

MERIA

THE ARAB SPRING, ITS EFFECTS ON THE KURDS, AND THE APPROACHES OF TURKEY, IRAN, SYRIA, AND IRAQ ON THE KURDISH ISSUE

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This article addresses the approaches of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq in dealing with the Kurdish issue, with a special focus on historical background. In addition, the article discusses how this issue affects relations among the aforementioned countries and whether cooperation on this issue is possible. The article also examines how the Arab Spring has impacted the Kurds and the attitudes of these countries toward the Kurdish issue.

INTRODUCTION

The Kurds, an Iranian ethno-linguistic group, living in the area where the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria converge, are the largest ethnic group without a state.¹ Since the Justice and Development Party (JDP) or Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey has embraced a “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy approach. This has coincided with a shift from confrontation to collaboration among Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq on the Kurdish issue. Yet the Arab Spring and the ensuing developments in the region have led to a deterioration in Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran, bringing the validity of Turkey’s “zero problems with neighbors” policy into question.

Turkey’s increasing pressure on the Syrian regime, its decision to host a NATO missile defense system, and Turkey’s “rising-star” status in the region have led to competition between Iran and Turkey and an exacerbation of both Turkish-Iranian and Turkish-Syrian relations. In addition, Turkish military intervention in northern Iraq in response to intensified PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) attacks since August to November 2011 have strained Turkish-Iraqi relations, since such attacks could potentially be perceived as a threat to Iraqi territorial integrity. In addition, Turkish-Iraqi relations deteriorated after the bitter exchange between Turkish Prime

Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. This article evaluates the Arab Spring and its effects on the Kurds and the approaches of these four countries the Kurdish issue. It also addresses whether in light of these circumstances, continued collaboration among these countries on the Kurdish issue is possible.

TURKEY AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

In 1984, the Kurdish separatist movement resurfaced, with the goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state. The roots of the problem date back to the nineteenth century and the “Eastern Question,” which involved competition between the great powers, Russia and Britain, for influence over the Ottoman Empire.² A series of agreements intended to partition the Ottoman Empire were signed between 1915 and 1917. Accordingly, Kurdish populated areas would come under the control of Britain, France, and Russia. During the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the allies supported the idea of a future Kurdish state. The division of the empire and the final settlement of the “Eastern Question” by promising Kurds their own country were formalized in the Sèvres Treaty, which was signed between the allies and the Ottoman government in 1920.³ The Sèvres Treaty was never ratified by the signatories. A resistance movement, which opposed the terms of Sèvres Treaty, emerged in Anatolia and ended with

the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.⁴

Following First World War I, the map of the Middle East was redrawn. Most Kurds found themselves living in Turkey, Iran, and two new Arab states--Syria and Iraq--which were under French and British mandate after WWI.⁵ The newly established Republic of Turkey designated a single nationality for all Turks in its constitution, which did not recognize ethnic group. After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the Kurds did not renounce their goal to establish an independent Kurdish state.

The Shaykh Said Rebellion of 1925 emerged as a Kurdish separatist movement, but was suppressed by the Republic of Turkey. Since the 1930s, the Kurds have resisted government efforts to assimilate them, yet uprisings have repeatedly been suppressed by the Turkish army. During the 1960s and mid-1970s, Kurdish intellectuals attempted to establish Kurdish-language journals and newspapers. However, the publications were soon shut down.

Kurdish opposition to the government's emphasis on linguistic homogeneity was spurred by agitation in neighboring Iran and Iraq on behalf of an autonomous Kurdistan that some proposed would include all the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Since 1984, the PKK, an organization officially classified as "terrorist" by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union (EU), has carried out a violent armed struggle to obtain a Kurdish state. Prior to 1991, the majority of Kurds, however, continued to participate in Turkish political parties, in particular the Social Democratic People's Party or the SHP, the party most sympathetic to their goal of equality for all citizens of Turkey and assimilating them into Turkish society.⁶

Turgut Ozal, who became prime minister in 1983 and president in 1989, not only broke the official taboo by using the term "Kurd," but also called for a more liberal policy toward Kurds and supported a bill that revoked the ban on the use of the Kurdish language and possession of materials in Kurdish.⁷ Following the parliamentary elections of 1991, several

Kurdish deputies, including Hatip Dicle, Feridun Yazar, and Leyla Zana, formed the HEP (People's Labor Party) with the goal of campaigning within the National Assembly for laws guaranteeing equal rights for the Kurds.⁸ However, as of 1995, the use of Kurdish in government institutions such as the courts and schools still was prohibited.⁹

During the mid-1990s, the PKK began a series of suicide bombing attacks. In the late 1990s, Turkey increased its pressure on the PKK and its supporters. Both Iran and Syria, Turkey's neighbors, were among the supporters of the PKK. From 1979 to 1999, Syria provided support to PKK in the Beq'a Valley region. However, Syria placed some restrictions on PKK activity within its territory when an undeclared war between Turkey and Syria emerged. Turkey threatened to invade Syria if it continued harboring PKK leader Abdallah Ocalan. Damascus quickly expelled him. After Ocalan's arrest in Kenya, Syria expelled many PKK terrorists, many of whom relocated to northern Iraq. According to a detailed report by the Turkish parliament's Border Security Research Committee, Iran allowed the PKK to train and maintain logistical support camps on its territory as well as cross the border into Turkey in order to launch attacks and lay mines. However, once the PKK began operations on its own territory, Iran listed the group as a terrorist organization.¹⁰

Despite the frequency and intensity of their operations, Turkey could not achieve its goal of wiping out the PKK from northern Iraq due to the support of the Iranian and Syrian governments.¹¹ In September 1996, the Turkish authorities announced that they would intervene in northern Iraq to establish a security zone extending several miles into Iraqi territory. Iran called on Turkey to abort the plan. By the end of October 1996, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) had regained practically all its lost territory with Iranian support, and the danger of an immediate Turkish-Iranian clash receded.¹²

Turkish military interventions in northern Iraq again took place in May and October 1997. Along with these interventions, Turkish

forces escalated their support for the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) by bombing PUK and PKK positions and actually approached the cities of Irbil and Kirkuk. The largest Turkish military intervention into the northern Iraq took place on May 14, 1997, by a reported 50,000 Turkish troops. The purpose of this incursion was: to destroy PKK units, strengthen Massoud Barzani's KDP (hoping he would prevent future PKK raids), and balance Iran's relationship with the PUK. With this act, Turkey also sought to counter Iran's growing role in northern Iraq as a step toward preventing Iranian domination of the region.¹³

In 1999, Ocalan, leader of the PKK--officially classified as a terrorist organization responsible for the deaths of an estimated 30,000 people to create an independent Kurdish state in the Southeastern Turkey--was captured in Nairobi, Kenya. He was extradited to Turkey to stand trial. He was prosecuted and sentenced to death. He was, however, commuted to life imprisonment in Imrali Island Prison, since the death penalty is forbidden in EU member states and Turkey, in the process of trying to gain EU membership, had removed the death penalty from its legal code.

In July 2009, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan announced the Kurdish Opening (later referred to as the Democratic Opening). The initiative marked the achievement of several rights for Kurds: 1) the use of formerly Kurdish titles for districts was permitted; 2) legal barriers for speaking Kurdish during prison visits were eliminated; 3) Kurdish language and literature departments at various universities were established; 4) giving Kurdish names to Kurdish children was permitted; 5) TV channels broadcasting in the Kurdish language were allowed.¹⁴

SYRIA AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

From the 1920s onward, the Kurds represented the largest non-Arab Muslim minority group in Syria.¹⁵ However, they were also divided along tribal and other lines, a situation reinforced by the French during the mandate.¹⁶ All promises of minority rights

made by France and Britain were forgotten.¹⁷ The Syrian Kurds were expected to be easily assimilated into an Arab majority. This seems more plausible, since demands for a Kurdish identity came only from leading land-owning families responding to their loss of traditional power in the new state.¹⁸

During the 1920s, the Kurdish political movement faced the scrutiny of the French Mandatory authorities. The newly established Republic of Turkey was also keeping an eye on Kurdish developments in Syria. The failure of the Shaykh Said rebellion in Turkey in 1925 led to the exodus of a substantial number of Kurdish rebels to Kurdish regions in Syria. The Kurdish exiles from Turkey continued to retaliate against the Turkish government. The first such attempt against the Turks was the founding of the pan-Kurdish Xoybun (Independence) League on October 5, 1927, in Bhamdoun, Lebanon. The league's political branch was headed by Celadet Bedirxan. Syrian Kurds joined Xoybun and its branches, offering a space for Syrian-Kurdish intellectuals to gain experience speaking about issues of nationalism, self-determination, and oppression, and providing a foundation for the emergence of the Kurdish political movement throughout the Kurdish region. Xoybun was dissolved in 1946, when Syria gained independence from France. At the time, Kurdish-Soviet relations were on the rise, and interest in "nationalism" was diminishing. The Syrian Communist Party was gaining popularity among the Kurds.¹⁹

Kurdish political parties, which were weak and fragmented, operated with limited interference from the government during the rule of Hafiz al-Asad (1970-2000), since Damascus considered them to pose little threat. Asad was not concerned with Kurdish movements in Syria. He saw the Kurds in Syria's neighbors, Iraq and Turkey, as sources of leverage in his various disputes with Baghdad and Ankara. Syria thus supported opposition groups in Saddam's Iraq and allowed the opening of PUK offices in Damascus in 1975. In 1979, Damascus formalized relations with Barzani's party. Syria sought to weaken the regime in Baghdad

by bringing the rival factions among the Kurds of Iraq together. Both parties established offices in Qamishli. They recruited Kurds in Syria to join their *peshmerga* and fight against the Iraqi army.²⁰

The Hafiz al-Asad regime also supported the PKK against Turkey. PKK terrorists operated freely in Syria during the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, an estimated 20 percent of PKK terrorists hold Syrian citizenship. However, the Asad regime could not sustain this game and signed a security accord, the Adana Agreement, with Turkey in 1998 in order to avoid a major confrontation with Turkey. With this agreement, Syria labeled the PKK a terrorist organization, prohibited its activities and those of its affiliates, and agreed to block the supply of weapons, logistical materiel, and money to the PKK from Syrian territory. This move forced PKK leader Ocalan out of his Syrian refuge and opened the way for capture and imprisonment of the PKK leaders and militants. Hence, the remaining PKK terrorists left the country. However, the PKK's presence in Syria brought to an end this period of relative calm for Syria's Kurds.²¹

Following the death of Hafiz al-Asad in 2000 and the accession of his son Bashar al-Asad, the Kurdish population was more politicized than ever before. They protested to demand an improvement in their political and cultural rights since Syria's treatment of the Kurds differed from that of other minorities in the country. The Syrian regime forbids Kurds from building private schools, teaching in Kurdish, giving their businesses and children Kurdish names, and publishing books in Kurdish. In the eyes of the Syrian Kurds, the worst injustice is the denial of Syrian citizenship to Syria's 300,000 Kurds and their resulting deprivation of civil rights.

During the "Damascus Spring," Kurdish cultural activists joined other Syrian intellectuals in demanding more rights.²² Yet the Damascus Spring, which called for an end to the emergency law, a constitutional convention, and other democratization measures, was suppressed by the Asad regime. However, this act led to change in the

regime's stance toward the Kurds. The regime removed much of the state security apparatus from the Kurdish regions and ordered Ba'th officials to meet with Kurdish party leaders. The parties organized a series of demonstrations, hopeful that the regime might relax some of its repressive laws.²³

This transition period ended when the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which preserved the autonomous "Kurdistan Regional Government" (KRG), was adopted in Iraq on March 8, 2004. Syrian Kurds celebrated the announcement. In response, Damascus moved extra security forces into Kurdish areas and placed its troops on alert in order to monitor repercussions on Syrian Kurds.²⁴ Four days later, during a soccer match in Qamishli between the Qamishli team--whose fans were mostly Kurds--and Davr al-Zawr--whose fans were mostly Sunni Arabs, Davr al-Zawr fans insulted Barzani and Jalal Talabani. They held up photographs of Saddam while the Kurds shouted slogans in support of George W. Bush. The events soon escalated into Kurdish riots, in which seven Kurdish football fans were killed. Syrian security forces responded to these anti-government riots known as the "Qamishli Revolts," which took place in Qamishli, Aleppo, and Damascus, by killing dozens of Kurds and deploying several Arab tribes against the protestors.²⁵

These protests led to intense repression of Kurdish cultural and political expression. The Kurds were told, for instance, that the state would no longer tolerate the teaching of the Kurdish language, even in the private sphere. Hence, the Kurdish activists maintained their ties to other oppositionists. Eight Kurdish parties were signatories to the 2005 Damascus Declaration. However, the parties that did not sign this document objected to it on the grounds that it did not include a provision for constitutional recognition of the Kurds as the largest ethnic minority in the country.²⁶

The Kurds of Syria have long had a brotherly relationship with the Kurds of Iraq. When the KRG was established in Iraq, the unified KRG downgraded its formal links to the parties in Syria. Most Kurdish parties in

Syria continue to keep offices in Irbil, however, and the KRG intervenes in those parties' internal affairs. For instance, Barzani appointed Bashar as the new head of the KDPS in 2008. These developments indicate that the KRG may be looking to rebuild more robust ties with its Kurdish political allies in Syria.²⁷

IRAN AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

There is a long history of tension between the Kurds and the government in Iran. This began with Reza Shah Pahlavi recapturing the lands that Kurdish leaders had gained control of between 1918 and 1922. The Kurds spread their control in western Iran when Iran was occupied and divided into three zones in 1941 by the United States, Britain, and the USSR. This development left the country with a weak government that had little control over areas outside of the central province of Tehran and created an environment in which the Kurds set up a political organization different from prior organizations, which had mostly been clan dominated, feudal infiltrated, and religious organized groups. The KJK (Committee of Kurdish Resurrection) thus was set up in 1941 in Mahabad,²⁸ changing its name to the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) in 1945. In 1946, the KDP, with Soviet support, announced the establishment of the Mahabad Kurdish Republic, which only lasted 11 months. The Iranian government recaptured Mahabad and eliminated the Kurdish leaders involved. The 1960s land reform further reduced the political power of Kurdish landowners.²⁹

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, struggles for independence in the Kurdish regions continued. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Komala, and the Kurdish branch of the Fadayan launched a well-organized rebellion in 1979. The Iranian regime responded harshly with the banning of the KDPI, followed by an armed campaign against the Kurds. During the Iran-Iraq War, both sides became engaged in ongoing violence in order to bring the Kurdish areas under their own control. Hence, Iran was faced with a rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan supported

by Iraq. They were put down through a systematic campaign of repression. In 1983, the PUK agreed to cooperate with Saddam by signing an autonomy agreement. However, the KDP remained opposed. In 1985, the PUK and the KDP joined forces. This led to widespread guerilla warfare in Iraqi Kurdistan until the end of the war in 1988.³⁰

Attempts to negotiate a settlement on Kurdish autonomy with the Iranian government resulted in the assassination of Kurdish leaders. The KDPI leader, Abd al-Rahman Qasimlu, was assassinated in 1989. Iranian Kurdish opposition leader (Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, PDKI) Sadiq Sharafkandi and three other Iranian dissidents were killed in the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin in 1992. The minister of intelligence at the time, Ali Fallahian, was the only official named in the Mykonos verdict, which revealed the high-level government involvement in this political assassination.³¹

Following the First Gulf War (1991), a no-fly zone was established to protect rebellious Kurds from Saddam's military attacks and to facilitate the return of Kurdish refugees. Kurds continued to fight against Iraqi forces. When Iraqi forces left Kurdistan to the Kurds, its territory became a base for Kurdish separatists in the region. On September 15, 1993, Iran and Turkey signed an agreement to prevent illegal border crossings. With Syria, they held an ad hoc series of tripartite conferences between 1992 and 1995 to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. When Turkey and Iran increasingly provided support to opposing factions, the KDP and PUK, in the Iraqi Kurdish civil war, these conferences came to an end. Turkey supported Barzani's KDP in order to wipe out the PKK and keep open the Iraqi-Turkish oil pipeline. Iran supported the PUK in order to interfere within Iraq and to prevent the influence of Turkey and the United States on its western border.³²

Turkish military interventions into northern Iraq following the PKK's attacks led to heavy criticism from Tehran. Following this event, Iran took steps to strengthen its position in northern Iraq. It deployed Iraqi opposition

fighters near Sulaymaniyya in 1995, most of them members of the Badr Forces, the military arm of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI). The Iranians sent 2,000 to 3,000 Iranian troops into PUK territory to pursue rebellious Iranian Kurds in 1996. This move strengthened the PUK and weakened the KDP. The KDP reached an agreement with Saddam that permitted Barzani to retake Irbil from Talabani in August 1996. Both sides justified this action in part by referring to Iranian support for the PUK. Iran used terrorism for its political ends, providing logistical support to the PKK to harm established order in Turkey.³³

The Iranian side saw U.S. efforts in Iraqi Kurdistan as directed against them. After the failure of U.S.-Turkish sponsored peace talks between the KDP and the PUK to reach a settlement of their internal conflict in Drogheda in 1995, al-Hakim, the SAIRI's leader, declared that "the talks failed because they were conducted with the aims of the US and Turkey behind them and were against the policies of Iran." Saddam's attacks on Kurds in 1996 led the Iranians to claim that "Saddam's army moved into the Kurdish area with the US green light." Iranian commentaries denounced the "Ankara process," renewed mediation attempts by the United States, Turkey, and Britain to end the KDP-PUK civil war in 1996 as a U.S. attempt to establish "a spying base and spring board to carry out its malicious schemes in the region" and "a concerted effort by the US and the Zionist regime.... to create another Israel in the Kurdish areas."³⁴

Turkey's military interventions in northern Iraq, combined with its perceived role by Iran as America's cat's-paw, exacerbated tensions with Iran. Tehran denounced the Turkish invasion as both a violation of international laws and sovereign rights and territorial integrity of the Iraqi Muslim nation, while it characterized accusations of Iranian support for the PKK as a "joint conspiracy by the Turkish military and Israel." The Iranian reaction was clearly intensified by Turkey's growing military ties to Israel in 1997. The PKK also focused on this growing tie between

Turkey and Israel. Its leader, Ocalan, argued that the Turkish "operation was launched through the cooperation secured between the US, Israel, and Turkey." He further claimed that its aim was "not only to hit the PKK, but Iran as well."³⁵

In the wake of Turkey's arrest of PKK leader Ocalan in 1999, pro-Ocalan demonstrations among Kurdish nationalists took to the Iranian cities and turned into protests against the Iranian government. In 2000, a Kurdish member of parliament made a public allegation of the existence of a campaign of repression and serial killings against the Kurdish community in Iran. In the following year, all six members of the Iranian Parliament from Kurdistan province collectively resigned in joint letter to the interior minister claiming that the legitimate rights of the Kurds, especially the Sunni among them, were denied and their calls for justice on the political, economic, cultural, and social levels had been neglected. Their resignation was later apparently withdrawn.³⁶ According to Amnesty International reports, three Kurds were killed and many Kurds were injured by police during a demonstration for Kurdish rights in Mahabad in February 2007. Reporters without Borders announced that two Kurdish journalists who had written on Kurdish issues for a banned magazine in August 2005 were sentenced to death in Marivan. The prosecution cited interviews one of them conducted with the Voice of America as evidence of "activities subverting national security" and "spying." A Kurdish journalist and human rights activist was arrested in October 2008 and held incommunicado.³⁷

The New Constitution of Iraq, which was ratified in 2005, defined Iraqi Kurdistan as a federal entity of Iraq. This development has been watched with alarm by the Iranian regime due to the possibility that the establishment of a Kurdish state would make claims on Iranian territory. An Iranian Kurdish militant group, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which is affiliated with the PKK of Turkey, operates in Iran from bases in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. Tehran accuses the United States and Israel of

supporting the PJAK, and shelled northern Iraq in response in 2007.³⁸

IRAQ AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

Many tribal Kurdish uprisings, aimed at gaining a sort of autonomy, had taken place in Iraq between 1919 and 1932. Shaykh Mahmoud of Sulaymaniyya was the first to rise against the Iraqi monarchy and the British. He was followed by Shaykh Ahmad of Barzan. These uprisings were suppressed by the Iraqi monarchy implementing an assimilation policy. This policy created a breach between nationalist Kurds and the Iraqi government and led to a new Iraqi identity, which did not appeal to Kurds.³⁹ These suppressions continued after the creation of the modern state of Iraq in 1932. Since 1932, the Kurds have been subject to political and cultural repression, ethnic cleansing, and genocide because of their struggle to gain autonomy within the Republic of Iraq. Al-Anfal (The Spoils) was the code name for an aggressive planned military operation against the Iraqi Kurds. Anfal took place in 1988 under the direction of Ali Hasan al-Majid, who became known as "Chemical Ali" because of his use of chemical and biological weapons in Kurdish towns and villages. The broad purpose of the campaign was to eliminate resistance by the Kurds by any means necessary.⁴⁰

In addition to these campaigns against the Kurds, economic blockades were placed on these villages to cut them off from all support. The evacuation and relocation of Kurds were also planned by the army. During this process, many of the men were executed while the others were removed to the collective towns or to camps in the south of Iraq.⁴¹ The campaign also included the Arabization of Kirkuk in order to drive Kurds out of the oil-rich city and replace them with Arab settlers.⁴² Kurdish groups' cooperation with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War also became one of the motivating factors of the Anfal operations.⁴³ Among these operations, the most widely known was Halabja, which occurred in 1988. The town of Halabja is located about 11 kilometers from

the Iranian border. The Iranian army had previously pushed Iraqi forces out of the town. The town was attacked with conventional bombs and chemicals, including mustard gas and nerve agents. An estimated 17,000 people died as a result of these chemical attacks, which lasted for three days.⁴⁴

After the Gulf crisis, UN Security Council Resolution 688 led to the emergence of a safe haven for Kurdish refugees. Operation Provide Comfort provided security and humanitarian assistance to refugees in camps along the Iraq-Turkey border.⁴⁵ A no-fly zone over northern Iraq was established by the U.S. and British governments. Despite these precautions, some of the Kurdish populated areas were still unprotected. Clashes between Iraqi forces and Kurdish troops continued in these areas. However, the Iraqi government voluntarily and fully withdrew its civil administration in 1991. With this act, it allowed Iraqi Kurdistan to function de facto independently. In 1992, elections were held, and the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) and the KRG were created. The region was left to be ruled by the two Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK. This time, tensions between the two principle Kurdish Parties led to a Kurdish civil war.⁴⁶

The KDP and the PUK joined forces with Turkey to evacuate the PKK from its sanctuaries in northern Iraq in 1992. However, the PKK's surrender to the PUK turned out to be a charade. Two Iraqi Kurdish parties had partially lost control over their fates due to ongoing civil war, since the KDP was supported by Turkey whereas PUK was backed by Iran. The KDP blamed Tehran due to its direct intervention in support of the PUK, which included sending several thousand new troops with heavy weapons across the border. The reason behind these Iranian attacks was the KDP's friendship with Turkey. Turkey was called upon to help the KDP.⁴⁷

Iran and Turkey cooperated in several ways to limit any autonomy and prevent any independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. The two countries signed agreements to stop illegal border crossings in 1993 and worked together to prevent a Kurdish state from forming in

northern Iraq in 1992-1995. Nevertheless, Turkey and Iran also continued to support the KDP and PUK, especially after 1995, when they increasingly provided support to opposing factions in the Iraqi Kurdish civil war.⁴⁸

In 1995, Turkey sent 35,000 troops into northern Iraq to eradicate the PKK. This was followed by Turkish President Demirel's statement that proposed the Turkey-Iraq border be changed in favor of Turkey. Demirel withdrew his suggestion as a result of the responses from the Arab states and Iran. The KDP supported the Turkish intervention, whereas the PUK joined Iran in denouncing Turkey's actions.⁴⁹

Large scale Turkish military interventions in northern Iraq took place in 1997. Turkish forces escalated their support for the KDP by bombing PUK and PKK positions. With this operation, Turkey aimed to destroy the PKK, strengthen the KDP, and balance Iran's relationship with the PUK. In addition to these goals, Turkey also aimed to counter Iran's growing role in northern Iraq and to prevent Iranian domination in the region.⁵⁰ The Ankara Process led to renewed mediation attempts by the United States, Turkey, and Britain to end the KDP-PUK civil war in 1996. Barzani and Talabani signed the Washington Agreement of September 17, 1998, thus ending the four year civil war between Iraqi Kurdish factions.⁵¹

Prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Turkey had refused to allow the U.S. forces to cross its territory into northern Iraq. Turkey's decision made the Iraqi Kurds a powerful ally for the United States. Kurds joined the United States and British forces with the aim of defeating Saddam's regime. The Kurds entered post-Saddam national politics on an equal footing with Iraq's Arabs. The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC)--which Barzani, Talabani, and three independent Kurds became part of--was established as a provisional government in 2003. In 2004, a transition government was established, and Hoshiyar Zebari became foreign minister.

The transition government preserved the KRG and its power to alter the application of

some national laws in Kurdish-populated areas. The constitution not only retained substantial Kurdish autonomy but also included the Kurds' insistence on "federalism," providing them with a regional government. The constitution recognizes the three Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyya as a legal "region" of the KRG, with the power to amend the application of national laws not specifically under national government purview, to maintain internal security forces, and to establish embassies abroad. In addition, Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages.⁵²

Iraqi Kurds supported the division of Iraq into federal units under a federal system.⁵³ However, Turkey raised concerns about the establishment of a federal system, which would cede Mosul and the oil-rich city of Kirkuk to a new Kurdistan federal unit. In addition, since the establishment of the KRG, the Iraqi Turkmen community has also been a concern to Turkey, as the Iraqi Turkmen Front has called for the establishment of a Turkmen federal unit to include the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk if a permanent Kurdistan federal region is formed. The future establishment of a Kurdistan federal region to include Kirkuk is determined as a *casus belli* by Turkish leaders. The Kurds have repeatedly and publicly assured the United States and Turkey that they do not seek independence but prefer a unified, federal, and democratic Iraq.⁵⁴

Some analysts fear that violence could escalate in Iraq due to the struggle over Kirkuk and the disputed internal border, also referred as the "trigger line" between the KRG and Baghdad after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. Furthermore, the decreased U.S. presence could allow Iran to increase its influence.⁵⁵ The other important issue relates to its future relations with its neighbors. For instance, despite warming economic and even political relations between Turkey and the KRG, Turkey began bombing PKK militants in northern Iraq in August 2011 and then even sent troops over the border to pursue them as a legitimate act of self-defense following growing attacks by the PKK, which killed more than 40 Turkish soldiers. Turkey also

asked the KRG for help in these efforts, even though it is clear that the KRG does not want to fight against fellow Kurds in the PKK. Iraq's other neighbor, Iran, has also been shelling the PJAK, which is entrenched just over the border in northern Iraq. Both Turkey and Iran have a freer hand in intervening in northern Iraq.⁵⁶

THE ARAB SPRING, TURKEY, AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

When the Arab Spring commenced in Tunisia and was followed by other Arab countries, a search for a role model for these newly established governments of the region emerged. Turkey's "soft power" and its economic, social, and political performance during the last decade inspired many in the Arab world. However, the Kurdish issue poses a serious handicap for the Turkish model and an obstacle to Turkey's regional ambitions and stability. In addition, speculations that the Kurds across the Middle East could follow suit were raised when uprisings began to spread throughout the Arab world.

These speculations came true when the PKK imitated the Arab Spring and attempted to bring about a "Kurdish Spring" in the region. An analogy between the Kurdish situation and Arab Spring has been made by Kurds, including by the PKK's imprisoned leader, Ocalan. On February 14, 2011, Ocalan made a statement to his advocates that "the Kurds could only be free if they pour on to the streets and call for their rights in the Kurdish cities, like Diyarbakir."⁵⁷ The PKK had hoped they would pour out onto the streets on a massive scale and become subjects of a popular Kurdish Spring. A Kurdish Civil Disobedience Campaign thus began in southeast Turkey for broader rights.

This campaign widened the confidence gap with Ankara and led to deadly PKK attacks on police, despite the ceasefire that had been declared by the PKK in August 2010. The PKK intensified its attacks in Turkey. The escalation of Kurdish separatist violence through terrorist attacks between August and November 2011 pushed Turkey to deploy its

special forces to the Iraqi border, where it led transborder military strikes against Kurdish PKK targets in northern Iraq.

Nevertheless, the role of the Kurds in Turkey cannot be characterized only by the PKK attacks. The BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), a Kurdish separatist party, gained 36 (out of 550) seats at the national parliament and is fully integrated in the national parliamentary process. Efforts by the government to engage in peaceful relations with moderate Kurdish parties have stepped up and culminated in Erdogan's recognition on November 23, 2011, of the Dersim massacre, which took place in the late 1930s.⁵⁸ In addition, Turkey has been in the process of reforming its system to support a democratization initiative through a new constitution. A meeting between the AKP and the BDP was held in this regard.⁵⁹

The Arab Spring and its effects on Turkey's neighbor Syria, which has a great impact on Turkey's stance toward this issue, led to elimination of their newly established good relations as a part of Turkey's "zero problem with neighbors" policy. Growing tensions between Turkey and Syria caused a deterioration of relations between the two countries. This development created an environment in which the Assad regime used the Iraqi and the Syrian "Kurdish terrorists" against Turkey. This could possibly turn the "Arab Spring" into a "Kurdish Spring" in Turkey with the help of the PKK.

Besides Syria, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the PKK residing in Iraq are additional factors that could bring about a "Kurdish Spring" in Turkey. This too pushed Turkey to increase its presence in the region in order to weaken the PKK. This clearly explains Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's demand to remove all weapons and military equipment when the U.S. troops leave Iraq. Although prime minister of the KRG, Barzani stated that Turkey could not combat terrorism effectively by conducting military operations in northern Iraq and urged both sides lay down their arms and start negotiations. Ankara, however, is not willing to accept this call for dialogue by Iraq, which has never taken

serious measures against the PKK.⁶⁰ Following a meeting with his Iraqi counterpart Zebari, Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said Turkey would not tolerate it if the PKK were to threaten Turkey from Iraqi territory.⁶¹

THE ARAB SPRING, SYRIA, AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

The wave of protests calling for greater freedoms, respect for human rights, and improving living conditions throughout the Arab world reached Syria. Operations such as massive naturalization of undocumented migrants have been organized by granting Syrian citizenship to more than 300,000 Kurds to ease the mass disturbances.⁶² Besides this, Syrian Kurdish opposition leader Tammo, leader of the Future Movement, who openly called for the Asad's overthrow, was assassinated by the Asad regime in October 2011. The day of the funeral, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Qamishli. It was the largest protest in the northeast since the beginning of the uprisings against the Asad regime.⁶³

Some Kurdish groups are wary of joining the Syrian National Council (SNC) due to the SNC's lack of clear-cut policies regarding the status of the Kurds in a post-Asad era and disputes concerning the number of seats the Kurds would hold in the SNC.⁶⁴ For instance, the only Kurdish party that attended the Istanbul meeting of Syrian oppositionists, Tammo's Future Movement, wanted the name of the country changed from the "Syrian Arab Republic" to the "Republic of Syria." When the other delegates at the conference refused this request, these Kurds walked out in protest.⁶⁵ The Kurds' concern is that the opposition against the Asad regime is dominated by Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and that they do not support Kurdish demands for local autonomy.⁶⁶ Turkey's active role in Syria's uprisings also raises concerns with the Kurds. Kurds believe that Turkey would not leave things to take their own course in Syrian Kurdistan if Asad's regime in the country were to fall.⁶⁷

It has even been observed that some of the KDP and PKK are used by the regime as "al-Shabiha" (pro-Asad regime armed thugs and mobs). The PKK receives further support from the regime.⁶⁸ The Asad regime is using the PKK card as leverage against Turks. The PKK has done little to dispel such suspicions, and some statements made by Kurds seem to verify this argument. For instance, in an interview, Cemil Bayik, one of the group's leaders, warned that if Turkey were to intervene against Assad, the PKK would fight on Syria's side.⁶⁹ The PKK also serves as a means for the Asad regime to keep the Syrian Kurds in check. The PKK's Syrian branch, the PYD, pulled out of the negotiations with other Kurdish parties. They do not support the protests. Some Kurds have accused the PKK of playing a role in Tammo's assassination and claim that they warned not to work with the mainstream Arab opposition.⁷⁰

THE ARAB SPRING, IRAQ, AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

The Iraqi Kurds have had their own "Kurdish Spring" of sorts. First, the Gorran Party (Movement for Change), which is the Iraqi Kurdish opposition party, split from the PUK in the KRG elections held in 2009. Inspired by the Arab Spring, particularly by the uprising in Egypt, the Gorran Party called for the resignation of the cabinet and the disbanding of the KRG. In this respect, violent demonstrations broke out in Sulaymaniyya on February 17, 2011. Protesters chanted "This is Tahrir Square. Do you remember Mubarak?"⁷¹ The demonstrations protested corruption and the lack of jobs, electricity, and government services. The protests also centered around limits on freedom of speech and press. There was a visible anger against the KDP and PUK due to their joint monopoly in controlling society and government. These protests continued until they were forcibly curtailed by the KRG leadership on April 19, 2011.⁷²

Besides this, Turkey's increasing military intervention in northern Iraq as a result of intensified PKK terrorist attacks has not been welcomed by Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari, an

ethnic Kurd. He called for an immediate halt to Turkish army operations in the territories of Iraq. He also condemned the operations as a breach of Iraqi sovereignty. He added that resolving the problem of the PKK presence in northern Iraq should be left to a trilateral Iraqi-Turkish-American joint committee, which thus far has not been able to resolve the issue. The PKK, on the other hand, accused the Iraqi government of collaborating with Turkey in an effort to empty the villages close to the PKK hideouts in the Kandil Mountains.⁷³

Iraqi Kurds also have an active policy regarding Kurds in Syria. For instance, the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (PKKS) and KDP-Syria report directly to the leaders of their counterparts, the KDP and PUK of northern Iraq. Iraqi Kurds have not pushed their Syrian counterparts to participate in the anti-Asad revolt. Neither the PKKS nor KPDS encouraged protesters when a revolt broke out in Qamishli in 2004. These two parties were supported in this stance by Iraqi Kurds, since Iraq's government supported the Asad regime.⁷⁴

THE ARAB SPRING, IRAN, AND THE KURDISH ISSUE

Iran fears that the creation of a semi-autonomous state in northern Iraq might motivate its own Kurdish minority to press for greater independence. However, Iran's concern about Kurdish separatism does not approach the level of Turkey's concern. Still, there have been repeated clashes between Kurds and Iranian security forces.⁷⁵ PJAK, which is affiliated with the PKK, took up arms for self-rule in the Kurdistan province of Iran beginning in 2004. In parallel with increasing PKK attacks, PJAK has increased its attacks in Iran. The PKK and PJAK were declared common problems of Turkey and Iran. Turkey and Iran have thus worked together to defeat the two groups. The PJAK has had a ceasefire with Iran since September 2011. There are some claims that PJAK evacuated its camps in Iran following PKK leader Murat Karayilan's release by the Iranian government in August 2011. Yet top officials in Iran have denied

claims that Karayilan was captured and later released by Iran.

Kurdish Labor Group leader Kamal Karimi has stated that the Kurds would be the major component of an uprising in Iran: "In 2009, the public protests had very narrow slogans which were calls for a recount of the votes and repeating the elections, but this time there will be a radical change in Iran that might end with the toppling of the Islamic regime. In that case, the Kurdish areas of Iran will become the strongest base, after Tehran, for confronting the Islamic regime."⁷⁶

In addition, some experts say Israel has enhanced its ties with Iranian Kurds in order to exploit ethnic fissures between the Kurds and the Shi'i Persians.⁷⁷ There are also claims that Israel has supported the PKK and PJAK by providing equipment and training to encourage their efforts to undermine the regime's authority. Sometimes this has been overtly implied by the Israelis. For instance, Maj. Gen. (res.) Uzi Dayan called upon Israel to take a diplomatic initiative and advocate Kurdish independence, saying: "There are some 30 million Kurds in a clearly-defined region spread across four countries. They deserve statehood no less than Palestinians."⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

The Kurdish issue has not only been employed by external forces to weaken regional states, but has also been used by Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq against each other to counter each other's domination of the region. The approaches of these four states to the Kurdish issue thus led to confrontation. However, the adoption of a "zero problems with neighbors" policy by Turkey changed this, leading to collaboration among them in suppressing Kurdish separatist movements. Since 2008, this has involved a joint effort to fight against the PKK, PJAK, and their Syrian counterpart. Yet the Arab uprisings, which emerged in Tunisia and quickly spread to the other countries of the region, ended this alliance against the Kurds.

The Arab Spring, first reached Syria and led to the deterioration of Turkish-Syrian

relations, followed by the worsening of Turkish-Iranian relations. The AKP government increased its pressure on the Asad regime to end violence by imposing sanctions on Syria. In addition, Turkey hosted the SNC and deployed its military along the Syrian border.

Turkey's actions against Asad regime also led to strained relations between Turkey and Iran. In this case, the main reasons for this included: 1) Iran might lose its only Arab ally that gives it direct access to Hizballah and Lebanon; 2) of the end of the Assad regime would lead to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, which would mean Syria would no longer belong to the Shi'i bloc. Turkey's decision to host missile defense radar as part of NATO BMD capability in September 2011 also contributed to the deterioration of Turkish-Iranian relations. In this case, Iraq sided with Iran and Syria due to Iraq's increasing economic and political ties with Syria and Iran in the post-Saddam era.

The common policy among Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq concerning the Kurdish issue is that they are all opposed to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in the region due to fears that this could have a domino effect in the region. Hence, it is obvious to say that there is collaboration among these four states on this issue. However, this collaboration does not seem to apply to their approaches to the PKK in the wake of the Arab Spring.

According to one political analyst, Syria's regime is not taking action against the PKK due to Turkey's current anti-Asad position. Furthermore, the Asad regime uses the PKK to control Syria's Kurds and prevent the Kurds in Syria from taking an active part in the Syrian uprisings. The SNC hopes to win over the Kurds against the Asad regime by changing its former stance on the Kurdish issue. To this end, former SNC President Burhan Ghalioun has promised a decentralized government, which would enable local authorities to take control of their affairs and would allow for national recognition of Kurdish identity in the post-Assad Syria.⁷⁹ Moreover, Abdulbaset Sieda, a secular Kurdish academic and

politician, succeeded Ghalioun in June 2012 to reconcile rival factions within the SNC.

The worsening of relations between Turkey and Syria's Asad regime has also affected Turkish-Iranian relations. This might hinder Iran, which made a ceasefire with the PJAK after serious attacks on the group, from maintaining its collaboration with Turkey on the PKK issue. Yet in light of Turkey's anti-Assad approach and its relations with NATO including its hosting a NATO missile defense system against Iran, this collaboration does not seem long-lasting. Last, in the case of Iraq, its preference appears to be siding with Iran and Syria on this issue. This is despite the fact that the KRG has very good relations with Turkey.⁸⁰ In the wake of the latest developments in the region, it thus seems impossible for these four states to maintain collaboration on the PKK issue. However, cooperation in preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdish state does seem feasible and likely to continue.

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NOTES

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