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THE KURDISH ARENAS: A POLITICAL CARD BETWEEN TURKEY AND IRAN

Sulaiman Hussain Alwadai

Researcher, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)

Abstract

The interests of Turkey and Iran converge and intersect across several regional issues. Due to its security, political, economic and ethnic dimensions, the interests of both the Turks and Iranians deeply overlap and intertwine when it comes to the Kurdish question. The two countries share the same view regarding the Kurdish question as a security concern that threatens their sovereignty in light of the Kurdish ambition to create an independent Kurdish state that encompasses land from Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. However, the two countries use the Kurds as a political lever in their dispute over regional influence. The study, therefore, discusses in detail the Kurdish groups affiliated with Turkey and Iran, the factors influencing the position of Turkey and Iran towards the Kurds, and the attitudes of the Turks and Iranians in their handling of the Kurds. The study also sheds light on whether the Kurdish card between Turkey and Iran represents a point of intersection or a conflict of interests.

Keywords: *Kurdish question, Iran, Turkey,*

The Kurdish arenas abound with political tensions, either between the Kurdish groups themselves, or through the groups' interactions with the outside world in light of regional and international developments. Turkey and Iran attach a great deal of significance to all Kurdish developments, whether those occurring within their own territories or in Iraq and Syria given the fact that Kurdish communities live within their national boundaries and the Iraqi and Syrian central governments are as yet unable to extend their sovereignty over the entire Kurdish geographical spheres due to several impediments.

The historical background is of great importance when trying to understand how Turkey's and Iran's relationship was formed with the Kurdish parties. The past few years have brought to light several developments in the Kurdish arenas. In these arenas the interests of both Ankara and Tehran are intertwined, however, at certain moments their interests conflict, compromising their national interests.

Regionally, the Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence in 2017 had many ramifications for the status of the Kurds and their relations in the region. Kurdish forces played an important role in supporting the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS which was formed in 2014. Subsequently, Kurdish forces played a critical role in the Syrian crisis, resulting in them fully controlling the north-east of Syria. Turkey responded by launching military operations against Kurdish strongholds inside Iraq and Syria. Iran continues to support Bashar al-Assad's regime, however, to take control of the Syrian border areas, it has entrusted Shiite militias to carry out military operations in Iraq, thus undermining the Kurdistan Regional Government's influence in its territories.

Internationally, there is a new variable as the Biden administration took over the US presidency at the beginning of this year. It has a different approach towards the Kurds compared to the Trump administration, which withdrew from the Kurdish areas in northern Syria in 2019. This left Washington's Kurdish allies vulnerable to Turkish attacks. Washington later reconsidered its decision and redeployed troops to the surrounding oil-rich areas. On the other hand, Russia has taken the lead in Syria and sometimes coordinates with Turkey to support its operations against the Kurds, and sometimes it mediates to conclude agreements between Turkey and the Kurds. At the same time, it provides an official cover for Assad's forces and his allies on the ground, primarily Iran's Shiite militias.

All the aforementioned developments result in significant questions arising: Do the Kurdish territories constitute arenas of cooperation or conflict between the two neighbors, Iran and Turkey? Do the Kurds have a united front? What are the internal differences amongst the Kurds? When will the Kurdish card be a means of convergence between Turkey and Iran, and when will it be cause for dispute? How does each country exploit the Kurdish file to

shun the other and advance its political objectives?

In this paper, we assume that there are conflicting interests between Turkey and Iran in the Kurdish arenas across Syria and Iraq, although the Kurdish card was initially a means of cooperation and coordination between the two parties. The Kurdish arenas have been overwhelmed with Turkish-Iranian rivalry and exploitation because each party wishes to defend its own core national interests, or to extend political and regional influence through ideological, military, and economic means. To investigate the validity of this assumption, we review in-depth four major topics: The characteristics and variables of Kurdish groups connected to Iran and Turkey; the factors impacting Turkey's and Iran's positions; the most critical junctures in Turkish-Iranian interactions with regard to the Kurds; the Kurdish card between Turkey and Iran: intersection or conflicting interests?

The following table lists the acronyms of Kurdish parties used throughout the study.

KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
KNC	Kurdish National Council
PYD	Democratic Union Party
YPG	People's Protection Units
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PJAK	Kurdistan Free Life Party
KDPI	Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
Komala	Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan
YBS	Sinjar Resistance Units
EPF	Ezidkhan Protection Force

1. Kurdish Groups Connected to Iran and Turkey: Characteristics and Variables

The Kurds could not manage to forge a united front due to several internal variables and differences amongst the Kurdish groups. These internal variables and differences can be classified as follows:

1.1 Kurdish-Kurdish Differences/Distinctions

The ruling party of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its democratic partner in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), stand out prominently from other Kurdish groups in Iraq. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is active in the mountains of Kurdistan and opposes the Turkish government, and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) opposes the Iranian government. In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose military arm is the People's Protection Units (YPG), is the dominant party in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Kurdish National Council (KNC).

The Kurdish groups have various political ideologies. The PKK is radical and revolutionary; the KDP is democratic although with some aspects of conservative feudalism; and the PUK is a leftist nationalist movement, with a tilt towards progressive socialism. There are also radical differences between Kurdish groups regarding Kurdish nationalism, however, this might not be significant to delve into when discussing Kurdish aspirations for unity. At the cultural and social levels, linguistic distinctions stand out the most. Kurds in Turkey, Syria and northwestern Iraqi Kurdistan mainly speak Kurmanji (written in the Latin alphabet), while the Kurds of Iran and southeastern Iraqi Kurdistan speak Sorani (written in the Arabic alphabet). In the context of religion, there are Shiite Kurds in Iran who have sectarian disagreements with the Sunni Kurds and are the majority in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. We cannot lose sight of the Yazidis who hide their beliefs because of religious persecution. Their beliefs are linked to ancient religions like Zoroastrianism and are also derived from Islamic and Christian teachings.⁽¹⁾

The distinctions in the Kurdish sphere are not limited to language and religion, but extend to collective memories of historical military conflicts, especially the civil war between the Iraqi Kurdistan parties (the KDP and the PUK) which broke out in 1994 and lasted until 1998, or the renewed military disputes between the KDP and the PKK. Particularly, the ruling party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KDP) does not oppose the decades-old successive Turkish strikes against the PKK's positions in the Qandil Mountains inside its territories.

Economic fortunes play an important role in deepening the disparity between the Kurdish parties. Economic relations with Turkey have enabled

Barzani's ruling party in the Kurdistan Region to build infrastructure projects and reap financial revenues, and consolidate its national and regional position unlike its counterparts from other Kurdish groups such as the PKK and those following revolutionary ideologies in northern Syria.

Regional and international developments have had a clear impact on raising certain parties at the expense of others. Turkey, the United States, NATO, the EU and European countries designating the PKK as a terror outfit⁽²⁾ eroded its influence at the international level, unlike the international recognition that other Iraqi Kurdish parties enjoy because of their involvement in the international military campaigns to oust the former Saddam regime.

1.2 Developments in the Kurdish Arena in Iraq

After the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein drew attention to the problem of the Kurdish rebellion. Foremost among Saddam's concerns was that the Kurds or Iran would destroy the oil pipeline that passes through Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Europe. As soon as the war with Iran ended, Saddam launched the Anfal campaign against the Kurds and committed massacres against them. Chemical weapons were used, resulting in the death of 182,000 civilians.⁽³⁾ This massacre brought the Kurds together, leading to the creation of the Kurdistan Front under the leadership of Barzani and Talabani. The former later took over the leadership of the Peshmerga's military operations, while the latter assumed responsibility for foreign relations.⁽⁴⁾

During the 1990s, the two most important internal developments in Iraqi Kurdistan were the bloody conflict that erupted in 1992 between the PKK and the Kurdish alliance in Iraq, which included the KDP and the PUK backed by Turkey; and the civil war between the two allies and the two prominent parties in Iraqi Kurdistan: the KDP and the PUK. The PKK engaged in the war, exacerbating the conflict, in favor of the PUK against the KDP.⁽⁵⁾

The constitution of the central government of Iraq recognized in 2005⁽⁶⁾ Kurdish autonomy over Iraqi Kurdistan. Then their experiences developed into democratic elections, after which Jalal Talabani became the president of Iraq, and Mustafa Barzani the governor of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

ISIS incursions into Syria and Iraq had ramifications on the Kurds. The battle to regain Sinjar from ISIS control played an important role in changing Kurdish dynamics in the region. ISIS attacked the Yazidi religious minority, punished their men and committed heinous crimes against their families. PKK forces, supported by the international coalition and the Iraqi Peshmerga aligned with the KDP, and also supported by the Syrian Peshmerga and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), managed to liberate Sinjar and expel ISIS elements.⁽⁷⁾

This change in dynamics revealed prominent political paradoxes due to the fact that the forces linked to the PKK, which are included on international

terrorist lists, received international support. Furthermore, the new dynamics led to temporary Kurdish cooperation between the warring factions, an increasing Kurdish role in important regional issues, the expansion of PKK influence, and the training of pro-Yazidi militias.⁽⁸⁾

The Kurdistan Regional Government's hope to hold a referendum for independence in 2017 was crushed when it faced international opposition, especially from the United States, and regional opposition which was evident in the Turkish and Iranian reactions. At the internal level, the Kurdish referendum's declared goals were met with skepticism and caution by the PUK, the rival of the ruling KDP in the region. The PUK, therefore, sought to converge with the Syrian Kurds, who have close ties with the PKK.

1.3 Variables in the Syrian Kurdish Arena

The PYD was established in 2003 to defend the rights of the Kurds in Syria, and it does not keep secret its clear subordination to PKK policy. Since the beginning of the civil uprising in Syria against Bashar al-Assad in 2011, the Syrian Kurdish groups led by the PYD used their human and military capabilities to defend their lands. This was achieved through the efforts of its military arm, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the unprecedented support from the PKK, which has supported the Syrian Kurds for a long time with a number of Syrian Kurds holding leadership positions in the PKK's military hierarchy.⁽⁹⁾

In October 2011 in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, an umbrella of Kurdish parties in Syria opposing the PYD approach was established and dubbed as the Kurdish National Council (KNC). It included up to 13 Kurdish parties, most of which were formed after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising. The KNC is ideologically aligned with the Barzani-led KDP in Iraq, although it includes emerging left and revolutionary parties.

The KNC umbrella contributed to the creation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in 2012. Its military arm, the Rojava Peshmerga, was formed in Iraqi Kurdistan, consisting of Syrian Kurdish fighters numbering between 300,000 and 500,000 fighters, most of whom are Kurdish soldiers who defected from the Syrian army following the outbreak of the civil uprising. However, the Rojava Peshmerga has not participated in any military operations inside Syria. The KNC and the PYD are still debating over relocating the Rojava Peshmerga back to its Syrian home.⁽¹⁰⁾

It is important to shed light on the map of the Kurdish divisions in Syria. The KNC led by the KDP is internationally recognized and has been integrated into all matters relating to the Syrian opposition. It is also involved in the Astana peace talks in Syria, guaranteed by the three countries involved in the conflict: Russia, Turkey and Iran. On the other hand, the apparent brotherhood between the PYD and the PKK put the former under the spotlight of international

suspicion and prompted Turkey to oppose any attempt to involve the PYD in the diplomatic settlement in Syria to prevent it from gaining international legitimacy.

The PYD, however, managed to establish a partnership with the United States during the Kobane battle in September 2014. In October of the same year, the PYD received its first shipment of arms supplies from the US-led coalition. This partnership resulted in the PYD controlling three important areas in northern Syria: Afrin, Hasaka and Kobane. In addition, it led to the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the PYD allied with the scattered diaspora of Arabs, Turkmen, Muslims and Christians.⁽¹¹⁾ The external threat meant that Kurdish groups had to unite against a common enemy. The battle to liberate Kobane from ISIS was one of the threats that led to a Kurdish consensus and this was aided by the channels of communication that Washington established between the KNC and the PYD in Dohuk.⁽¹²⁾

The PYD's pivotal role resulted in it turning into an active political player in the Syrian crisis, and helped it to develop influence, whether in regards to current Syrian events or in relation to future proposals to resolve the Syrian crisis. Although Turkey carried out successive attacks targeting PYD controlled territories – this point will be discussed in detail under subheading 2- and the US withdrew from northern Syria while keeping its forces around the oilfields in Hasaka in 2019, the PYD still controls vast territories east of the Euphrates in northern Syria — even after Turkish forces and the Syrian opposition took Afrin in March 2018.⁽¹³⁾

Kurdish nationalism as a whole has never been represented by a united political party nor a single representative front. However, on more than one occasion, we have seen temporary cooperation between the warring Kurdish factions to counter an external existential threat; their joint defense when ISIS took over Sinjar and killed the Yazidi religious minority, and their joint response when ISIS invaded Kobane in Syria. Yet, fragmentation and partisanship still prominently exist amongst the Kurdish groups. The PKK adopts a revolutionary Marxist ideology as do the Kurdish parties in Syria, in particular the PYD and the PJAK in Iran that are hostile to the KDP's policies, the ruling party in the Kurdistan Region. The PUK seems hesitant to defend its political interests; sometimes it aligns with the KDP by engaging with it in the democratic experience in Iraqi Kurdistan and at other times it enters into disputes with it, moving closer towards the PKK and its loyalists.

2. Factors Impacting Turkish and Iranian Positions on the Kurds

There are four main factors which influence Turkish and Iranian positions towards the Kurds:

2.1 The Persisting Kurdish Ambition for an Independent State

The Kurdish ambition for an independent state dates back to the 20th century in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire collapsing. However, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which was subsequently signed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, determined Turkey's current borders and prevented the establishment of a single Kurdish state as was envisioned by the Kurdish leadership at the time. The Kurdish struggle continued at all levels during the last century, from the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in northwest Iran with Soviet support, which was suppressed in 1947 by the Pahlavi shah and his Western allies; the unsuccessful revolt against the British Mandate in Iraq; the armed struggle led by Mustafa Barzani during the 1960s in Iraq; to the 1970s when the Pahlavi government and the United States abandoned the Kurds after Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi signed the Algiers Agreement with Saddam Hussein to demarcate the borders between Iran and Iraq in 1975.⁽¹⁴⁾

Thus, the concern about the Kurdish ambition to establish a single state is the fundamental reason for Turkey and Iran engaging with the Kurdish minority at home and abroad. The PKK began its revolutionary operations to separate Kurdish territories from Turkey in the 1980s. The Iranian Kurdish parties were brutally suppressed after the 1979 revolution for fear that the Kurds would demand political autonomy or separation. Turkey's and Iran's opposition to the Kurdish ambition was evident from their decisive opposition to the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq in 2017.

2.2 The Problems of National Security and Terrorism

In the four countries that have large Kurdish minorities, several security problems stem from Kurdish separatist movements. Separatist movements seem inevitable in light of the policies towards Kurdish culture, rights, language, and recognition. Prior to the 1990s, the Kurdish card was the basis of relations between the concerned countries, resulting in unique security relations between them, either to quell Kurdish protests or to antagonize neighboring countries, like when Iran and Syria used the Kurdish card against Turkey.

The first security agreement signed between Turkey and Iran in light of the Kurdish equation was in September to uphold border security. Iraq, Iran and Turkey, with the participation of Syria, previously held a series of conferences starting in 1992 to prevent the Kurds from establishing an independent state in northern Iraq. These conferences continued until 1995 when the Kurdish civil war escalated and then Turkey intervened to support the KDP, and Iran supported the PUK.⁽¹⁵⁾ The security problems stemming from the Kurdish card still motivate Iran and Turkey to strengthen areas of cooperation such as by signing agreements to strengthen border security and combat terrorism

to prevent continued oil and gas pipeline attacks such as the March 2020 bombing incident, which disrupted the export of Iranian gas to Turkey.⁽¹⁶⁾

2.3 Ramifications of Weak Central Governments in Syria and Iraq

The weakness of the Syrian and Iraqi central governments has affected the status quo in the Kurdish arenas. During the 1990s, the Iraqi government lost control of northern Kurdistan as a result of the air embargo imposed by Western countries and the UN Security Council in 1992. The Iraqi central government grew weaker after 2003 due to sectarian divisions and the conflict of internal interests instigated by regional parties intervening in the country. The status of Iraq as a declining regional power meant that it was imperative for the other two powers, Turkey and Iran, to compete in order to expand their influence within Iraqi territories.⁽¹⁷⁾

Iran and Turkey support both sides in the Syrian crisis. Iran has fought alongside the Shiite militias linked to Assad's forces, while Turkey has supported the Syrian opposition stationed in its last stronghold, Idlib. The two sides are aware of the opportunity presented to Kurdish parties to establish their control over northeastern Syria in their quest for autonomy. This would not have been possible if the Syrian government had not lost its control over its territories.

2.4 International and Regional Use of the Kurdish Card

Iran and Turkey have a number of concerns about the regional and international exploitation of the Kurdish card that contradicts their strategic interests. International players exploit the Kurdish card to promote their interests in the Middle East and to place pressure on Turkey or Iran, most notably the United States and Russia. Regionally, Israel is a pivotal partner for Washington.

Washington has always presented itself as supportive of Kurdish demands for self-determination. Although it has repeatedly disappointed the Kurds, America has undoubtedly exploited the Kurdish card politically to leverage against certain countries in the region. Iran's Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi used the Kurds in the 1970s against Iraq and then betrayed them by signing the Algiers Agreement of 1975. The Kurds were used in the 1991 Gulf War, but they were supported when they rose up against Saddam Hussein, but this uprising was violently suppressed by the Iraqi regime. The Americans used the Kurds again in the war to overthrow Saddam in 2003.

According to Iran, the situation is more dangerous because it opposes the US military presence close to its western borders. In addition, it resents the convergence of Israeli-US interests in regard to their focus on the Kurdish card. Turkey guards against full US support for the Kurds, especially during the air embargo in the 1990s in northern Iraq, although it essentially participated in enforcing it. The US alliance with the Kurds in Syria, under the pretext of

eliminating ISIS, has raised Turkish ire. It should be noted that there are news reports about a US offer to win over Komala, an Iranian Kurdish party, on the condition that it ends its subordination to the PKK'S revolutionary ideology. The Komala party reportedly rejected the US offer.⁽¹⁸⁾ The US support for the PYD, linked to the PKK, raises doubts about the reports regarding the US making a conditional offer.

The Soviet Union supported the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in northwestern Iran, but the Shah of Iran used his Western allies to overthrow it quickly after 11 months of its establishment. Russia continues to use the Kurdish card in its bilateral relationship with Turkey whenever needed. For example, in response to the negative Turkish reaction against Russia's intervention in Chechnya during the 1990s, Moscow raised Turkish ire after it opened the so-called "Kurdish House" in Moscow in December 1994, and allowed PKK members to attend military training operations in January 1995. However, the crisis was defused when Russian Prime Minister Primakov, back then, refused to grant the PKK leader asylum in Russia in 1998.⁽¹⁹⁾ Currently, Russia is a major and dominant actor in the Syrian crisis and has the upper hand in establishing security in the Kurdish engagement areas and contact with Turkish troops or Syrian forces and their allies; Iran's militias.

Therefore, both Ankara and Tehran are aware of the security problems raised by the Kurds and the potential ramifications of regional and international parties interacting with the Kurds as their national interests might be undermined or contradicted. There are other factors influencing Turkey's and Iran's position towards the Kurds such as the weakness of the two central governments in Syria and Iraq, and the growing ambitions of the Kurds for establishing an independent state.

3. Turkish and Iranian Attitudes Towards the Kurds

After reviewing the Kurdish arenas, the variables in Syria and Iraq and the factors impacting Turkish and Iranian positions, we now attempt to shed light on the most significant junctures in Turkish and Iranian interactions with the Kurds, in light of domestic, regional and international developments.

3.1 Turkey's Reaction to the Kurdish Question

Turkey confronting the PKK's threats to its national security has been a fundamental aspect of Ankara's foreign policy. Following the collapse of the peace talks between the Turkish government and the PKK, that started in 2013 and lasted for less than two years, the two sides have waged war against each other. The PKK was founded on a nationalist revolutionary Marxist ideology that seeks to separate Kurdish territories from Turkey. However, over the past decades, the PKK's ambitions were restricted since the Kurds gained some autonomy and rights inside Turkish territories. It should be noted that

the Kurdish population in Turkey amounts to about 20 percent of the total population.

The conflict between Turkey and the PKK impacts the Turkish interior, especially Kurdish populated areas, as illustrated by the Turkish government's enactment of emergency laws to stifle the Kurds. Following the military confrontations with the PKK, the Turkish government imprisoned thousands of members of the Turkish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), supportive of the Kurds, and expelled 93 governors from their posts in Kurdish metropolises, and replaced them with government commissioners.⁽²⁰⁾ The HDP returned to the political arena after the 2018 parliamentary election and it has actively participated with other opposition parties against the Turkish government, the Freedom and Justice Party, led by President Erdogan and its ally the Nationalist Movement Party MHP. The Turkish government has attempted to keep the HDP away from the political scene completely and pass legislation that would give it the right to prosecute HDP members and lawmakers.⁽²¹⁾

Turkey had previously extended a helping hand to both prominent Kurdish parties in the region, the KDP and the PUK, in their struggle against the Iraqi Baathist government during the 1990s, through enforcing the no-fly zone imposed by Western powers on the Kurdish areas known as Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). We cannot ignore the various pressure tools Turkey has at its disposal, most notably the Kurdish region's economic dependence on trade with Ankara, as well as the region generating revenues from exporting oil and its derivatives to Turkish markets.

Turkey's foreign policy goal is to prevent an independent Kurdish state in Iraq's Kurdistan Region and launch military operations against PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. Over the past two years, Turkey has launched several military operations in northern Iraq to attack PKK fighters and eliminate them. In the middle of 2020, it launched Operation Claw-Eagle, and then in February 2021 launched Operation Claw-Eagle 2 in Jabal Karah, Amadiya district in Dohuk Governorate in the Kurdistan Region. The second operation aimed to free 13 Turkish prisoners who were being held by the PKK, but it was unsuccessful. Ankara accused the PKK of killing the Turkish prisoners during the operation. The PKK responded that the Turkish bombing of a cave in Jabal Karah killed all the Turkish prisoners.⁽²²⁾ In addition to the two mentioned Turkish operations, Ankara launched its third, Operation Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt, in April of this year.⁽²³⁾

On the Syrian side, the PYD's control of vast lands in Syria worries the Turkish government, as it considers this to be an existential threat to its national unity and its worries would grow if Kurdish nationalists demand an independent state. Turkey considers the PYD in Syria and its military wing, the YPG, solely a Syrian branch of the PKK. Therefore, it deals with this party as a terrorist

outfit, so it opposed with all its political weight the PYD's involvement in the peace talks in regard to resolving the Syrian crisis.

The successive Kurdish triumphs to expel ISIS and the siege of Raqqa from October 2017 until victory was announced in March 2019⁽²⁴⁾ coincided with Turkish military operations to prevent the formation of an autonomous region run by the Kurds. It carried out two military operations against Kurdish-controlled territory; the first, Operation Euphrates Shield, which lasted until March 2017, and then Operation Olive Branch, through which it regained Afrin in March 2018. Undoubtedly, the two operations were coordinated with Russian forces. Strategically, Turkey aims to advance its troops into Syrian territory by 32 kilometers and along the border strip with Syria, estimated at 460 kilometers, to establish a safe zone to abort any attempted Kurdish autonomy project.⁽²⁵⁾

3.2 Iran's Reaction to the Kurdish Question

The estimates of the Kurdish population inside Iran vary, and it is more likely close to 10 percent of the total Iranian population — though the Kurdish sources go beyond this percentage. As in the case with all ethnic minorities in Iran, the Kurdish people suffer from serious marginalization, persecution and their civil and cultural rights are denied.⁽²⁶⁾

Historically, the Kurds participated in the revolution against the Pahlavi government, but Khomeini, months after taking power, believed that Kurdish ambitions were akin to “disbelief in Islam” and directed the Iranian army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to end the Kurdish movement. As a result, 10,000 Kurds were killed.⁽²⁷⁾ At that time, the two prominent Kurdish parties were the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), which was headed by Abd al-Rahman Ghassemlou who was assassinated by the Iranian government in 1989, and the Komala Party, which aligned itself to a Marxist-Leninist ideology. The former only called for autonomy without having separatist ambitions.⁽²⁸⁾ During the Iran-Iraq War, just as Iran exploited the hostility of Iraqi Kurds towards Saddam, the Iraqi forces exploited the armed struggle of the Kurds against the Iranian political system led by Khomeini.

The year 2004 witnessed the rise of the Kurdish Free Life Party (PJAK), which is ideologically and organizationally connected to the PKK. Sporadic disputes have erupted between the PJAK and the Iranian government. Although the PJAK announced that it had halted its military operations in 2011, these operations continued until the current moment in time. Iran has launched military strikes targeting sites in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, which it says are PJAK strongholds. Iran stirs political divisions among the two prominent parties in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region because it fears Kurdish national unity and wants to thwart Kurdish separatist attempts. Therefore, even if Iran recognizes the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, it certainly does not

want a unified Kurdish entity inside Iraq nor an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Iran, however, has different considerations when it comes to the Kurds in Syria because they are quite close to Turkey's border, and Tehran therefore has a heavy bargaining chip against the Turkish government.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran used every means available to agitate the Kurds and support their struggle against Saddam. During the four years of civil war between the two parties, the KDP and the PUK from 1994 to 1998, Turkish-Iranian rivalry surfaced. Turkey aligned with the KDP while Iran aligned with the PUK. This civil war ended after US mediation and a peace treaty signed between the two parties called the Washington Agreement in 1998.⁽²⁹⁾

The common denominator between Iran and the PUK was their hostility to the KDP. According to some reports, there were talks between Iran and the PUK in 2017 to establish a pipeline to export oil from Sulaymaniyah through Iran.⁽³⁰⁾ Iran's growing influence over Iraq's central government after the collapse of the Saddam state allowed it to activate its Shiite militias inside Iraq against the Kurdistan Regional Government to exhaust the KDP's forces, the ruling Turkish-backed party. In Syria, the IRGC-backed militias are active, and they operate under the cover of Assad's regular army.

3.3 The Worsening of Disagreements in Sinjar

Turkey has had military posts established inside Iraq for decades to eliminate PKK forces, which currently depend on the rugged terrain of the Sinjar Mountains and the Qandil Mountains, to hide or stir unrest against the Turkish government.

Recently, Tehran's ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, condemned Turkey's military operations. In response, Turkey summoned Tehran's ambassador to Ankara, Muhammad Farazmand, in protest against the statement of the Iranian ambassador to Iraq. According to media reports, the two regional powers are potentially heading towards a cold war, given the fact that tensions between the two countries have dramatically increased to such an extent that forced Iran to summon Turkey's ambassador to Tehran, Derya Urs.⁽³¹⁾

The Sinjar district is located in the triangle of northwest Iraq along both the Turkish and Syrian borders, specifically west of the city of Mosul within the Nineveh Governorate of the Kurdistan Region. This gives it great strategic importance. Before 2014, it was an area disputed between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and then fell into the grip of ISIS, leaving the Yazidis, there vulnerable to rape, killing and displacement. About 75 percent of its inhabitants are Yazidi Kurds. However, some prefer to reveal their Kurdish identity only, whereas others are proud of the Yazidi community's unique heritage.⁽³²⁾

Thanks to Kurdish fighters from Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, and with the support of the international coalition, Sinjar was liberated in November 2015, and since then Kurdish groups have taken control over the region's mountains, including the PKK. The latter developed much popularity amongst the Yazidis because of the support it offered to them after they suffered much brutality under ISIS control, marking this period as the darkest in Sinjar's history. The PKK established a safe corridor to help Yazidis escape from Sinjar.

The Sinjar Mountains is highly significant in Iran's regional strategy, given the fact that it can possibly use these mountains as a crossing point for its Shiite fighters, and a conduit for military supplies across the border. By engaging in the battles to liberate Iraq from ISIS control, Iran managed to deploy its Shiite militias in territories surrounding the Sinjar region.⁽³³⁾

PKK forces have infiltrated areas in the Kurdistan Region, especially where popular anger against the KDP is growing, as is the case in Sulaymaniyah, or in the Sinjar region, home to the Yazidi community, with the Yazidis accuse the KDP's Peshmerga of abandoning them when ISIS attacked their homes. Since the beginning of the battle against ISIS, the PKK used the conflict as an opportunity to establish its influence in Sinjar by establishing militias that are loyal to it, most notably the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) and the Yezidkhan Protection Forces (EPF).

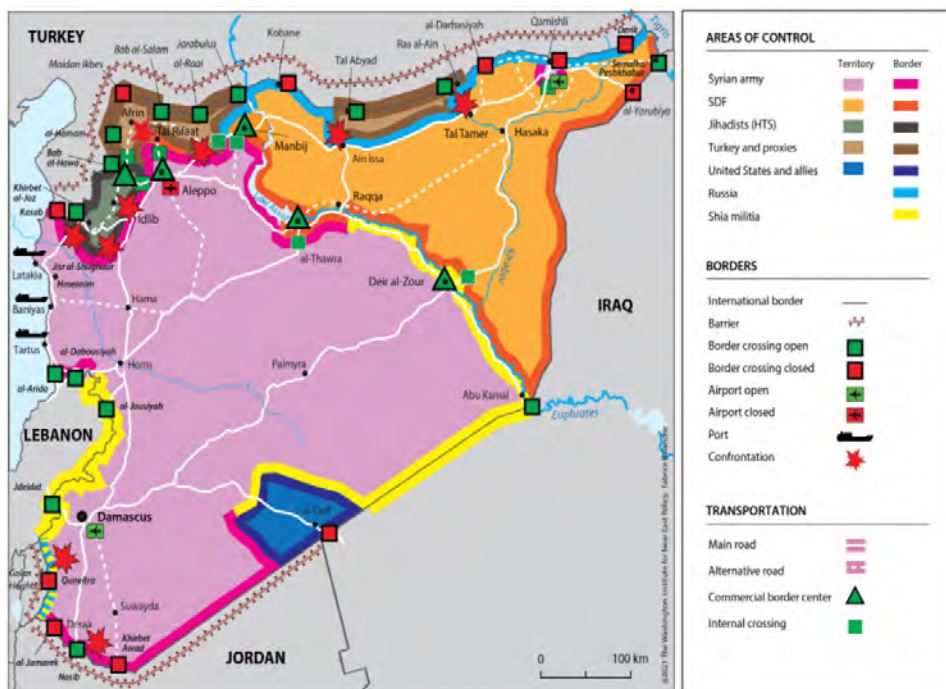
The Shiite PMF has developed links with the PKK because they share the same outlook and face common enemies, motivating the former deputy PMF commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in 2019 to conclude an agreement with the PKK. This paved the way for the YBS and other Yazidi militias connected to the PKK to benefit from the PMF's financial allocations that had been provided to it by the Iraqi federal government.⁽³⁴⁾

3.4 The US Position on the Kurdish Question

After the former US President Trump took the decision to withdraw US forces, amounting to nearly 2,000 soldiers, from Syria in October 2019, Turkey intervened militarily for the third time through operation Spring of Peace which forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee from the area that Ankara sought to secure. The operation forced the SDF to plead to Russia and Syria for their forces to confront the Turkish threat. The situation ended with the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the border with Turkey, and the involvement of Russian and Turkish patrols to comb the border area, except for 120 kilometers of the border located between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, since it is under the exclusive control of Turkish forces.⁽³⁵⁾ Despite the Turkish advances and the results of its agreement with Russia, the SDF forces still managed to extend their

influence over vast areas in the northeastern Syria and east of the Euphrates, as shown in Map 1 below.

Map 1: Spheres of Influence of Disputing Forces in Syria



Source: Fabrice Balanch, “The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria,” *The Washington Institute*, February 10, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2U6YRwN>.

Iran opposes the US presence on Iraqi soil, particularly the US military bases established in Kurdish cities. These served as a platform for many operations launched by the United States against the Iraqi central government, whether during the 1991 Gulf War or the operations it carried out to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003. Iran’s opposition reflects the Iranian government’s concern that it might face the same fate as the Baathist regime in Iraq.

In Syria, US support for the Kurdish parties complicates Iran’s strategy that supports Bashar al-Assad and hinders the efforts of Iran’s Axis of Resistance, which extends from Tehran through Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut. Turkey rejects US support for the Kurdish parties in Syria and considers changing their names to be a political ploy that is part of Washington’s strategy. Washington perceives the Kurdish forces as a trustworthy ally, especially in defeating ISIS. At the same time, the United States seeks to avoid provoking its Turkish ally.

4. The Kurdish Card Between Turkey and Iran: Intersection or Conflict of Interests?

At first glance, the Kurdish card may appear to be the focus of strategic cooperation between Turkey and Iran to quell Kurdish ambitions for separation, but the Kurdish card has many entanglements and the polarizing disputes stemming from these entanglements are well known.

Before we address the areas of disagreement between the two sides in light of the Kurdish question, it is worth mentioning the cooperation between the two sides in certain areas:

4.1 Nominal Cooperation Against Terrorism

In 2019, when Iran and Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding to boost security cooperation on their shared border strip, and although Turkey stated that it carried out joint operations with Iran against PKK sites after concluding the security agreement, Tehran quickly denied this, raising doubts about military cooperation between the two sides against the Kurds in Iraq.⁽³⁶⁾ Kurdish media platforms confirmed on September 9, 2020 that Turkish attacks against PKK militants in northern Iraq coincided with military attacks launched by the IRGC on sites near PJAK strongholds in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁽³⁷⁾ It should be noted that the Iranian strikes did not cause any casualties, but rather material damage to farms belonging to Kurdish villagers. This indicates that the details of the agreement between Turkey and Iran were merely nominal and not substantial.

4.2 Close Cooperation to Thwart the Establishment of an Independent Kurdish State

This is evident from both sides rejecting the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum in 2017 and it is currently evident in their agreement to curb Kurdish ambitions in Syria, fearing that Kurdish control of northeastern Syria will lead to autonomy and heighten calls for Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq.

4.3 The Individual Responses to Internal Threats

It is also evident in the suppression of separatist movements and the tightening of restrictions on groups sympathetic to the Kurds so that they do not impact the course of political decision-making in the two countries. On the other hand, conflicting Turkish-Iranian interests in regard to the Kurdish file are also evident:

■ The possibility of increasing the frequency of clashes in the Sinjar region: The developments in the Sinjar region caused concern for several reasons, most notably that they foreshadowed an unbridled Turkish-Iranian conflict in the future. The Turkish military operations against PKK sites are also a

bold challenge to Iranian goals, and it is likely that this challenge will lead to a direct clash between Iraqi Shiite militias under the command of Iran and the Turkish side.

The developments of the clashes in the Sinjar region will reveal crucial complications between the Turkish and Iranian parties in the coming days, especially as the Turkish side is prioritizing the security problem created by the PKK in Sinjar and northern Iraq, while the Iranian side cares more about arms supplies and the movement of its Shiite militias across the Iraqi-Syrian border.

■ **Shiite militias and the PKK converging, thus threatening Turkey's interests:** The real threat to Turkey is the Iranian convergence, represented by the PMF, with the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Shiite factions and elites find pragmatic commonalities with the PKK; therefore, the two sides rejected the Iraq central government's agreement with the Kurdistan Regional Government signed in October 2020 regarding Sinjar. According to this agreement, all armed forces must vacate the area, including the PMF and the PKK. At the end of February 2021, the leaders of the PMF, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba met with IRGC leaders to discuss what they described as Turkey's intention to storm Sinjar. According to local Turkish media reports, the PMF deployed almost 15,000 fighters to Sinjar to counter Turkish interventions.⁽³⁸⁾

■ **Kurdish internal rifts and granting Iran and Turkey tools to compete:** After the 2017 referendum, the PMF was the biggest winner in the internal rift between the KDP and the PUK during the Kirkuk crisis, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces to the Kurdistan Region and the capture of Kirkuk by Iraqi forces supported by the PMF. The Iraqi forces settled in Kirkuk, Mosul, and Sinjar district. Iran relies heavily on the internal rifts and takes advantage of the tensions between the PKK and the KDP, and between the PUK and the KDP, to put pressure on Turkey and its ally, the KDP, the Kurdistan Region's ruling party.

Many regions and parties inside Kurdistan are tilting towards the PKK, especially after popular and political anger grew against the growing administrative corruption stemming from the decisions taken by the ruling KDP. For example, the Kurdistan opposition movement, the Gorran Movement, stayed in Sulaymaniyah and strengthened its relationship and support for the PKK after its representatives were expelled from the Kurdistan Parliament by Massoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP.⁽³⁹⁾

Turkey has a strong relationship with Barzani's party (KDP), and it accepted – though tacitly – the successive Turkish attacks against PKK strongholds, deepening the gap between the Kurdish parties internally and instigating them to fight each other again. This may lead to a new civil war engaging both Turkey and Iran undoubtedly. The Kurdish internal rifts provide an opening

for regional powers to exploit the Kurdish parties, especially Iranian and Turkish forces, which have been competing to extend their influence in Iraq and Syria.

■ Turkey's rising influence in Syria and Iran's dependence on militias in Iraq and Syria: Iran depends on its armed militias to extend its military influence and execute its desired policies. The most compelling illustration of the PMF's growing pressure against the Kurdistan Regional Government and the capital Erbil is its escalation in the targeting of international diplomatic and military interests and headquarters in the region. Iranian-backed Shiite militias were reportedly accused of carrying out attacks against these targets. Trump's withdrawal from Syria increased Turkey's influence and opportunities for securing its goals. Accordingly, Turkish and Iranian goals and interests collide depending on the extent of the weakness of the Iraqi and Syrian central governments.

■ The Biden approach favoring the Kurds: Internationally, the Biden administration's approach will not be the same as that of the Trump administration's towards gradual withdrawal from Syria. The Biden administration wants to be a key player in determining the outcome of the Syrian crisis. Although the Iraqi and American governments announced that US forces will merely play an advisory role, the US military presence in Syria will not change, and supporting the SDF is among Washington's most significant goals — in coordination with its regional ally, Israel.

Conclusion

Although the Turkish-Iranian relationship is deeply divergent in light of their different regional strategic visions and ideological approaches, the two sides were driven by several motives that led to them forging cooperation agreements in regard to various developments, hence neutralizing disagreements over the past four years. For example, their mutual cooperation was clearly evident in response to the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. The study concludes that the Kurdish question has not been an area of cooperation between the two countries given their mutual disagreements on the issue itself as well as the internal differences among the Kurds themselves. This is in addition to the repercussions resulting from the weakness of the central government in Syria and Iraq. Further, various regional and international developments led the two countries to adopt divergent regional policies when dealing with the Kurdish parties.

There are various disagreements between the two countries, most notably the competition in Sinjar between Turkey and the KDP on the one hand and the PKK and the Iraqi Shiite militias linked to Iran on the other. This is in addition to the convergence of Iran's Shiite militias and the PKK despite the

differences in their intellectual and ideological foundations indicating that a direct clash between Turkey and Iran in the coming days could possibly erupt. The two countries are determined to support rival Kurdish parties in the hope of securing their competing interests. The absence of state sovereignty in Iraq and Syria undoubtedly is fertile soil for a frantic competition between Iran and Turkey. The two countries are on full alert for any potential, urgent regional and international developments such as the new US policy towards the Kurds adopted by the Biden administration.

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