

The Future of the Kurds

Graham E. Fuller

Former vice-chair, CIA National Intelligence Council; former CIA Kabul station chief

Of all the peoples of the Middle East who have suffered through various wars and manipulations by the US and other foreign powers over the past century, the Kurds, an indigenous people inhabiting the mountainous region straddling the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Armenia, are probably the only people whose national cause has improved during the more recent geopolitical turmoil. Kurds make up the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East. On each occasion, they have managed to put themselves and their aspirations more firmly on the world map and gained attention in the calculations of the great powers.

The Kurds took advantage of the brutal Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 to gain some elements of transitory de facto autonomy in northern Iraq and even in Iran. Then the war to expel Saddam Hussein in his invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to the first creation of a secure no-fly zone for the Kurds on the Turkish border in northern Iraq. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the resulting widespread anarchy gave further opportunities for the Iraqi Kurds to establish a de facto autonomous zone. Finally, the civil war in Syria brought the Syrian Kurds into the geopolitical equation there in which Syrian Kurdish forces have acted as significant allies to the US — much to Turkey's chagrin — in the international campaign against the militant jihadist group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Syria's Kurds are now seeking to establish their own regional state of some kind in northern Syria.

The Kurds represent one of the largest ethnic groups in the world — some 35 million — who have no state of their own. They are scattered across the Middle East region with some fifteen million in Turkey, six million in Iraq, six million in Iran, and up to two million in Syria.

Can the Kurds Unite?

The Kurds have never achieved any kind of pan-Kurdish solidarity. A key reason is that they live in mountainous regions, which leads to divided clans and traditions.

More importantly, the states in which they live have been determined to deny them any kind of independence. Furthermore, the Kurds have been historically socialized into three highly distinct political cultures: Turkish-speaking in Turkey, Arabic-speaking in Syria and Iraq, and Persian-speaking in Iran. All these languages are distinct and quite unrelated. The Kurdish language itself constitutes a branch among Iranian languages; it consists of at least three different dialects. Living in their traditional mountainous regions, usually far from urban centers in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, the Kurds developed a more tribal, sometimes even feudal type of social structure — except for those living in more urban areas.

In an earlier decade, it was Turkey that made the greatest progress towards finally acknowledging the Kurds as a distinct culture and language. Even twenty-five years ago, the term “Kurd” rarely appeared in the Turkish press; Kemalist culture and governance claimed they were merely a strain of backward “mountain” Turks given to anarchy and brigandage. But today, and especially in the early days of the Erdogan-AKP government, important progress has been made: the Kurdish identity is officially acknowledged, and some freedom is granted for the use of the Kurdish language, which had been banned in public usage. There were experiments in using the Kurdish language in schools alongside of Turkish. Sadly, in later years, Erdogan and Kurdish guerrilla groups allowed promising negotiations to collapse as Erdogan sought to play the Turkish nationalist card to strengthen his domestic political position. The main Kurdish armed Marxist militia, the PKK, then stepped up its insurgency operations inside Turkey. The situation between the two sides remains tense and violent, especially as Erdogan strengthens his hold over the country where he has all but crushed the leadership of the progressive pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

In Iraq, the Kurds today have gained a great deal of autonomy, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Ankara, to its credit, finally bit the bullet and wisely acknowledged the Kurdish entity in Iraq. Indeed, it has brought it into Turkey's

economic orbit where Turkey represents the Kurds' single most important commercial tie.

The Kurds in Syria have benefitted from the country's turmoil to form a new political entity called Rojava, which runs parallel to the Turkish-Syrian border. They are most prominently represented by their united militia organization, the People's Protection Units (YPG), who maintain significant ties with Turkey's Kurdish guerrillas, known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The YPG also cooperates with the US in anti-ISIS operations. Indeed, a large number of Syrian Kurds are refugees from Turkey from 1937 when they fled a massacre by the Turkish army, for which Erdogan actually apologized in 2011. But Ankara remains very sensitive about Rojava and is angered with Washington's military cooperation with Syrian Kurdish militias. Ankara is determined not to allow the establishment of any autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria in any new Syrian political order.

Kurdish leaders and politicians in the past have been somewhat conservative and traditional, linked to tribal associations and regionally focused. But the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) brought a new face to Kurdish nationalism starting in 1980 when its leader, Abdullah Öcalan (the Avenger), promulgated a Marxist and pan-Kurdish vision for the first time in Kurdish history, calling for national liberation of all Kurds, eventually to create one Kurdish state. This internationalist agenda represented a threat to traditional local Kurdish leaders, particularly in northern Iraq. This has led to occasional willingness by Iraqi Kurdish leaders even to cooperate with Ankara against the more radical Turkish guerrillas of the PKK. That cooperation does not sit well with many younger Kurdish nationalists.

In the meantime, the Kurds in Iran now seem the most isolated of all, largely unaffected by events in Iraq and Syria. While their Kurdish identity in Iran is acknowledged, Tehran has little tolerance for any movements towards autonomy, much less separatism, and it cracks down harshly against Kurdish separatist leadership.

The fact is that all these political events surrounding the Kurds — the anti-ISIS struggle, the creation of a new Iraqi state and a new order in Syria, and Turkey's more activist role in Kurdish regions outside of Turkey — offer Kurds new political options. From a historical perspective, eventual greater autonomy for all Kurds appears all but inevitable; in terms of real autonomy, Iraqi Kurds are, at the moment, the

most advanced.

Shared hostility to any kind of Kurdish independence unites the regimes of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Whatever other issues they have with each other, they will always cooperate on this one. The more autonomy Kurds gain in one state, the more demands will arise in the other Kurdish regions. But the Kurds have now also developed something of an international constituency, which brings them greater sympathy, diplomatic support, and human rights attention abroad.

The Iraqi Kurds planned a referendum on independence on September 25, 2017. This move was opposed by Washington, the international community, and all regional states. (Israel is the only exception; it supports Kurdish independence as part of its policy to weaken all regional states.) Few Kurds will vote against independence — it is a cherished cause. And a yes vote does not necessarily mean real consequences will flow from it immediately, but the Kurdish regional government will gain a powerful bargaining chip vis a vis Baghdad, and the inexorable process of ever greater Kurdish autonomy will have moved significantly further forward.

The handwriting is on the wall: broad Kurdish cultural and political autonomy is in the cards in all Kurdish regions. If governments resist, crack down and persecute, Kurdish discontent will grow along with international sympathies for them. All four of these states need to get smart about how they will handle this issue over the longer run. Denial and repression will only intensify violence and local anger.

Turkey ironically could emerge as the big winner from serious Kurdish autonomy in Turkey, but only if Ankara plays its cards intelligently. Over half of Turkey's Kurds live outside the southeast Kurdish zone. Istanbul is the largest Kurdish city in the world. Kurdish identity is now fully out of the box and broadly acknowledged among the Turkish public. If Turkey's Kurds are granted serious local autonomy, there will be far fewer incentives for them to break away from Turkey and retreat to isolation in the southeast. By being part of Turkey, Turkish Kurds would be part of the most flourishing state in the Middle East with ties to Europe and to Asia. Never mind that President Erdogan, through his self-aggrandizement and megalomania, is currently crushing all political opposition; he is seriously damaging Turkish democracy and its international stature for now, but Erdogan will not last forever.

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If Turkey can satisfy its own Kurds' aspirations, it will become the center of Kurdish economic and cultural life for the whole Middle East. Indeed, an enlightened Turkish policy towards its own Kurds will create a magnet force in Turkish Kurdistan by creating a model of Kurdish governance and life that will attract discontented Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Syria. Turkey would become the international Kurdish capital with far more to offer than Iraq, Iran or Syria ever could.

If, on the other hand, Turkey is unwise, and if President Erdogan continues to try to exploit crude Turkish nationalism against the Kurds to bolster his own isolated government, then the crisis will grow and violence in Turkey will increase, seriously damaging the country, and spread over into the neighboring Kurdish regions.

Will the Kurds ever unite under their own state? No one can say. How successfully these four states handle the challenge of integrating large minorities will be a key litmus test for their own future democratic governance. But it is safe to say that repression and violence will never solve the Kurdish problem; ultimately, they will only hasten and escalate Kurdish demands for maximum independence.

About the Author

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official and former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, in charge of long-range strategic forecasting. He is currently adjunct professor of history at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, and is the author of numerous books on the Muslim world. His first novel is "Breaking Faith: A Novel of Espionage and an American's Crisis of Conscience in Pakistan," and his second novel is "BEAR — A Novel of Eco-Violence in the Canadian Northwest."

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