

NOREF Report

Reopening the Kurdish question: states, communities and proxies in a time of turmoil

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Executive summary

The Kurdish question involves the aspiration to self-determination of the Kurdish people; their continuing failure to obtain a state of their own; the problematic accommodation within the states where they live; and the desire for recognition of their rights. It remains a critical issue across the Middle East, affecting Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The influence of unresolved Kurdish demands is all the more acute in times of regional upheaval and uncertainty. Kurdish groups have served as “proxy” forces in conflicts, have undergone cooptation by failing authoritarian regimes, have adhered to the wave of popular mobilisations and have remained mindful of the possibility of using the region’s turmoil to secure better treatment or finally carve out an independent state.

Nearly a century after the failed Sèvres Treaty, a number of experiences and organisations now stand out as political reference points for the estimated 23–30 million Kurds living in the Middle East: the trans-state armed challenge

posed by the PKK, the quasi-state in a federal Iraq, the splintered Kurdish awakening in Syria and the tensions affecting a largely ignored Kurdish population in Iran. While recent trends have pointed to a new sense of pan-regional identity, old schisms and local imperatives mean that different Kurdish communities have often sought to advance their interests at the expense of Kurds in other countries, generating chronic fragmentation and popular disillusionment with leaders.

On the basis of an analysis of the challenges in each of the four countries with significant Kurdish minorities, this paper argues for a comprehensive international approach at state and regional levels to prevent the Kurdish question from being a source of further discrimination, instability and violence, as well as an exacerbating factor in broader regional crises. Recognition of rights and promotion of a dialogue-based settlement remain overwhelmingly the best routes for engagement.

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Introduction

The “Kurdish question” – namely the unresolved aspiration to self-determination of the Kurdish people and their continuing failure to obtain a state of their own, the problematic accommodation within the states where they live and the desire for recognition of their rights – is an outstanding issue affecting Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. With the Kurdish population making up a substantial ethnic minority in each of these four countries, its importance far surpasses the issue of cross-border connections. At present, the Kurds are crucial components in the political futures of these four states, and as a result will have a profound influence on an area of extraordinary geopolitical importance.

The Kurdish question arose in the first few decades of the twentieth century as a result of the colonial division of the Middle East. The mountainous area inhabited by the Kurds – an Indo-European people who mostly profess Sunni Islam,¹ and have a sense of identity based on a shared culture – was divided into political entities that later became the four countries listed above. The interests of the imperial powers prevailed in defining the new borders, despite promises to establish an independent Kurdish state. The Kurds came to hold a peripheral position, both geographically and politically, within new states that were dominated by nationalist and ethnically based (Turkish, Arabian and Persian) political agendas (Stansfield, 2006, 2007).

Since then, Kurdish nationalism has grown and developed in interaction with the different states, their political objectives and their policies of assimilation, coercion and cooptation. Expressions of Kurdish nationalism have also been determined by the character of Kurdish elites, depending in turn on their level of organisation, the scope of their demands, the strategy employed to advance their goals (including armed struggle, political means and diplomacy), and their relationship with various governments, which, generally speaking, have applied centralist policies.

Crucially, the Kurds have not conveyed their aspirations through any sort of homogenous nationalism: they have not been a stateless people moving *en masse* towards unitary statehood. Their political diversity has been linked to the topographic reality of Kurdistan, a mountainous area that has given rise to a complex society with significant internal political cleavages. Kurdish movements have not forged a unified political project – an embryonic “pan-Kurdish” state – despite the narrative of “Great Kurdistan”, and a host of shared problems, such as the political, linguistic, cultural and economic marginalisation of the Kurdish regions within each different state.

In practice, divisions – also attributed to the weight of tribal, religious and cultural factors,² among others – have resulted in a fragmented leadership, with many figures establishing relations of cooperation or conflict with one other according to the dominant logic of local interests. Kurdish nationalist movements have sought support and established ad hoc alliances with neighbouring states, even if this has meant neglecting or betraying the oppressed Kurds within those very same states (Halliday, 2005).³ Living in an area where the borders of four states converge and which, as a result of these states’ geopolitical profiles, lies at the centre of international security concerns, the Kurds have repeatedly been exploited in interstate conflicts by regional and international powers (Muñoz, 2003; Natali, 2005; Stansfield, 2007; Hassanpour, 1994).

Today, the strategies adopted by Kurdish movements in each state, as well as their unequal recognition as actors on the international stage, reveal the extreme complexity and diversity of Kurdish political life. The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is an armed group that stands on US and EU terrorist lists, and is fighting the Turkish state – which possesses the second-largest army in NATO, is a consolidating democracy and has become a crucial ally of Western diplomacy. On

¹ The majority of Kurds are Muslims. Around 75% are Sunni Muslims while 15% practise Shia Islam. The rest of the Kurds follow Alevi, Christian, Jewish, Yezidi or Ahl-i-Haqq faiths (Izady quoted in Romano, 2006: 3).

² Three major dialects of the Kurdish language are currently spoken: Kurmanji, Sorani and Zaza. Speakers of each dialect may not completely understand the other two.

³ Fred Halliday emphasises that in the modern history of the Middle East many nationalist movements have tried to acquire the patronage or support of states in pursuit of their ends. In the case of Kurdish nationalist movements, each of them has sought support from other states, even though these latter have themselves been oppressing their own Kurds.

the other hand, the internationally recognised Kurdistan Autonomous Government (or KRG) is advancing towards the construction of a de facto state within a deeply fragile Iraqi state. All Kurdish communities coexist with armed conflicts of varying intensity: in some cases with Kurdish actors as the main combatants, and, in others, in extremely violent contexts where, for now, armed Kurds do not play a leading role (e.g. Iraq, Syria).

This report identifies a series of challenges related to the complex and contested nature of state–society relations in Kurdish-dominated areas, and the way they bear the intricate and evolving patterns of cross-border interactions between Kurdish peoples. The specific challenges posed by the Kurdish question in different states are addressed: the PKK’s campaign in Turkey; the de facto state of the KRG in Iraq; the future of the Kurds in a probable post-Assad scenario in Syria; and, finally, the apparent invisibility of the Kurdish question in Iran. Yet, within the context of convulsions and transformations in power structures across the Middle East, there are strong reasons to believe the Kurdish question may acquire particular urgency in different states, and that the four-state “Kurdish question” may become a transmission belt for new political models or for further waves of violence and instability.

Turkey and the Kurdish question: the PKK challenge

The Kurdish question is often depicted in Turkey as the country’s overriding problem, not least because the estimated Kurdish population ranges between 15 and 20% of the national total. Non-Turks were the principal victims of a state-building process led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the early twentieth century, and by successive leaders and governments, in which the homogeneous, unitary and centralist Turkish nation-state was promoted while policies of assimilation, repression and militarisation were applied to the Kurds – the largest group of non-Turks. Kurdish rebellions in 1925, 1930 and 1938, along with Kurdish left-wing militancy in the 1960s and 1970s, were outstanding examples of Kurdish resistance to state policies and to the impact of economic, social and political transformations in each of those periods.

For the last three decades, amid enduring discrimination, Kurdish aspirations to cultural, linguistic and political rights as well as self-government have coincided with the armed conflict between the state and the PKK, which began in 1984.⁴ The repression of non-violent Kurdish (and Turkish) opposition by the military-led regimes, in addition to the PKK’s own use of violence, resulted in the party’s pre-eminent position among the Kurdish nationalist left-wing opposition. Nearly 30 years of mainly security-oriented state policies have not managed to put an end to the PKK’s armed struggle, or its social support base. Meanwhile, fragile recent attempts at peace talks (such as in 2011) have failed. The PKK’s initial goal of an independent state for all Kurds in the Middle East changed in the 1990s into demands to address the Kurdish question within the borders of Turkey. The PKK and the broad Kurdish nationalist movement share demands for cultural and linguistic rights, an end to discriminatory laws, political participation, decentralisation within Turkey and an agreed settlement for the future of PKK militants and the group’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan.⁵ So far, limited democratisation reforms have not provided an acceptable answer to these demands.

Current local and regional conflict dynamics have converted the PKK’s armed conflict into a severe challenge for the Turkish state, even if by now all sides know there is no military solution to the conflict. Increased violence by the PKK inside Turkey in 2012 has coincided with the crisis in

⁴ The legacy of the conflict includes an estimated 40,000 deaths, mainly of PKK militants, 352,576 to 3 million internally displaced persons (Yildiz, 2005), an estimated 17,000 unsolved murders, an undetermined number of sexual violations and other gendered violence against women as well as sexual violence against men, torture and other human rights violations, high suicide rates of Kurds in the Turkish army, trauma, and direct or indirect economic extortion by the PKK, among other impacts.

⁵ The term “Kurdish nationalist movement” generally refers to a broad amalgam of legal and illegal actors, which includes political parties (the Peace and Democracy Party or BDP and predecessor parties), numerous cultural, social, gender and professional associations, organisations and platforms, the PKK and other armed factions, which use different means (e.g. armed struggle, legal politics, advocacy) and do not necessarily have clear links. The various actors in the movement generally share the aforementioned demands on democratisation, human rights, decentralisation and settlement of the conflict with the PKK. The Kurdish nationalist movement has significant support among Kurds in Turkey. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) highlights, in the 12 provinces where Kurdish is the main language, 50.4% of voters chose independent candidates that represented the BDP in 2011 general elections. However, in the whole of Turkey, more than half of Kurds generally vote for non-Kurdish movement parties (International Crisis Group, 2012a).

Syria and with associated disputes between countries across the region, notably in the form of Turkey's opposition to the Assad regime and the end of erratic Turkish–Syrian–Iranian cooperation against the armed group. It also appears to reflect efforts to establish alternative, “proxy” battlefronts in the ongoing Syrian war, as shown by the recent rapprochement between Syria, Iran and the PKK.

The recent emergence in Syria of de facto autonomous Kurdish-dominated areas (interestingly described by some as a “PKK-state”; Uslu, 2012) has raised more alarm in Turkey. While the situation remains complex, with Syria still seeming to be of limited military value for the PKK (Wilgenburg, 2012), the impact on Turkey and on the PKK is important. Pressure will mount on Turkey to address its Kurdish question in view of the increased level of Kurdish self-government in Iraq and Syria. The PKK's strengths, which rest on a pragmatic combination of armed struggle, cross-border interactions (with state and non-state actors), mass mobilisation and coercion, contrast with the limits to Turkey's own flawed approaches to resolving the conflict and its inability to prevent an increase of violence close to its borders, or to sustain the 2011 peace talks.

These trends in the PKK's campaign have come against the backdrop of an alarming increase in distrust between the Turkish state and Kurdish society, including threats of de facto disengagement from the state. Given that the PKK is to a certain degree a mass nationalist movement rather than just an armed group, this disaffection might well provide further legitimisation to the campaign of violence. In this respect, it is worth noting that the authority and legitimacy among many Kurds of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, stems from a mixture of emotional appeals,⁶ coercion, a lack of self-criticism, the sophisticated social organisation of the PKK/KCK system (the KCK is a organisation under the leadership and ideology of Öcalan, allegedly with “sub-systems” in neighbouring countries), egalitarian opportunities within the PKK, a progressive gender regime, and the group's effectiveness and resources.

The KRG in Iraq: a de facto state in a fragile context

The Kurds account for between 15 and 20% of the Iraqi population, and are concentrated in the north of the country. Their inclusion within the Iraqi state came at the expense of international promises of free adherence to a future Kurdish state in the region, made in the 1920 Sèvres Treaty. Only in the case of the Iraqi Kurds did the League of Nations commit to an autonomous status, and early Iraqi-Kurdish aspirations for a political authority not controlled by Baghdad must be seen in this context. Moreover, unlike Kurds in other countries, especially Turkey, the Kurds in Iraq were soon formally recognised as a distinct minority. The first Constitution after the overthrow of the monarchy (1958) referred to an association of Kurds and Arabs in the Iraqi nation.

The evolution of the Kurdish movement in Iraq, however, was for decades characterised by tensions between the formal recognition of their specific rights and the failure of authoritarian and centralist regimes in Baghdad to provide autonomy (Muñoz, 2003). The central government combined strategies of cooptation, control and repression, which intensified under the Ba'th Arab governments. As a result, the Kurds in Iraq have faced various strategic dilemmas: whether to seek accommodation with the Iraqi authorities, rebel against the central government, fight for minority rights or take steps towards gaining independence (Hiltermann, 2008).

In practice, negotiations with Baghdad on autonomy status have tended to alternate with periods of armed struggle. The alliance between Kurdish leadership and regional and international adversaries of the Iraqi regime – in the Iran–Iraq war, the Persian Gulf War and the US-led invasion of 2003 – fuelled Baghdad's image of Kurds as traitors and fifth columnists (Stansfield, 2006). This in turn led to brutal reprisals involving thousands of Kurdish civilian casualties (such as

⁶ Emotional factors include social trauma, deep distrust of the state, grief and many family links to PKK militants.

at Halabja and Anfal), which have become part of the Kurds' collective memory across the region.⁷

In the 1990s, the Kurds in Iraq began what some authors have described as a “state-building experiment” (Hassanpour, 1994). Following the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq and the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from three provinces to the so-called Green Line, conditions for a de facto autonomy with international – mainly US – support were created.⁸ The KRG was established in 1992, but for a decade the political process was affected by internal divisions within the Kurdish leadership. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) were involved in an armed conflict, and did not advance towards greater cooperation until the 2000s. Since the US-led invasion, the KRG experience has been consolidated and legitimised in the new Iraqi Constitution (2005), with the Kurds also winning positions in the new Iraqi power scheme.

The institutional and economic development of the KRG, along with its relative stability – strategically emphasised by the Kurdish leadership as part of its pursuit of international legitimacy – has been compared with the profound instability elsewhere in Iraq. Increasingly criticised for its corruption, political stalemate and inability to deliver basic services and security, the Iraqi government has been considered incapable of exerting effective authority over the country, and is regarded as only “one” among several “state-like actors” that exist in the country (Stansfield, 2007). Meanwhile, the KRG has been labelled a “quasi state”, drawing for its authority on its practical capacities and its internal (albeit de facto and disputed) sovereignty (Natali, 2012a).

Federal dilemmas

One of the main challenges for Kurds in contemporary Iraq is how to manage the KRG–Iraqi state relationship under the federal model. From a position of strength, after collaborating with allied forces in the defeat of Saddam Hussein, the Kurds influenced the definition of the legal framework and power structure of the new Iraq. Some authors have stressed that the Kurds have succeeded in “Kurdifying” Iraqi politics through guarantees that ensure that decision making at the national level takes Kurdish views into account (Hiltermann, 2008). Kurds also have important representatives in the central government, including the president of Iraq and leader of the PUK, Jalal Talabani. Kurdish nationalist ambitions, but also their fears over a fresh autocratic drift in Baghdad, lie behind the federal model for Iraq favoured by the Kurds. However, there is no political agreement in Iraq on the type of federalism by which the country should be governed.⁹ The lack of clarity or agreement over competencies between the central government and the KRG, along with disagreements over the management of key issues such as energy resources, continues to be a source of tension.

In particular, the so-called “disputed territories”¹⁰ remain one of the most troublesome issues. In theory, the dispute should have been resolved through a referendum in 2007, but this has not yet taken place. Based on its own interpretation of the legal framework, the KRG has pursued a policy of fait accompli: the area has fallen progressively under KRG control, while remaining de jure under Baghdad's jurisdiction. This Kurdish approach – which includes deployment of Kurdish security forces and officials – has led to escalating tension with Baghdad. Particularly troublesome has been the KRG's decision to award contracts for oil

7 At the end of the Iran–Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's regime used chemical weapons against the city of Halabja, causing the death of more than 5,000 Kurds, most of them civilians. The Anfal campaign was a long-standing campaign carried out between 1986 and 1989 that involved gas attacks, mass deportations and aerial offensives. This policy caused thousands of deaths and the forced displacement of at least a million Kurds.

8 The US decision to create a safe haven for Kurds was justified by the attacks carried out by Saddam Hussein's regime on the Kurdish and Shia minorities who rebelled against Baghdad in the context of the international conflict, but also by the wish to avoid a significant stream of Kurdish refugees from Iraq to Turkey, which was viewed with great concern by Ankara.

9 There is a struggle between different tendencies that advocate greater centralisation or decentralisation, including greater regionalisation, a debate that transcends ethnic differences. Greater regionalisation and decentralisation is mainly defended by Kurds and Shiite groups such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which advocates the creation of a macro-region in the south, rich in oil resources. The Iraqi Constitution provides minimal barriers to prevent the provinces from forming new autonomous regions, either standing alone or in conjunction with other provinces, with no limit on size or number.

10 Areas that were subject to Arabisation policies under Saddam Hussein's regime and that the KRG considers part of the historic Kurdish region. This claim is contested by Baghdad.

exploration to international companies despite the uncertain legal status of this area. Baghdad has rejected these manoeuvres, and uses its control of the state budget and the pipeline infrastructure to put pressure on the KRG. As a result, Kirkuk – a multi-ethnic city with large oil reserves, considered by Kurdish leaders as the “Kurdish Jerusalem” – stands out as one of the most potentially explosive locations.

These tensions have heightened distrust between the parties. The policies of the KRG, in particular its attempts to move towards economic independence, have prompted apprehension among non-Kurdish politicians over secessionist aspirations. The KRG’s “state-building” process is perceived as a strategy to advance its separation from Baghdad, taking advantage of a weak Iraqi government and seeking alliances with external groups – including private companies – as a way to secure future political support. However, the chances of forming an independent state clash not only with the wishes of Iraqi political forces, but also with other countries with Kurdish minorities that would not accept such a political entity at their borders.

The paradox of a Kurdish beacon

In this respect, the KRG faces major difficulties in the way it handles its two levels of strategic relationships: namely those with other states in the region that include Kurdish minorities, and those with other Kurdish non-state actors. Indeed, maintaining these two sets of relations has for a long time generated the high levels of complexity and paradox in Kurdish politics.

The KRG maintains collaborative relationships with countries such as Turkey and Iran, both of which are dealing with Kurdish armed groups (PKK and the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan, PJAK), which in turn have bases on the territory of the KRG. When considered appropriate, the Kurdish leadership in Iraq has established partnerships with Ankara and Tehran to try to control these groups, and both states have made incursions into northern Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish guerrillas. However, several authors have stressed that the KRG may face insuperable difficulties in going any further and, above all, in reconciling the pursuit of its interests through regional alliances

– the relationship with Ankara, for example, is a key part of the KRG’s oil export strategy – with its growing importance as a reference for the Kurdish cause at the transnational level. Its status as a de facto Kurdish state, constituting the most important political experience since the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad (1946), may seriously constrain its ability to curb the ambitions of other Kurdish groups in the region. At the same time, KRG authorities may become more willing to intervene beyond their borders, and to materially assist Kurdish movements.

Furthermore, the status of the KRG as a beacon for all Kurds in the region has made the challenges of internal governance more pertinent and acute. The KRG has to deal with deficiencies in democracy and human rights, as well as corruption. The domestic political context has been dominated by two families – the Barzani and Talabani – which control the administration, each with their own separate security forces, intelligence units and distinct areas of influence. Since the 1990s, some parts of Kurdish society have shown their willingness to challenge this traditional leadership system, to question the division of power between these two groups and to raise objections to the increasingly authoritarian rule of the KRG. The creation of new opposition parties, such as Goran (Change), and the recent protests against KDP–PUK dominance in the context of popular uprisings in the region, offer strong evidence of local demands for greater pluralism and democracy. The violent repression of these protests by the Kurdish security forces – at least six people died and dozens were injured as a result of excessive use of force in March 2011 – is also a reminder of how hard it will prove to provide a durable model for all Kurdish aspirations.

Kurds in Syria: inclusion or exclusion post-Assad

The total number of Kurds in Syria remains unclear, but estimates suggest it ranges between 1.7 and 2.5 million people, or between 8 and 10% of the total population. Unlike Kurds in other countries, the Kurds in Syria are more geographically dispersed and are considered to have undergone greater assimilation into the Arab

majority. Since the proclamation of Syria as an independent state, the Kurdish minority has had to manage a difficult fit within a self-proclaimed “Arab” republic. In effect, Kurds have been subject to state discrimination policies that have marginalised them for decades (Lowe, 2006). The accumulated grievances include social and economic exclusion, political persecution and cultural constraints. Along with Arabisation and the creation of an “Arab belt” along the border with Turkey and Iraq – involving land expropriations and the forced displacement of thousands of Kurds – many Kurds had their citizenship withdrawn in 1962 after a special census.¹¹ The growing number of stateless Kurds, currently numbering between 200,000 and 300,000 people lacking legal rights or access to social services, remains a major concern.

Until recently, the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria had little visibility, especially in comparison with Turkey or Iraq. Repressive regime policies hindered collective action, while Kurdish political fragmentation¹² was accentuated by Damascus’s tendency to coopt certain Kurdish leaders and tolerate some of their organisations (International Crisis Group, 2011). The Kurdish approach in Syria has been less antagonistic to the central government, with demands mainly on cultural, civil and political rights, but not for independence; calls for autonomy are relatively recent. This follows from the complex sense of identity of important sectors of Kurds in Syria, who despite historical grievances have maintained a sense of loyalty and belonging to Syria (Ziadeh, 2009).

A backlash against Damascus

It is also important to note that the evolution of the Kurdish movement in Syria has been influenced by the experience of other regional Kurdish actors, and by the relationship of the latter with

the Syrian state – again showing the prevalence of local interests over the defence of a cross-border Kurdish cause. On the basis of geopolitical imperatives, Damascus has continually supported Kurdish nationalist movements in neighbouring countries. Damascus allowed Iraqi Kurdish groups such as the KDP and the PUK to establish headquarters in the country, as it did with the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, until Ankara’s threats forced his expulsion from Syria in the late 1990s.¹³ The relationship with these groups, and Syrian consent to “its Kurds” being incorporated into other national movements, had an influence on the presence of Syrian Kurds in the ranks of the PKK (representing one third of the ranks of the armed group), but also on the creation in 2003 of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), considered a PKK-affiliated group and one of the most disciplined Kurdish organisations in Syria.

Since 2000, the Kurdish movement has gained a degree of notoriety. The mobilisation of the Syrian opposition after the arrival in power of Bashar al-Assad led to more explicit Kurdish demands.¹⁴ Riots in Kurdish areas in 2004¹⁵ – heavily repressed – also revealed increased identity-based awareness, and marked a turning point in terms of visibility of the Kurdish issue in Syria (Tejel, 2009).¹⁶ The protests were partly influenced by the KRG’s experience of autonomy in neighbouring Iraq.

The current civil war in Syria has placed the Kurds at a crossroads, with the question of their inclusion or exclusion in any post-conflict scenario at stake. After the outbreak of the revolt against Assad in 2011, the Kurds were perceived as reluctant to

11 The exceptional census was conducted in al-Hasakah province. The official explanation for the denaturalisation process, which affected around 20% of Kurds in Syria, was that the Kurds concerned had entered the country illegally from Turkey and Iraq, thereby threatening the “Arab character” of the country. As a result, in Syria there are Kurds with Syrian nationality, others considered *ajarib* (foreigners) and still others that are not even registered (*waktoumeen*, concealed Kurds).

12 Currently there are over a dozen Kurdish parties in Syria, many of them the result of divisions and with similar or identical names, which fosters the perception of confusion in the Kurdish political scene.

13 A security agreement between Turkey and Syria, signed in the Turkish resort of Adana in 1998, forced the expulsion of the PKK from Syrian territory.

14 The Damascus Declaration (2005) demanded a fair democratic solution to the Kurdish question in Syria, guaranteeing the complete equality of Syrian Kurdish citizens with other citizens in terms of language, political, social and legal rights on the basis of the unity of Syria.

15 The Qamshili incidents occurred in March 2004 following clashes between Kurds and Arabs after a football match, which resulted in the intervention of the security forces and the death of at least seven Kurds. The events prompted a wave of popular protests, criticism of the government and appeals for Kurdish emancipation and the recognition of this minority’s rights. Damascus quelled the protests, which left over 40 dead and thousands arrested.

16 Tejel emphasises that the new era of “visibility” of the Kurdish question in Syria was confirmed by the riots which occurred in Kurdish areas in March 2004. According to the author, “for the first time in contemporary Syria, the Kurdish question was at the heart of the political debates from 2004 to 2005” (Tejel, 2009: 136).

participate in demonstrations and were subject to cooptation efforts by the regime.¹⁷ However, in an increasingly violent conflict, many Kurdish groups decided to act. The fragmented Syrian opposition and the influence of different regional powers have caused major divisions over the Kurdish agenda and strategy.

Some Kurds are involved in the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition platform in exile, which has demanded a solution to the Kurdish question in the context of a democratic Syria.¹⁸ Several Kurdish groups have distanced themselves from the SNC, in part because they distrust the influence of Turkish and Islamist groups in it, and because of a perceived lack of guarantees for Kurdish demands. Many of them have converged in the Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC), with the support of Iraq's KRG and the embrace of a more pro-autonomy stance.

The position of the PYD, meanwhile, has been conditioned by the realignment of strategic alliances across the region. Given the rising tensions between Turkey and Syria, Damascus appears to have restored – at least tacitly – its alliance with the PKK as a bargaining chip against Ankara. Syrian state forces retreating from the north to concentrate in other areas have allowed the PYD to take control of areas of Syrian Kurdistan. After being accused of acting as gendarmes of the regime by suppressing opposition protests in these areas, and even using violence against Kurdish activists (killings, abductions, torture and intimidation have been denounced), the PYD, which has rejected these accusations, seems to have distanced itself from any alleged alliance with the government, and has begun to advance its own agenda. At the same time, it has prevented non-Kurdish rebel forces from making incursions in the area.

Recently, the PYD has signed an agreement with the KNC – brokered by the leader of the KRG, Massoud Barzani – for a jointly run administration, and protection of “liberated” Kurdish areas. Denying separatist intentions, the groups defend democracy and self-government of the Kurdish regions within the borders of Syria. This development has been widely compared to the de facto control assumed by Kurds in northern Iraq since 1991. While some analysts have emphasised the fragility of Kurdish self-rule in Syria, due in large part to disunity and distrust between Kurdish political groups, lack of economic viability and a hostile reaction from international and regional powers, others have stressed the relevance of the Kurdish enclave, which both the regime and the Syrian rebels vying for Kurdish support have accepted (Cockburn, 2012). A second autonomous political entity in the region further encourages Kurdish expectations, and has put the Kurdish question at the forefront of Syrian and regional politics in a time of major upheaval. It also constitutes a nightmare for Turkey, forcing Ankara to revise its policy towards the Kurds.

Kurds in Iran: fighting invisibility

Kurds in Iran amount to about 5 million people, or 7–15% of the country's population according to some estimates. They are mainly concentrated in the north-west of the country, on the border with Iraq and Turkey. Unlike the Kurdish minorities in those two countries, the relationship between Kurds and Persians has been characterised by greater linguistic and cultural affinity (Natali, 2005). These links, along with a certain degree of recognition of the ethnic singularity of Kurds in the building of modern Iran, help to explain why the Kurds have prioritised demands for autonomy ahead of independence. Nevertheless, Iranian Kurdistan also saw the establishment of the first Kurdish political entity after the fall of empires. Created in 1946, the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad aspired to full autonomy “within” the borders of Iran, and lasted 11 months before being disbanded by Iranian forces (McDowall, 1992; Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2009). As in other countries, the Kurdish question in Iran revolves around grievances resulting from homogenisation

17 In the first few months of the revolt, the Syrian regime tried to gain the support of the Kurdish minority with promises to regulate the status of Kurds without nationality, and symbolic measures such as the recognition of the Kurdish New Year celebrations.

18 The SNC – under the leadership of the Kurdish politician Abdulaset Bayda since mid-2012 – published an official declaration of its vision on the Kurdish issue in Syria, stressing the need to redress the injustice meted out to the Kurdish people for decades. The SNC proposes constitutional recognition of the national identity of the Kurdish people and their rights within a framework of unity of Syria's land and people. It also demands the abolition of discriminatory policies, and the adoption of measures aimed at strengthening Kurdish participation in national events and activities. The SNC invites all political forces to sign this proposal.

and discrimination. These policies have included severe repression of expressions of Kurdish nationalism, and of groups demanding minority and human rights. The fact that most Kurds are Sunni Muslims means that they are subject to double discrimination, on the basis of ethnicity and religion. They are also victims of denial of cultural and linguistic rights, forced resettlement, expropriations, unemployment, poverty and lack of government investment in the areas where they live.

The possibilities for advancing Kurdish demands in Iran have been constrained by a number of factors, most notably the increasing authoritarianism of the Islamic Republic and, as in the case of other Kurdish groups in the region, internal fragmentation, which has resulted in serious episodes of intra-Kurdish violence (Natali, 2012a; Hassanpour, 1994). Nevertheless, several Kurdish groups have challenged Tehran, some of them intermittently by violent means. Kurdish uprisings have occurred mainly when Iran has been weakened by occupation or internal upheavals (Romano, 2006). Until the 1990s, Kurdish opposition in Iran was dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)¹⁹ and Komala, but both have refrained from armed activities against Tehran in recent years and are today mostly based in the KRG's territory. On the other hand, since 2004 PJAK, a subsidiary group of the PKK, has been involved in a low-intensity conflict with Tehran.

The relationship between Tehran and other Kurdish actors in the region has also had a determining effect on the Kurdish issue in Iran, dramatically highlighting the limits and paradoxes of Kurdish cross-border cooperation. Tehran's collaboration with Kurdish groups of Iraq was a vital part of its antagonistic relationship with Saddam Hussein's regime: it has sheltered Kurdish militant groups from Iraq, and authorised them to set up their bases and launch operations from Iranian territory. Agreements between Tehran and Iraqi Kurds have also enabled the execution of Iranian Kurdish leaders, or prevented military

actions by militant groups against Iran. In 2011, for instance, the Tehran–PJAK conflict was fought mainly in KRG territory, with Iranian cross-border attacks in northern Iraq.²⁰ An alleged ceasefire in late 2011 suggests an agreement was made between Iran and the PKK to neutralise the actions of the PJAK and refocus its struggle against Turkey. Given the asymmetry of forces in relation to the Iranian military and dependence on other Kurdish actors in the region, the leeway given to the PJAK seems to be conditioned by the strategy of more significant Kurdish political and military players.

Future scenarios for the Kurdish issue

Scenario planning is an especially sensitive task in view of the extreme uncertainty currently affecting the Middle East. Turmoil in the region as a result of popular uprisings and armed conflict is causing realignments between states and non-state actors, including Kurdish ones. These shifts will have significant influence on the future of Kurdish life, whether in terms of cultural rights or political representation, in all four countries. Alongside these regional factors, more local dynamics will also play a vital part. What follows is an analysis of several likely scenarios – and the best possible outcomes – related to an escalation or reduction of violence, to the Kurds and their relationship with the four different states in a context of growing “Kurdishness”, and to the internal balances between Kurdish groups.

An escalation of violence?

In the near future, an escalation of violence affecting much of the Kurdish population is a highly probable scenario, especially in light of the Syrian crisis and its impact on sectarian tensions and border instability, the challenges posed by Syria becoming the scene of “proxy

¹⁹ In April 1979, the KDPI presented a plan for autonomy within Iran to the Ayatollah Khomeini, who rejected the proposal, accusing the Kurds of seeking independence. The plan included provisions for an elected Kurdish parliament, local management of provincial government institutions and recognition of Kurdish as an official provincial language (Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2009).

²⁰ The conflict between the Government of Iran and the PJAK has been characterised by increasing internationalisation. Clashes between the parties have been reported mainly in KRG-controlled territory, rather than in the north-west of Iran, as Tehran's forces have sought to dismantle the bases of the PJAK in the Qandil Mountains and to create a buffer zone in the border area. Iranian cross-border military attacks – as well as those undertaken by Turkey against the PKK in this area – resulted in civilian deaths and the forced displacement of hundreds of people in 2011.

wars” between antagonistic regional powers, and the alleged configuration of Sunni and Shia axes competing for areas of influence in the Middle East. In addition, the strategic calculations of Iran in a context of growing international isolation, and a possible multipolar cold war, will also tend to place the Kurds in the foreground of conflict dynamics.

Turkey is at clear risk of increased violence from and against the PKK in the coming years. Amid the regional uncertainty and in the absence of rapprochement, both sides could try to reinforce their positions. The greater willingness of Syria and Iran to confront and weaken Turkey in view of its anti-Assad policy could further reinforce the PKK in the short term, reducing its previous isolation and providing increased access to weapons. All this points towards deteriorating security in Turkey and a dilemma for the Turkish government: whether or not to deal once and for all with its own Kurdish question and, if so, how. Preventing a long-term escalation of violence requires a more sustainable resumption of peace talks between Turkey and the PKK, with international support, and an additional political process aimed at settling the general Kurdish question.

In Syrian Kurdish areas, violence could be an effect of conflict between Kurdish and non-Kurdish actors related to competition for power, increased sectarianism or rejection of Kurdish self-rule initiatives. Despite Ankara’s threats, an eventual Turkish intervention against PKK/PYD in northern Syria is less probable because of the regional risks. Taking into account the increase in the number of armed actors – besides the PYD, the KRG has started military training of Syrian Kurdish fighters in coordination with the KNC – some analyses have not dismissed the possibility of intra-Kurdish violence. However, the dominance of the PYD makes it difficult to foresee highly violent internal confrontation in the short term as a result of a “proxy war” between the main Kurdish groups for influence in the new Syria.

In the case of Iraq, the possibility of deteriorating security is also difficult to ignore given the recent crises in the country, institutional weakness and high levels of violence. Tensions between Erbil and Baghdad could result in conflict in the coming years, coupled with the inability or unwillingness

of the parties to reach an agreement on pending issues. Challenges in the field of security include fears of an escalation of violence in the “disputed territories” and along the “trigger line”. Given that the autonomy of the KRG in Iraq is already recognised as a reality, and that relevant regional and international actors and the Iraqi state will most probably not permit the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq, actions should focus on the consolidation of the KRG under the Iraqi state, and on improving relations between Erbil and Baghdad. This requires parties to agree on a negotiated settlement of the disputed territories, as well as to avoid unilateral actions and inflammatory rhetoric (International Crisis Group, 2012b). This also requires progress on the institutional framework and legislation to clarify the relations between the Iraqi government and the KRG, by exploring power-sharing formulas that consider local realities; some authors have proposed, for example, asymmetric models of federalism (Hiltermann, 2012).

Kurdishness and demands for statehood

Recent years have seen a number of changes in the way that Kurds see themselves, mainly through an increasingly ethnic-based and cross-border consciousness. This increasing sense of “Kurdishness”, which is identified by many experts, implies more visibility for Kurdish demands and empowerment. The phenomenon is associated with a number of factors. Globalisation has favoured more fluid communication channels between the Kurds, and greater awareness of their situation as a minority in the countries where they live. The experience of the KRG, as a political reference and source of inspiration, is also cited as another important factor. The so-called Arab Spring – which includes non-Arab mobilisations – has enabled many Kurds to link their claims with broader demands of democratisation, and has given prominence to Kurdish actors in a changing regional context. Some analysts also note a reduction in intra-Kurdish criticism, and a high tide of solidarity and cooperation (as in the recent deal between two historic rivals, KDPI and Komala, for a united Kurdish front against the Iranian regime). There is a sense that this is a crucial moment for Kurds in the region.

However, this Kurdishness has not generated a transnational claim for a pan-Kurdish state, an idea that seems to resonate with only some diaspora groups.²¹ Political, ideological, cultural and linguistic barriers persist, preventing Kurds from articulating a shared political project. As noted in the report, a great variety of Kurdish political organisations have maintained ideological and strategic differences at regional and local level.²² Kurdish political aspirations have been constrained by internal strife and divisions, leadership rivalries, distrust, and the complex matrix of cross-border relationships.

As a result, even though greater Kurdish consciousness and trans-state cooperation can be foreseen at the grass-roots and political levels, the main Kurdish demands will probably continue to be channelled through national movements anchored in local political realities and machinations. Future scenarios, in other words, will still be determined by the various forms of recognition provided to Kurds in the states they inhabit, and their accommodation in more plural state frameworks. On pragmatic grounds, Kurdish leaders could avoid maximalist approaches; but, if there is increasing instability in Iraq, they might also tell international partners that they deserve to be released from a failed state (Romano, 2006). Besides, the option of strengthening Kurdish autonomy in Iraq does not necessarily entail the renunciation by Kurds of independence as a long-term goal, even if this distant prospect is circumscribed by geography and the need to establish alliances with neighbouring countries to ensure viability.

In any case, the possibilities of a future independent Kurdish state in the Middle East will depend on the political ability of Kurds, their capacity to overcome their divisions and, as various authors stress, the convergence of Kurdish interests and goals with those of regional and international powers.

In an optimal scenario, Turkey could see the start of an inclusive long-term process – including participation by the Kurdish nationalist movement – of settling the Kurdish question under a new and pluralist constitution (which is already under preparation²³) and through various legislative reforms. Ongoing socioeconomic, political and psychological transformations in Turkey have helped to move in that direction to some extent. The recent increase in violence and deep political rivalries, however, suggests that antagonism will prevail in the short term.

In the case of the Kurds of Syria, all future scenarios are determined by the current armed conflict, which will pose huge challenges to future reconciliation and institution building. A regime change would most likely provide an opportunity for the Kurdish minority to seek a better accommodation with Syria's new rulers. Guarantees for the exercise of linguistic and cultural rights, effective political participation, the end of policies of discrimination and social exclusion and an effective resolution of the problem of stateless Kurds in Syria should all be taken into account if a new political settlement is crafted in the country. While the possibility of achieving Kurdish autonomy in Syria has been considered difficult in the short term, and out of line with the historical aspirations of Kurds in the country, recent developments in northern Syria and the KRG could encourage Kurds in Syria to refocus their strategy, and to create new expectations over Kurdish cross-border cooperation.

Finally, the Kurds of Iran are perhaps those with the fewest prospects for a turnaround in the near future, given that any transformation would be directly linked to overall changes in the country that are not foreseen in the short term. The expectations that the Iranian reformist government nursed in the late 1990s did not result in significant long-term changes, and recent political trends point towards a reinforcement of the conservative and nationalist tendencies in the country, and not towards greater recognition of the rights of minorities.

21 Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe – 1 to 1.5 million according to estimates – live mainly in Germany, the UK, France, the Netherlands and Belgium.

22 Examples of these divisions include ideological and strategic differences between Barzani's traditional tribal-based movement and Öcalan's revolutionary PKK about the way to address the Kurdish question; or between Barzani and Talabani over the degree of KRG autonomy.

23 In October 2011 a parliamentary committee was established to prepare a first draft of a new constitution. In this committee, called the Constitutional Reconciliation Commission, all political parties with groups in the Parliament are represented equally, with three members each, including the BDP.

Governance, leadership and Kurdish society

Intra-Kurdish relations in each state and across the region will pose various challenges in the next five to ten years, including at the level of governance. Dominance by traditional Kurdish elites (as in the PUK and KDP) and power groups (PKK) could be increasingly contested in their respective territorial areas of influence by groups and individuals whose independent or critical positions had been neglected or suppressed by isolation, coercion or violence. Demands for transparency, accountability, free competition and democratic management of dissent will have to be addressed. The handling of this contestation in one way or another could well influence future governance.

The Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey faces competition from rival Kurdish actors, including Kurds in the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and some criticism by independent Kurdish voices that had been silenced up to now. This may well increase if violence worsens. In fact, the PKK's new campaign could at some point face much more resistance from the Kurdish population as a result of general battle fatigue. An optimal scenario in Iraq would see improvements in the KRG's internal governance, thereby reversing the trend of increasing authoritarianism. This would mean higher levels of transparency, accountability, pluralism, democracy and guarantees for expression of dissent, in line with the demands of the population. It would also include better service delivery, satisfaction of basic needs and a redistribution of the benefits from economic development.

A challenge that cuts across Kurdish movements in the region concerns their capacity to manage differences, focus action on areas of common interest and overcome a long history of power struggles and internal divisions. The problems associated with competition for political power tend to increase the gap between elites and the population. Local ownership in the Kurdish scenario requires more spaces and better connection with the population, specifically young people and women. An increasingly disaffected Kurdish youth population bearing the regional burden of mass unemployment, security

force abuses, family trauma and non-existent social mobility poses acute challenges for state authorities and traditional Kurdish elites in a global context marked by social disenchantment and youth mobilisation. A failure to answer their problems could result in further local disaffection and, eventually, the use of violence in a more autonomous or radicalised way. In addition, regional Kurdish gender regimes are generally characterised by the neglect of women's rights and male-dominated dynamics. Greater participation of Kurdish women could help transform political structures and promote cooperation between elites and social groups, as well as giving rise to new mobilisation strategies and creative problem-solving approaches. The experience of Kurdish women in Turkey is an example of these potential positive gender transformations.

Avoiding violence, promoting rights, supporting dialogue

In such a geopolitically important area, the Kurdish question requires close attention at state and regional level. The international community should engage with the Kurdish question through comprehensive approaches, recognising the complexity of the Kurdish question(s), its (and their) specificities, the many actors involved, and its material and symbolic dimensions. Nearly a century after the failed Sèvres Treaty, the Kurdish question is more alive than ever, and will continue to influence the political, social, economic and security conditions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria – and, consequently, of the entire Middle East. Changing power balances, and the increasing weakness or isolation of some of the states where Kurds live, make it imperative that the international community be alive to the danger of worsening relations between Kurds and other groups and the instability that might result from this.

International community should favour a peaceful accommodation of Kurds within the states where they are determined to advance their rights. Reducing the risks of violence associated with the Kurdish question requires a commitment to promoting dialogue and confidence building. This approach would include, for example, support or facilitation for sustainable peace talks between Turkey and the PKK, and confidence building between the KRG and Baghdad.

Rather than participate in, support or tolerate “proxy wars” in the region, international actors should favour recognition and promotion of Kurds’ human rights (e.g. cultural, political and socioeconomic rights) through diplomatic engagement with state and Kurdish authorities. The challenges over autonomy aspirations (or even separatist ones) should be addressed by avoiding neocolonial approaches, but with a constructive and firm stance towards respect for human rights, including those of non-Kurds in

multi-ethnic and multi-religious Kurdish areas. Taking into account the historical trajectory of Kurdish elites and the authoritarian dynamics in Kurdish contexts, international donors should promote grass-roots initiatives and more open political spaces. Intercommunitarian dialogue, promotion of a culture of peace, engagement with the diaspora or support to women’s organisations could all be part of responsible international engagement in the Kurdish question.

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