

# Facing ISIS: The Kurds of Syria and Iraq

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Kurdistan has faced numerous tragedies in its time. Divided between four countries by Imperial powers, the Kurds have suffered political alienation, discrimination and genocide at the hands of various Turkish, Arab and Persian rulers. Despite a long and bloody history, the Kurds have never faced quite as virulent and destructive a threat as the Islamic State (ISIS), which has sought to utterly destroy Kurdish political and cultural life in Iraq and Syria.

The Kurds presented little in the way of a strategic threat to the Caliphate. Kurdish territorial designs stretched into only small portions of Arab-held territory in Iraq and Syria, and certainly not into the heartlands of ISIS control. ISIS' militant dislike of separatist nationalism in the Islamic world, especially when mixed with secular values, may have been a trigger. But ultimately it may prove to be a combination of hubris and a misguided sense of military capability that drove ISIS into battles against the Kurds that have been hugely costly in terms of weapons and manpower and deleterious to the group's perceived invincibility.

### ISIS: a Blessing or a Curse for Kurdistan?

Despite ISIS' appetite for wanton destruction, a debate exists as to whether Iraqi Kurdistan has benefitted from the insurgents' repeated intrusions into their land. Kurds rejoiced in June 2014 when Iraq's army melted away from disputed Kurdish lands in the face of an ISIS attack. The long held desire for

Kurdish control over Kirkuk was finally realised as the Peshmerga moved to secure areas long disputed between themselves and the central Iraqi authorities in Baghdad. As such, the ISIS advances in Iraq have provided territorial benefits for Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as bringing the Kurds into close security cooperation with a number of important international actors, most notably the United States, France, the UK and Germany. With such international backing the security of Kurdistan is virtually all but guaranteed, be it from ISIS or from any potential conflict with the Iraqi State, and this despite the preference in the West for a unified Iraq under Baghdad's control.

But the raucous optimism of that time has been replaced with unease about the future of the proto-State that is coming into being in Iraq. Kurdistan may well have gained the land it dreamed of, but the price it is paying is high. The Peshmerga have lost 1,200 men and women, and over 5,900 have been injured defending their lines from repeated ISIS attacks. The region has taken in some 1.6 million refugees from Syria and the rest of Iraq, straining the regional government's resources to breaking point. Additionally, numerous towns and villages along the front lines of Kurdish and ISIS fighters have been rendered uninhabitable by the destruction of war and by retreating ISIS forces.

Similarly, ISIS attacks against Syria's Kurdish region (known as Rojava) have proven a defining moment not just for Syria itself, but also for the future of Kurdistan. The siege of the Syrian border town of Kobani in particular focused minds on the Kurdish struggle, for the first time bringing Western air power, under the guise of Operation Inherent Resolve, to back Syrian Kurds in their armed struggle. Less economically developed than their Iraqi brethren, and only having achieved relative autonomous power since

2012, Syrian Kurdistan's mere emergence on the world stage as a political actor is almost entirely as a result of ISIS attacks. Although not assured of the same level of Western support as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Syrian Kurds have been effectively given assurances by the international coalition that they will not be left alone in their struggle for survival.

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As Rojava comes to life as a socio-political entity it faces numerous challenges, not least the devastation caused by ISIS. 80% of Kobani lies in ruins; the majority of its people have fled to Turkey and are unsure as to whether they will be allowed to return to a town ridden with hidden bombs and little working infrastructure. Rojava's three cantons of Afrin, Kobani and Jazeera remain separate entities lacking contiguity and a defined political future, especially as the war in Syria still looks far from being over. As ISIS weakens militarily, retreating from territories it once held, and factions such as the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al Nusra and Syrian regime look to capitalise, Syria's Kurds undoubtedly have to continue fighting as the war drags on indefinitely.

### Economic Challenges

The fight against ISIS has deeply affected the daily lives of Iraq's Kurds, in particular through its effects on the KRG economy. Iraqi Kurdistan has suffered dramatically as a result of instability in the rest of Iraq. Failures by the central authorities in Baghdad to pay the KRG its allotted 17% monthly share of the national budget have led to a cash crisis in Kurdish-controlled territory.

Salaries of civil servants and Peshmergas have gone unpaid, sometimes for as much as six months, and the three incomplete payments made by Baghdad this year have only made up for salaries missed some four months ago. This while Baghdad has continually ensured the payment of salaries to Iraqi government workers in Mosul, working under ISIS. Given that 70% of the KRG's working population is in the public sector, this has proven devastating to the area's economy, the lack of money in the system leading to a cascade effect causing what little private sector that exists to shrink rapidly.

The solution to the problem is complex; corruption, bad fiscal management and tumbling oil prices all play their part in preventing a quick fix for Iraq's Kurds, and restarting regular payments from Baghdad will not cover the region's \$1.2-billion monthly expense bill. It will be a slow rebuilding process that may take many years, and the damage to Kurdistan's drive to one day become an independent state will be long lasting. The war has exposed the fragility of the KRG, and while Iraq's Kurds have pulled together during this time of crisis, there is deep anger about the inefficiency and incompetence of political leadership, and the inability of Iraqi Kurdistan to put into place structures which afford them greater fiscal autonomy from Baghdad.

In Rojava, Syria's Kurds have also begun to grumble. The existential nature of the threat posed by ISIS has exposed cracks in the nascent autonomous project. Burdened by refugees from other areas of Syria, effectively blockaded by Turkey and by ISIS regions to the south, and with a limited border crossing into the KRG, Rojava has struggled to form any sort of functioning economic system or export goods in any substantial quantity. This despite its plentiful oil reserves and abundant cereal crop production, which has the potential to provide up to 30% of Syria's total need if it is not exported. The highly centralised system being put into place by the canton administration is, like Iraqi Kurdistan, highly dependent on the capital city for inflows of cash, and, consequently, the fate of Rojava is tied to the ability of Damascus to print money, which hugely affects Syrian Kurds' ability to push for complete autonomy in the near future.

## **Intra-Kurdish Politics and the Growth of a Pan-Kurdish Identity**

The Kurds are infamous for their plethora of political divisions, and relations between the main party in Syrian Kurdistan the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the most powerful party in Iraqi Kurdistan the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) are notably poor. But the problems of intra-Kurdish rivalry have undergone a strange metamorphosis as a result of ISIS attacking Kurds on both sides of the international border. Indeed the ferocity of the ISIS attack against Syrian and Iraqi Kurds represents the first time in Kurdish history that Kurds have faced a threat from the same entity, unbound by state or geographical borders.

This has translated into a deepening sense of pan-Kurdish identity. Iraq's Kurds watched anxiously as their Syrian brothers fought desperate battles in Kobani to repel repeated ISIS offensives, eventually leading to calls from among Iraqi Kurds to support Kobani with Peshmerga fighters. Indeed Kurds across Turkey, Iraq and Syria cheered when 150 Peshmerga, with Turkey's permission, crossed into Kobani to help defend the town from ISIS. Additionally, hundreds of Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian Kurds have been identified fighting among the ranks of the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, and Iranians, Turks and Syrians have also been seen fighting in Iraq alongside Peshmerga forces, a sign if ever there was one of increasing unity among Kurdistan's four constituent parts.

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This unity was also displayed by diaspora Kurds in Europe and the US who collected aid packages for each other's armed forces and joined together to demonstrate against ISIS with scant thought as to whose faction they stood alongside. This is perhaps the first time such unity has been observed in the diaspora, where political divides in the homeland are often starkly reflected.

But despite the closer emotional links and the security cooperation in Kobani the problems between the PKK-affiliated PYD, and the pro-Turkish KDP still run deep. This is most demonstrably shown in Sinjar, where the Yazidi population faced slaughter at the hands of the Islamic State in August 2014 following a withdrawal by Peshmerga forces. Locals in the area largely view the Syrian Kurdish forces as their saviours, and the YPG and PKK were able to secure areas of Sinjar in the absence of KDP Peshmerga forces. At the time of writing, YPG, PKK and Peshmerga forces all patrol the area without clear jurisdiction as to who is in charge of security.

As such the rise of the Syrian Kurds in the international consciousness presents a challenge for the KDP, not only because they are a rival Kurdish faction with a lot of guns and an organised army, but also because the loyalties of some populations in Iraqi Kurdistan are decidedly mixed, and it is unclear as to whether the KDP can fully reassert itself as the dominant player in its own region of Kurdistan. This is particularly significant given that Iraqi Kurdistan houses some 600,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees from Rojava, most of whom are loyal to the PYD. Although it is unlikely that Syrian and Iraqi Kurds would go to war over their differences, especially when ISIS still threatens, it does present a problem in the future. Given that the PYD maintains working relations with Iraqi Kurdistan's other main party the PUK, the KDP has adopted something of a siege mentality, feeling surrounded on all sides by parties aligned against it.

How the problems of contested space between rival Kurdish factions will be resolved is unclear at present. The power struggles between the PYD and KDP will no doubt continue, and inside both Iraq and Syria there is competition for influence. The question will be whether the politicians can both understand and reflect the growing desire of their own populations for closer integration and co-operation.

## **The Future**

The future for the Kurds looks brighter than it did six months ago, the autonomous projects in both Rojava and Iraq have survived the worst of the ISIS on-

slaught, although they have been severely weakened. The blitzkrieg that saw ISIS sweep across Syria and Iraq has finished, and the edges of the Caliphate are fraying. ISIS losses in Kobani, Sinjar and Tikrit have shown that with Western backing, local forces on the ground can secure victory, albeit at a cost.

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But cities can be rebuilt, refugees rehoused and the price of oil will rise again in time, offering more stable income and resources to tackle the devastation ISIS has left behind. However Kurdistan has changed and the once confident KRG is no longer on the definite pathway to statehood that it was in 2013. The demographics of the region have been altered by the movement of millions, political control and territory have changed hands and the balances of power inside Kurdistan have changed in ways that counter KDP influence and dominance. The biggest threat the weakening of ISIS poses to

the Kurds, (quite apart from potential terrorist infiltration into Kurdish-controlled areas as revenge), is that it removes the glue that held the Kurds together. Only after the dust has settled will it be possible to know whether Kurds really can work together to build their future cooperatively, or whether the bickering and infighting will begin again.

It is most likely that problems with their respective capital cities will keep the Kurds busily engaged for some time. Syrian Kurds must negotiate a fraying relationship with Assad's regime as it battles back against the myriad of forces determined to remove it from power, all the while not becoming the target of either militia or regime retribution. Iraqi Kurds on the other hand face a long struggle ahead with Baghdad over the status of territories held by the Peshmerga, the distribution of oil revenues and the level of political participation for Kurds in what remains of the Iraqi political consensus.

The future of both Syria and Iraq is still unknown, and it is likely that the Kurds will focus on quietly building up their own structures of government in preparation for the day in which neither Damascus nor Baghdad can effectively extend any fiscal or political control inside their borders. At such a time, with ISIS gone and no rivals to match them, the Kurds will find they have become independent not through choice, but because there is no other option available but the full declaration of self-rule.