarbakir, in southeastern Turkey, the story was the same. The multi-party congress was established partly to implement Ocalan’s radical decentralization alternative to armed struggle, but even so, the congress was preoccupied with Kurdish survival. Husayin Durmaz, the senior congress official assigned to lead its Rojava Coordination Commission, said his main work was not politics, but organizing the food and medical relief the Rojava Kurds so desperately required.

“The priority objective is not to create a Kurdish state in Turkey or Syria. For the YPG, even Assad is not an important matter of concern right

now. There is no turning back from what the YPG has accomplished in Syria so far, but right now, the important thing for the YPG is to fight ISIS.”

The Kurds have always considered the Americans their friends, Durmaz said, but those warm feelings are growing cold. “The Kurds should be brought into the formula of an American strategy. It makes us very sad. You will never hear a bad word from the Kurds to the Americans. No American interests have been hurt by the Kurds, in any of their territories. To consider the Kurds of the south [the Iraqi KRG] to be allies, but call the Kurds of the north [the PKK] terrorists, is not fair. It is not just. And it further divides the Kurds among themselves,” he said.

“When ISIS started killing Kurds, the Turkish state likes this very much. Turkey sees it as being in its strategic interest to displace Kurds and to cause divisions in Kurdish society. But we expected Americans to be more sensitive to these matters.” ●