An Independent Kurdistan: A Benefit to US Foreign Policy
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In its geopolitical dealings in the Middle East and South Asia, the United States often has to prioritize a quality in choosing which states and groups to throw its support behind. Sometimes this is the strength of a nation or group in being a bulwark of stability and Islamist containment (Saudi Arabia); other times it is the willingness of the state or group to be supportive of, or at least non-hostile to Israel (Morocco). Sometimes it is both (Egypt). A more recent trend has been to support states or groups with fledgling democratic and liberal values (Tunisia.)

Until now, there has never been a real chance at supporting a nation, non-state actor, or people that possessed all three qualities. When America arms such authoritarian, misogynist, and positively medieval monarchies as Saudi Arabia or Qatar, accusations of democratic hypocrisy fly from the political left.1 When America aids unstable democratic forces like those that have recently emerged in Tunisia, the political right decries an overly-idealistic foreign policy not based in reality.2 Of course, generally no matter who the State Department, Pentagon, or CIA decide to open up their coffers or arms depots for, that state or group will likely be openly hostile to Israel. They will be, at the very least, uncomfortable with America's number one ally in the Middle East.

So when the inimitable opportunity to back a stateless nation that has all three of America's most cherished qualities of regional foreign policy, even the most novice of diplomats would know to seize it. Believe it or not, such an opportunity does indeed present itself today, in the form of the Kurds. In this essay I will explain why the United States should alter its foreign policy to support the independence of at least part of the region that is known as “Greater Kurdistan” because an independent Kurdistan would likely be democratic, pro-Israel, and a strong bulwark against radical Islam in the region. Before concluding, I will also discuss the problem of Turkish opposition to an independent Kurdistan and potential solutions to that issue.

1 Ben Norton, “Rights group blasts U.S. ‘hypocrisy’ in “vast flood of weapons” to Saudi Arabia, despite war crimes,” Salon, 8/30/16
2 Falil Aliriza, “Why Counterterrorism Could Be the Death of Tunisian Democracy,” Foreign Policy, 12/30/15

Who Are The Kurds?
Before the finer points of Kurdish geopolitics can be discussed, it is obviously necessary to discuss who the Kurds are and how they are still a stateless nation in a world of nation-states. As any Kurd will tell you, they
are proudly non-Arab, non-Turkic, independent, and have resisted cultural assimilation by those nations for as far back as the earliest recorded Kurdish history around 1600 CE. The Kurds as a physical people have more or less inhabited the same area of territory consistently throughout their recorded existence. This region, known as Greater Kurdistan, roughly correlates to the present-day regions of Western Iran, Northern Iraq, Northern Syria, and Southeastern Turkey, an amalgamation of states that I will call SITI (Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Iran) for the rest of this paper for simplicity’s sake.

As late as 1923, all Kurdish groups except Iranian Kurds were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. But following that state's defeat in World War One, the colonial powers of Britain and France redrew the lines of the Middle-East creating Iraq and Syria (with their own respective Kurdish regions,) and leaving a portion of Kurds within Turkey. For their part, Iranian Kurds have always had a tense relation with Iran's governments. The Kurds have been separated into these four SITI states for such a long time, that today four different communities exist in each of the Kurdish regions.

The Middle East already awash with non-governmental actors, it would be beneficial to take some space to describe the Kurdish regions, and clarify the principal political actors in each of the four Kurdish regions. Syria’s Kurdish region, sometimes called Western Kurdistan, is more popularly referred to as “Rojava,” the Kurdish word for west. Within Rojava the principal political actors are the leftist Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the rightist Kurdish National Council (ENKS). Within Iraqi Kurdistan, occasionally referred to as Southern Kurdistan, but more often known as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the main political parties are the leftist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the rightist Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). An up and coming centrist party, Gorran, has also made a recent appearance in KRG politics. The Kurdish region of Turkey, also known as Northern Kurdistan, is under the political domination of the far-left Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). On Turkey's national level, Kurdish and other minority rights in Turkey are represented by the People's Democratic Party (HDP). Finally, Iran's Kurdish region, often called Eastern Kurdistan, has the leftist Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK,) and another leftist group, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI).

Throughout 20th century, the four Kurdish regions all had varying degrees of conflicts with their mother states. Particularly poor were the relations between Turkey and Iraq, and their respective Kurdish populations. The nationalist ideology of Kemalism that governed Turkey from the end of WWI demanded that all cultures within its borders be assimilated into a single Turkish civic identity. The Kurds resisted this, and thus a period of deadly terrorism and state violence between Turkey and its Kurds (represented by the PKK) raged for decades. Kurdish nationalist militias, called peshmerga (Kurdish for “those who would fight”) first emerged during this period. In recent years Turkey, under the Erdogan regime, has again stepped up its violence against the PKK. Iraq under Saddam Hussein also managed to become an enemy of its Kurdish citizens in the KRG. After an attempt at genocide on the KRG with mustard gas during the Iran-Iraq War, Hussein's Baathist Iraqi military fought with KRG peshmerga throughout the 1980’s. When US troops crippled Iraq's military in the 1991 Gulf War, Hussein left the Iraqi Kurds to themselves, effectively leaving the KRG as an autonomous Iraqi province, which it remains today.

A Force of Deterrence.

Since the end of World War II, the onset of the Cold War, and the dawn of the present geopolitical era, one truism has remained consistent: the United States needs strong regional allies to check its enemies militarily. After Israel’s independence and the Suez Crisis, the enemy was Egypt; the ally was Iraq. After the Persian Gulf War, the enemy was Iraq; the allies were literally everyone else. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the enemy was Iran; the ally was Saudi Arabia. Since the fall of Ba’athism in Iraq in 2003, Iran remains the sole state that has any real power opposing US foreign policy in the Middle East. Though the war against ISIS that began in 2014 has led to some level of uneasy Iran-American cooperation, Iran still remains a major destabilizer of American backed states in the Persian Gulf region and beyond.

Iran’s main threat of destabilization comes from its support of radical Shia Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Iranian operations started with of backing groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon as far back as the early 1980’s. More recent Iranian ventures have included the arming and funding of Hamas in its relentless insurgency against Israel, as well as arming and funding the Houthi insurgents who plunged
Yemen into civil war in 2014. Then there is of course, the present case of the blood-soaked civil war in Syria which might very well be over (and may not have even happened,) had Iran not propped up that state’s Ba’athist dictator.

The United States in recent decades has entrusted its stalwart regional partners such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar to act as the main bastions against Iranian destabilization, but such allies have been working on countering Iran for years. What is needed is a fresh, dedicated nation-state that is not only willing to tackle the threat of Tehran, but is even right at its border. An independent Kurdistan would do just this. Having an automatic distrust for the Iranian regime which has controlled a piece of greater Kurdistan for centuries, and actively opposed any kind of Kurdish independence, a Kurdish state would surely use everything in its political and military power to ensure corrosive Iranian influence goes no further than Iran’s own borders. Evidence for this can be seen in the willingness of Iraqi Kurdistan to use its peshmerga forces to join a US-led coalition in combating Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq from 2007 to 2011.3 These militias were a proxy of Iran as that state attempted to impose its will in the chaos of post-2003 invasion Iraq. As long as Iran is a renegade Shia theocracy, it will attempt to suppress Kurdish aspirations, thus making the Kurds a permanent foe of Tehran.4

As opposed to the more tacit threat from nation-states like Iran, there is the very direct and very dangerous military threat posed to US regional interests by insurgent groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. ISIS specifically has become the largest and most menacing military threat in the Middle East, promising to violently destroy all hitherto existing states in the region, replacing them with a single theocratic Islamic caliphate that stretches the length of the Muslim world (perhaps even further) which would impose a fanatically extreme form of fundamentalist Islam upon those it conquers.

4 Mohammed Salih, “Why Iranian Kurdish party is stepping up fight against Tehran,” Al-Monitor, 7/1/2016

In the face of such a terrifying and very powerful group -ISIS utilizes captured hi-tech western military equipment with devastating skill- many conventional military forces have buckled: Iraq’s new American-trained armed forces famously collapsed and ran scared when defending the Iraqi city of Mosul from zealous ISIS insurgents.5 Meanwhile, the Syrian armed forces, already bogged down in a costly civil war with opposition rebels, were helplessly surrounded and besieged by rapidly advancing ISIS fighters. Even NATO and Russian airstrikes against ISIS seemed for a long time to be ineffective.

But into the fray, which started when ISIS exploded onto the regional scene in 2014, stepped the peshmerga forces of both the KRG and Rojava. Fighting fiercely, and punching far above their weight, the Kurds have managed to stall and even beat back ISIS advances in both Iraq and Syria. The legendary Battle of Kobane (Syria) captured the eyes of the world when Rojava peshmerga single-handedly beat back ISIS forces from taking that city, giving ISIS its first major loss since their insurgency began.6

KRG peshmerga too have shown their zeal, stalling all ISIS military advances into northern Iraq, despite being numerically inferior. As of 2016, KRG peshmerga have launched a thus far successful counteroffensive against ISIS in northern Iraq.

While both Rojava and the KRG receive significant aid from the US and its NATO allies, both in the form of arms and cash, both Kurdish polities are limited in ability by their lack of statehood.7

5 Michael B. Kelly, “Iraqi Army Retreats From Saddam’s Hometown As Assault On ISIS Falters,” Business Insider, 6/29/2014
6 “YPG retakes the entire city of Ayn al- Arab “Kobani” after 112 days of clashes with IS militants,” Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, 1/27/15

If one (or both) of these regional Kurdish entities would receive backing for statehood from a superpower like the United States, and declared independence, the benefits would be obvious. An independent Kurdish state could conduct trade with foreign nations far easier, could
tax its citizens to raise income, and use these cash inflows to fund a stronger, more technologically advanced military force. Kurdish peshmerga would transform from regional defense force composed almost entirely of light infantry, into a well-rounded army and air force of a Kurdish nation-state. In this capacity they could take the fight to ISIS and similar Islamist groups with a force and efficiency that only a formal military force can provide. Moreover, a Kurdish state would likely use its military and intelligence assets to severely check the power of Iran. Both of these developments would come as a great relief to a new Kurdistan’s ally, the United States.

A Friend of Israel

For decades following the founding of the Jewish state, the Kurds were frequently in contact with Israeli officials, however covert. As early as the 1960’s, Israeli feelers had provided Kurdish militants with arms and training. When times have gotten tough for the Kurds, particularly during the recent years of increased pressure from the post-Baath Iraqi government, Israel has often been the sole state willing to purchase Kurdish oil.

There are a few reasons for the warm relations between the Kurds and Israelis. Some scholars argue that it has to do with the status that both peoples share as personae non gratae of the Middle East. For centuries, both minority groups suffered under the yoke of subsequent Persian, Turkish, and Arab oppression. Similar cultural experiences breed empathy and appreciation, and this cannot be overlooked in international relations.

Another reason for the tacit Israeli-Kurdish axis could be Israel’s constant need for useful allies. Though the Jewish state has long been able to count on the US in a global sense, it has throughout its history had to partner up with states or groups whose political vision does not quite align with Israel’s own. Pahlavi-era Iran, apartheid South Africa, Kemalist Turkey, and the Kurds have all been such partners. As long as a state or group such as the Kurds is also under threat or pressure from Israel’s longstanding enemies, the Arabs, that state or group has a welcome role as a peripheral ally of Israel.

The two best Kurdish regional organizations that Israel has to work with are the KRG of Iraq and the Iranian Kurds. These two groups have the least amount of conflicts of interest with the largest partner of Israel who would potentially oppose a Kurdish state, Turkey. Working with Rojava and the especially the Turkish Kurds would prove to be a bit more difficult, but definitely would prove to be a fruitful endeavor. In the face of the ever-worsening Syrian Civil War, the Israeli establishment has deemed it ever more important to work with Rojava against ISIS and other anti-Israeli opposition groups. Even as recent as 2014, high Israeli officials like its late president Shimon Peres have advised President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry to consider supporting an independent Kurdish state in Rojava. It would behoove the United States to do so.

A Case of Democracy

While the democratic gains and underpinnings of the whole of Kurdistan can often be overstated, democracy and commitment to people’s governance and civil society within specific regions is irrefutable. Rojava in particular seems to be the best chance for a democratic state, not only in Kurdish regions of SITI, but indeed anywhere in the Middle East, Israel notwithstanding. This proudly Kurdish region of Syria has long held itself to high standards of civility, open governance, and even gender equality, all of which are almost unheard of in most of the Muslim world. Democracy in Rojava is not only well-entrenched, but is highly representative, with some observers even calling it one of the closest semblances to Swiss direct democracy in the world. Elections themselves are highly diverse and progressive; for instance, the 2015 municipal elections yielded a field of over 500 candidates, half of which were women, and ten percent minorities, in one city alone. There may be a few reasons for this.

First, Rojava’s politics have always been heavily influenced by the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, (PKK) and the theories of that group’s enigmatic founder, Abdullah Ocalan. According to Ocalan, himself formerly a
Marxist but currently labeling himself a “democratic confederalist,” a Kurdish state should be organized around the ideas of “cultural identities being able to express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils.” Government runs best when it is unhampered by formal institutions like legislatures, and thus direct democracy serves people the best, according to Ocalan.

11 Abdullah Ocalan, Democratic Confederalism, p. 21, 2011

Second, women’s rights at least recently been comparatively strong in Rojava. For example, women in Rojava in particular, and Kurdistan in general have the exceptionable freedom from the veil, and indeed are some of the few Muslim women in the Middle East that can be frequently seen bare-headed in the public sphere. There is no cultural stigmatism for women and men freely associating with each other in public, and indeed the vast majority of Kurdish marriages are strictly monogamous. Military service is also egalitarian in Rojava, with a special peshmerga, the YPJ, being specially set aside for women’s service. Finally, women are encouraged to be educated, and many Rojava women are encouraged to obtain an education level that would allow them to participate in civil society (doctor, lawyer, etc.) It should be noted that women’s rights in Kurdistan are better off compared to the rights of other Muslim women; Middle East-wide practices such as honor killings are still a problem in all of the regions of Greater Kurdistan.

Third, Rojava has the power of historical observation on its side, having witnessed that all other nationalist ideologies have been proven to be failures. Rojava’s Kurds saw Nasserism’s failures in Egypt. The PKK abandoned Marxism after realizing its failures in the collapse of the Soviet Union and its proxies. Its peshmerga forces are currently fighting the evils of Ba’athism, which itself is a nationalist ideology in political and economic decline. In terms of building a nation-state, Winston Churchill’s maxim rings true for Rojava: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

Other options for Kurdish democracy do exist in other regions of Greater Kurdistan, though they may have greater flaws than Rojava. The KRG in Iraq in particular has touted itself as an electoral democracy amidst a sea of authoritarianism since the end of the Gulf War, and to some degree this is true; KRG politics are indeed semi-democratic. A towering problem however, is corruption, and the leaders of Kurdistan unfortunately have this in spades. Several reports of graft, oil-money laundering, and nepotism by top PUK and KDP politicians have circulated since fall of Ba’athism in Iraq, as high as the KRG president, Massoud Barzani, himself. In addition, international observers have sadly also witnessed some cases of electoral fraud and voter intimidation. While these problems in the Iraqi KRG aren’t even close to levels present in neighboring states like Turkey, Oman, Yemen, etc., it is still a major concern.


The Turkish Question: Answers?

Finally, it would of course be inappropriate to talk about an independent Kurdish state without discussing the biggest obstacle to it; namely Turkey. For a long time, Turkey has opposed the creation of a Kurdish state in any form except for the Iraqi Kurds. In late August 2016, the situation became even more complicated when the Turkish government began unleashing airstrikes on the various groups of Rojava. To gain Turkish cooperation or at least compliance for an independent Syrian or Iranian Kurdish state, the United States would have to do some serious diplomatic compromising. Luckily, a couple of options are available.

First, the US could offer the incentive of recognizing Northern Cyprus as an independent state (which would likely have the effect of other western states doing the same.) For a long period of time now, Ankara has struggled to find even a single government to throw their weight behind the Turkic cultured state that Ankara created in Cyprus in 1974 by means of invasion. Washington could trade American recognition of Northern Cyprus for Turkish allowance of an independent Kurdish state, however limited in size.
Another option might be for American foreign policy to be less critical and more forgiving in its stance on Turkish human rights and democracy. Though it may sound morally dubious, as Jeane Kirkpatrick noted during her tenure in the Reagan foreign policy administration, American diplomacy often has to temporarily lessen its human rights standards in order to accomplish greater goals, in this case, an independent Kurdish nation. This is ever at present observable in US attitudes toward staunch gulf state allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. If approached with an offer of less chastisement on the international scene, the Erdogan regime may be a bit more willing to negotiate the issue of Kurdish independence.

Conclusion

The United States is at a crossroads; the Syrian Civil War is shifting ever more in favor of the Assad regime, and Russian and Iran are rapidly gaining regional power. The opportunity for a pro-US independent Kurdistan may soon close. If American leaders want to have the coveted prize of a mid-east ally that is democratic, pro-Israel, and a bulwark against US enemies in the region, they have to act soon.
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