

Back to the Mountains?



The turmoil in the Middle East seemed to be advancing the Kurds' plans for finally creating their own state. After the renewed flare-up of hostilities between the PKK and Turkey, there's all to play for.

Is there still a future for the stalled peace process?

BY WALTER POSCH · PHOTOGRAPHS BY BIRGIT HAUBNER

Kurds are often presented in the German and European public sphere as a single political and cultural entity, the only regional power capable of and will-in to resist the IS. Without this portrayal, resonating strongly and positively with European public opinion, it would hardly be possible for Germany and other European and NATO states to take the decision to arm 'the Kurds'—or to be precise, some Iraq-based Peshmerga militias—with modern weapons.

Leading political players on the Kurdish stage have had their status enhanced as a result of this decision. This, and the ongoing process of state collapse in the Middle East as well as developments in Turkey, bring the question of an independent Kurdish nation—the 'Kurdish question'—back to international attention. But a closer look reveals rivalries within Kurdish groups; could their presumed unity be a myth?

The Kurdish question and Kurdish politics

The first thing to consider is that up to the present day there are large differences of opinion on how to correctly frame the Kurdish question. Nationalists take the basic position that only a unitary national state can bring security and prosperity. This demands that the 'when', 'how' and 'where' aspects of a future state are answered. Meanwhile Western governments insist on the inviolability of borders in the region. They view the satisfying of Kurdish aspirations as guaranteed within the framework of a strengthening of human and minority rights. US support for the autonomous region in Iraq or European backing for the rights of the Kurdish minority in Turkey are typical examples of a stance in keeping with the preferred status quo.

Inconsistency between the far-reaching ambitions of Kurdish politicians and the amount of political capital that Western countries are prepared to invest isn't new. The Treaty of Sèvres, signed between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers in 1920, in no way promised the Kurds their own state, but instead held out the vague prospect of a referendum. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which arose from and superseded Sèvres, made no mention of it.

For most of the 20th century, the international community considered the Kurdish question as an internal political problem for the Ottoman Empire's successor states—particularly Turkey, Syria and Iraq—as well as for Iran.

Political and military assistance for the Kurds on behalf of international and regional powers were primarily means to exert pressure in order to attain wider strategic goals. This holds true for the Soviet championing of the short-lived Mahabad Republic in 1946, or for American help for Mustafa Barzani's Kurdish national movement in Iraq in the 1960s and '70s. Regional powers also played a similar game, providing backing for Kurdish groups in neighbouring countries as long as this served their own purposes: Iranians and Iraqis each supported the Kurdish minority in the other's country until the borders were agreed upon by Tehran and Baghdad in 1975, and again during the Iran-Iraq War in the '80s; Syria gave massive support to the PKK (see info box for acronyms) until 1999 and then to a lesser extent after in order to have a bargaining chip in its dealings with Ankara over the Euphrates water dispute, and Turkey itself worked closely with Iraqi-based Kurdish nationalists from whom Ankara in return expected active cooperation against the PKK.

However, this approach worked not to the benefit of Kurds themselves but states and regimes in the region against which Kurdish political groups were instrumentalised; it has proven the biggest impediment for a coordinated political process. All Kurdish parties and their associated

militias have collaborated with brutal regimes in the area against other groups: much Kurdish blood has been spilt by other Kurds. In Iraq, during the mid-'90s, internecine strife among the Kurdish parties escalated into a full fledged civil war, which was only brought to halt by a combined effort of international and regional powers. As a result the two main opponent groups, the KDP and the PUK split the area of self-administration into two zones of influence, variously dubbed 'Barzanistan' and 'Yekistan' by the population (after the Barzani tribal group and after yekiti, the Kurdish word for 'union'). In Turkey the three-way struggle between the PKK, Kurdish Islamists and the Turkish state went on for decades. The record shows that inner-Kurdish reconciliation and democratisation processes are very hard to achieve, if any effort in that direction is made at all.

The Kurds and the international public

Still, Kurdish politics have also moved on. Two factors have been decisive in this: the emergence of a global Kurdish public opinion and an awareness in Europe of Kurdish suffering. The most important turning point was Iraq's Operation Anfal in 1988. The Saddam Hussein-ordered genocide of Iraqi Kurds went further than any massacre or mass-deportation which had happened before. Anfal politicised all Kurds, regardless of their ethnic or religious background or nominal citizenship. Above all it mobilised Kurds exiled in Europe, who coordinated the efforts of their organisations—usually rivals—in raising international awareness, turning them into trusted interlocutors for European journalists and politicians.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Kurds stood once again in the spotlight of international attention due to the failed Iraqi intifada against Saddam Hussein, which broke out in southern Iraq and spread to southern Kurdistan (Bashur) after the end of the First Gulf War. The ensuing refugee crisis, with more than a million and a half people fleeing, played out on television screens worldwide and led to the adoption in 1991 of UN Resolution 688, the first time the Kurds were referred to in an international document since the Treaty of Sèvres, albeit adjectivally ("Kurdish populated areas").

Next to Anfal and the tragedy of the Iraqi Kurdish refugees, the murders of the Iranian-Kurdish politicians Rahim Ghassemlou in Vienna in 1988 and his successor Sadegh Sharafkandi in Berlin in 1992 by Iranian secret service agents caused outrage. These killings reinforced Kurds' sense of solidarity. Finally there was the PKK's major insurgency in Turkey in the late '80s and '90s, keenly discussed in Europe, which had a big influence on the policies of European countries towards Turkey.

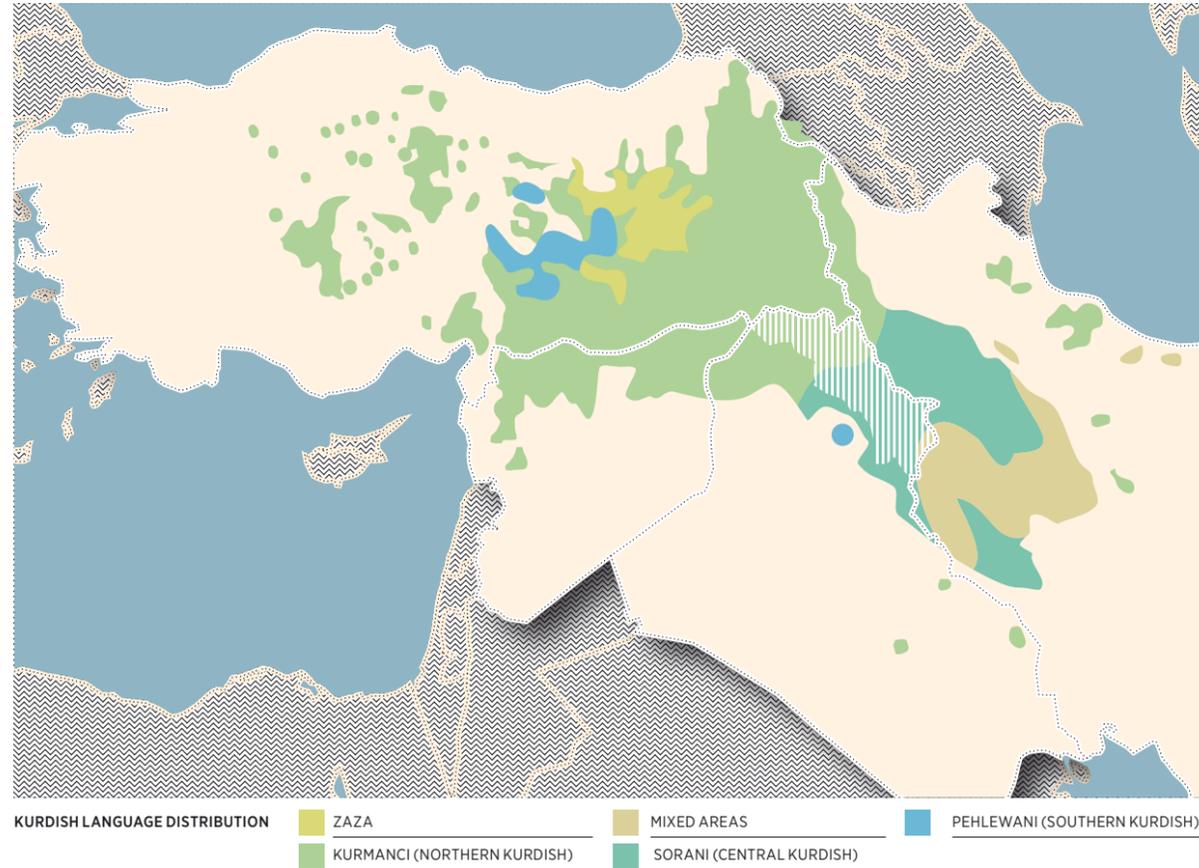
Three political currents

The increase of European and Western interest in Kurdistan stood in stark contrast to the fate of the Kurds in the region. Almost all the resistance movements suffered terrible defeats, and since the late '90s they have been kept in check by the security apparatuses of the secular and nationalist-oriented authoritarian states. This applies to Iraq itself, in spite of the fact that the Kurds were able to establish a self-governance in their areas, albeit with international support.

Complete suppression of the Kurds' aspirations towards cultural freedoms, autonomy and in some cases nationhood was however no longer possible. Among other reasons, the authoritarian national states were increasingly losing their appeal to their own populations. By 1992 at the latest, with the uprising against Saddam Hussein (and in Iran with the 1979 revolution), the era of regimes of secular, authoritarian modernisers was coming to a political and ideological end. They were gradually replaced

CAN THEY UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER?

KURDISH SETTLEMENT AREAS AND DIALECTS IN TURKEY, SYRIA, IRAQ AND IRAN



THE KURDISH NATION BETWEEN FICTION AND FACT

It's harder than at first seems to answer the questions of who is a Kurd and where Kurdistan lies. The term 'linguistic nation', where all inhabitants share a common tongue, is only partly applicable. The two main Kurdish languages spoken in Turkey, Zaza and Kurmanci, are indeed closely related but both derive from their own specific linguistic development. Kurmanci is also closely related to Sorani, a language spoken in Iraq and Iran. But the differences in this case are so marked that two written languages had to be developed, completely different grammatically and phonetically. Finally there still exists a series of minor and antique Kurdish tongues, including Gorani and Kalhor, spoken in the border area between Iran and Iraq.

Linguistic disparities can also be viewed in the light of the idea of commitment to a nation: when speakers 'feel' themselves to be Kurds. A 'commitment nation' would also have the upside of includ-

ing all linguistically assimilated Kurds, which is of key importance to Turkish Kurds. But if one follows the logic that Kurds are defined through their commitment to nationhood, then that excludes the possibility of the Lur and Bakhtiari peoples, whose languages are more closely related to Sorani than to Kurmanci or Persian (Farsi), being counted as Kurds because they've rejected Kurdish identity for themselves. It's also difficult to include Kurmanci-speaking Yazidis in this definition of Kurdishness because for many of them the Kurds are a primarily Sunni Muslim grouping from which they differentiate themselves culturally.

The term 'Kurdistan' gives rise to similar difficulties. Historically it has always been a distinct region, but never a politically independent entity. In reality Kurdish rulers held sway, with a great deal of autonomy, over certain swathes of present-day Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Kurdish autonomy or alternatively self-government—and equally

its removal—also has deep-seated historical roots. In the course of the modernisation and streamlining of the state apparatus in the Ottoman Empire, the power of these principalities was drastically curtailed.

The revolts generated by this process have embedded themselves deep in the collective consciousness of the Kurdish people and play a similar role in their modern identity, as does the experience of persecution and discrimination in the twentieth century. This feeds into an attitude towards the state that's basically negative and one which has been carried to extremes by the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party) with its anti-statist stance and its 'Union of Communities in Kurdistan' (KCK) system.

The great linguistic, geographical and cultural differences and the splits and disunity within the Kurdish parties have made it easier for the powerful nation-states to hinder the creation of a common Kurdish movement.

Walter Posch

by diverse forms of political Islam that at least in theory includes a global promise of international Muslim solidarity and social justice.

The strategic ambitions of Kurdish protagonists on the other hand restrict themselves to the Kurdistan region. Unlike other freedom movements, they still lack an inclusive concept, agreed upon by all parties, for evaluating what actually constitutes a nation (see Infobox). On the contrary, there are several competing political models—at the forefront the model of the nation state which lays down the fundamentals for state formation and the revolutionary model, which necessitates to conduct a revolution.

The state formation model has been put forward by parties representing the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The KRG is directed towards an internationally safeguarded Kurdish entity: autonomy within Iraq is a first phase to be achieved in the short- and medium-term; in the long-term the wish for an independent and recognised nation is left open. Presently, this form of independent Kurdistan would have echoes of the authoritarian modernisers and failed models of last century, with only superficial nods towards a legally constituted democracy. How bad conditions are in the KRG is evidenced by the growing exodus in recent years of youngsters from the region because of a lack of prospects, lack of rule of law and general economic mismanagement.

The revolutionary model advanced by the PKK in turn ignores the state as such (even when presumptively Kurdish) and instead pursues forms of grass-roots self-organisation undertaken by the Kurds themselves under the auspices of the party. Translated into reality, this model means nothing more than the establishment of all-powerful, Marxist-inspired one-party systems in every part of Kurdistan, with other political currents tolerated only on the fringes of this form of People's Front.

Both these models have been challenged since the late 1980s by the rise of political Islam. This made significant inroads into Kurdistan only in the 1990s and has as yet not introduced its own specific model of governance, but has rather limited itself to the islamisation of society, with a crucial exception in the case of the Turkish Kurds.

Kurdish tensions

Kurdish political groups are far from having a common platform or umbrella organisation for coordination. In fact the Turkish Kurds of the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds of the KDP are in increasing competition for the right to claim themselves as sole representatives of all Kurds. The PKK leadership's relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and its president Massud Barzani are extremely problematic. The head of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, is well aware of the high esteem for the Barzani clan held by conservative Kurds in Turkey, while Barzani is conscious of the growing influence of the KDSP, an offshoot of the PKK in northern Iraq. The development of the peace process in Turkey plays a central role for both sides: Iraqi Kurdistan needs the cooperation and goodwill of Ankara for economic development and political reasons. For the PKK, on the other hand, the long-term future of the organisation as a resistance movement is at stake.

The PKK—or more exactly the KCK—has reorganised itself from 2003 to 2015 and has set up parties and militias in other areas of Kurdistan. The presidency of the KCK/PKK is still held by Abdullah Öcalan, in custody on the Turkish prison island of Imralı, but its political course is steered by the old leadership cadre in Iraq's Qandil Mountains where its most important infrastructure is located.

At the forefront of the struggle against IS expansion have been the People's Defence Units, the Syria-based YPG as well as the armed wing of the PKK, the 'People's Defence Force', or HPG, and the Free Women's Units of YJA-STAR. In northern Syria, the organisation was able to form its own structures of self-government—Rojava—which is striving to increase the area under its control. After the embarrassing defeat of the Iraqi Kurdish fighters in the summer of 2014, PKK forces from Iraq and Syr-

THE MAIN ACTORS

AKP The Justice and Development party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) is a Turkish centre-right party. It was founded by, among others, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2001 and has been the ruling party since 2002.

HDP The Peoples' Democratic party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi) emerged in 2012 from different left-wing and pro-Kurdish organisations in Turkey. It advocates for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. In the parliamentary elections of November 1, the HDP received XX per cent of the votes.

HPG The People's Defence Force (Hezen Parastina Gel) is the armed wing of the PKK. At least 6,500 fighters are currently active, the headquarters is in the Qandil mountains in Northern Iraq. The women units of the HPG are called YJA STAR.

Hüda-Par The Free Cause party (Hür Dava Partisi) was founded in 2012 in Turkey. The Islamist group evolved out of the remnants of the Turkish Hizbullah group, a terror organisation active in the 1990s.

KCK The Union of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan) is the umbrella organisation for the Kurdish movement in Turkey. It was established by Abdullah Öcalan in 2007.

KDP (or PDK) The Kurdistan Democratic party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê) was founded in 1946. Today, it is one of the two major Kurdish parties in Northern Iraq. Its leader Massud Barzani is also the president of the KRG.

KDSP (or PÇDK) The Kurdistan Democratic Solution party (Partî Çareserî Dîmokratî Kurdistan) is an offshoot of the PKK in Northern Iraq. It was founded in 2002.

KRG Kurdistan Regional Government (Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan) is the name of the political administration in the autonomous region of Northern Iraq. It was established in 1992 after the troops of Saddam Hussein had left the region.

PKK The Kurdistan Worker's party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) was founded in 1978, among others, by Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish fight for independence in Turkey. Until today, the Marxist-Leninist resistance movement is regarded as a terror group by several countries.

PUK The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiy Nîştîmanîy Kurdistan), founded in 1975, is one of the major political forces in Northern Iraq. Its chairman Jalal Talabani was President of Iraq from 2005-2014.

PYD The Democratic Union party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat) was established in 2003. It is regarded as the PKK's sister movement in Syria, where it established a civil administration during the war, together with other Kurdish factions.

YDGH The Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi) is the PKK's youth movement.

YPG The People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel), formed in 2004 by the PYD, are the armed forces of the government of Kurdish Syria (Rojava), which gained its autonomy in 2013.

ia were able to establish, after Qandil and Makhmur, a third military stronghold in the Sinjar Mountains and thereby to widen their influence – at the expense of Barzani's.

In 2014 tensions escalated between the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, the Democratic Union party (PYD), and the KRG because the PYD wanted to curtail the independence of all other parties, including the Syrian Kurdish supporters of Barzani. As a result, Barzani closed the border and isolated Rojava economically. It needed the dramatic events in Kobani over the autumn of 2014 for both sides to move towards cooperation; this in itself would hardly have been possible without American mediation. These tensions have since shifted to the background without however being resolved.

The implementation of autonomy in Syria had to alarm Turkey; those media supportive of the PKK could finally point to the northern Syrian 'Rojava model' as a precedent for possible Kurdish autonomy in Turkey. YDGH, the PKK's youth movement actually began to put together its own military and police groups to carry out identity checks and assault actual or alleged followers of IS. These measures were directed above all towards other Kurds, primarily Islamists. Unbeknown to the general public, many Turkish Kurds from several traditionally fundamentalist regions in eastern Turkey have affiliated themselves with IS. These are primarily young volunteers who identify themselves ideologically with Hüda Par, the public face of the extensive network of Islamist groups in Turkey. These stand in the tradition of Hezbollah, one of the most active terrorist organisations of the 1990s, which over the last few years has been reconstituting itself underground.

Already, October 2014 saw serious clashes in Cizre between the PKK and Hüda Par. Followers of an armed group calling itself Sheyh Said Seriyeyeli appeared on the scene for the first time. In spite of their indisputable ideological closeness to Hüda Par, there's no evidence that the two are organisationally linked. Accusations from the PKK side, that this new armed group is a front for the Turkish security services and that the Hüda Par is nothing more than a project financed by Turkey's ruling AKP, conform to the PKK's usual practice of portraying all other Kurdish voices as mere lackeys of the Turkish state. There is however no denying the strong convergence of interests between the Turkish state (or rather elements within its security apparatus) and Kurdish Islamists with regard to the PKK.

There is no proof that the particular IS fighters, who in June 2015 advanced into Turkish territory from the Syrian town of Kobani and perpetrated a massacre there, were followers of or sympathisers with Hüda Par. But the episode adds fuel to the fires of conflict between the Turkish Kurds and Turkish government on the one hand and between Hüda Par and the PKK on the other.

Elections and escalations

Hüda Par as a party is attempting to become a mouthpiece to generate momentum for a Kurdish identity in Turkey that is independent from the PKK and markedly Islamic. Before the parliamentary elections in June 2015, Hüda Par sold itself as the Islamic alternative to the AKP on the grounds that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's increasingly eccentric behaviour was becoming more and more irritating to devout Muslims. But Hüda Par performed well below its own expectations in the 7th of June elections. On this occasion conservative Kurds voted for the HDP which, under the leadership of Selahettin Demirtaş, emerged as one of the election's clear winners, gaining entry into the Turkish parliament with 13 percent of the vote.

As well as conservative Kurds, the left-oriented voters in the west of the country also gave the party their vote. Apart from its pledge to safe-

guard Kurdish interests, this was primarily due to the credible way in which the party took a stand on civil liberties and secular concerns. Finally there's the fact that, more than any other party, the HDP is active in trying to get the peace talks going again in Turkey and has a stake in their success.

Demirtaş, HDP's co-chairman, was therefore a challenge to the PKK leadership as much as to the Turkish president. The more successful the HDP grows, the weaker the influence of the PKK guerillas together with that of Öcalan and the leadership cadre in Qandil – the organisation's founders and eminences grises. Before the election these were even threatening a resumption of hostilities. In contrast the HDP member of parliament and party leader Demirtaş was doing everything possible to de-escalate the violence of PKK forces scattered throughout Turkey. In defiance of all the provocations, the HDP continued to pursue the fulfilment of Kurdish aspirations within the framework of a strengthening of human and minority rights in Turkey.

After the June election the HDP however became increasingly sidelined under pressure from the Turkish side. Legal proceedings were initiated against elected representatives and party activists – charged with attempting separatism and supporting terrorist organisations – and Kurdish mayors and mayoresses were removed from their posts.

The violence then escalated during August and September 2015 in the Kurdish area. What began as a police- and military-led operation to safeguard internal security escalated, in the case of the town of Cizre, into a nine-day siege and a humanitarian catastrophe for the inhabitants. Conflicts also broke out in the west of the country, at first between diverse Marxist groups and Islamists, and then orgies of violence occurred on the part of Islamist-nationalist mobs against Kurds as well as ransacking of HDP regional party offices and headquarters. The systematic destruction of important party documents points to some of the perpetrators acting not out of hot-headed nationalist-inspired impulses but instead as a result of cold blooded and systematically conducted prior planning.

Responsibility for the vast majority of the attacks can be attributed to followers of the so far relatively unknown Islamist-nationalist organisation Osmanlı Ocakları. Their main point of departure from the more familiar Ülkücü Ocaklara, the notorious 'Grey Wolves', is the former's personality cult of President Erdoğan. This was the group who surrounded and stormed the building of the Hürriyet newspaper and staged protests against the media flagship of the Kemalists, the prestigious Cumhuriyet newspaper. The Osmanlı Ocakları bask in Erdoğan's favour. Their existence is at the same time an indication that the AKP has left behind its roots in the old Refah Party (a predecessor of the AKP), whose Islamic policies were inclusive towards the Kurds, and is moving its approach to the 'Kurdish Question' closer to the position held by the extremist National Movement party (MHP).

New elections and regional implications

It would be simplistic, however, to ascribe the escalation solely to Erdoğan. There have for a long time been signs of a dire situation unfolding between the security and military forces and the various PKK militias in the east of the country. But he himself has done little to calm the state of affairs. There's a nagging suspicion that the violence was a political message to the voters: whoever votes for the HDP must reckon on instability.

It could make sense, in Erdoğan's point of view, to neutralise the HDP as the most important political power with an interest in the peace process. In prosecuting his Syrian policy, he's demanding buffer zones, whose logical consequence would be the dissolution of the area of self-government built up by the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the PYD. Here two motivations



During the 'Islamic State' assault on the Shingal mountain, Ali was kidnapped. In January 2015 he was released. Now the 75-year-old Yazidi has returned to Shingal. He vows to defend his homeland with his gun if IS attacks again.

should be differentiated. The Turkish security apparatus wishes to destroy Rojava as a source of inspiration and as a possible retreat for Turkish PKK adherents – it approaches this in the context of national defence and internal security. But Erdoğan's policy towards Syria is also an attempt at a neo-Ottoman great-power politics, directed towards Assad's downfall and the strengthening of Islamist groups in Syria. By this reasoning, Rojava should be eliminated through concerted international action.

With this as a background, negotiations towards peace make little sense for Erdoğan, at least at the moment. But a peace process worthy of the name is also problematic for the PKK which would need to finally lay aside its mission of armed struggle. Yet 2013 and 2014 were years of success for the PKK, even though the leadership in Qandil wrongly estimated the international landscape and, with four political and military theatres of operation running in parallel (Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran) is clearly overstretched. So Kobani and Sinjar were recast as success stories which wasn't the case, militarily speaking, because in neither of these areas was IS in any sense defeated, it was just pulled back. And in the spring of 2015 the PKK's Iranian offshoot, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) embarked on a course of confrontation with Tehran, resulting in the Iranian air force bombing Qandil. This in its turn prompted the PKK leadership to compel the PJAK to cease hostilities against Iran.

This episode is significant because it shows the limitations on the capacity to act of the PKK/KCK as a joint organisation. Their leaderships can barely manage the challenges of the present time. The story is similar in Syria where the PYD together with their arch-rivals the KRG have to cooperate with the Americans against their ideological inclinations. That Rojava still endures should be credited by the PYD and the YPG in the first place to the United States, which has recognised their willingness to fight and their operations against IS and which has to this end accorded them scope for international manoeuvre (for example, opportunities to travel to Europe).

Only the conditions in Turkey seem at the moment to be playing into the hands of the leadership in the Qandil Mountains because the latter's organisation grew up in a similarly repressive and brutal climate.

Western policies towards the Kurds

What does all this mean for the West? An effective set of policies towards the Kurds isn't on the table for the foreseeable future. Political developments are too complicated and the costs, uncertainties and inconsistencies of approach too great. Four points, however, are of relevance:

1. It's astounding how little pressure has been exerted by the Euro-



Two snipers belonging to a PKK unit are aiming at IS fighters who are just meters away, hiding in houses the other side of the street. On page 128: Members of a mixed Yazidi-Kurdish Peshmerga unit fighting against IS.

peans and Americans on the Turkish government and the PKK to resume peace talks. This peace process, whose end must be the cessation of all violence, has not yet completely failed. Two transgressions would need to be clearly addressed: the brutality of the Turkish security forces against the civilian population and the irresponsible adventurism of the elderly cadre leading the PKK, who still refuse to admit that purely militarily Turkey holds all the cards.

2. In regard to Syria, the US has already delineated a political framework concerning the Kurds: the YPG and the PYD are supported despite their weaknesses in democratic politics and their military forces are coordinated with the KRG. The main aim is the fight against IS. It makes sense against this backdrop to develop Rojava as a form of secondary Kurdish autonomous area, ignoring whether this is acceptable to Damascus or to other neighbouring Arab countries.

3. Arising from this, governments in Europe and the US need to be aware of their responsibility towards the KRG in Iraq. After all, it was Western countries who started to treat Erbil as an international player in its own right, and therefore roused the hopes of every Kurd for an independent state. At the very least, a proper reordering and reform of the security, governance and justice sectors within the KRG should be implemented. In other words, to take on a long-term political and military engagement. This must take place separate from the question of whether the KRG develops into an independent state or whether it serves as a blueprint for the stabilisation of Iraq.

4. Support for the KRG and the YPG in their fight against IS on Syrian territory should be bolstered on the Iraqi side by a military campaign in the Sinjar Mountains. Not only because the atrocities against the resident Yazidi population call for a response from the international community, but also because from Sinjar the connection between the Syrian city of Raqqa and the Iraqi city of Mosul can be cut: the axis between these two urban centres is a vital supply line for IS.

None of these points can be achieved without cost and none serve Kurdish nationalist ambitions. But they do indicate a changed set of geo-strategic conditions: in the 1960s the Kurdish militias were helping to fulfil the political goals of the superpowers, and now they are political and military partners. Whether that role is internationally acknowledged or not. •

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