The Kurds in the spotlight: local and regional challenges[1]

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Executive summary

The Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq face complex challenges. Among the current Kurdish realities, the emergence of Kurdish self-governing areas in northern Syria controlled by what is considered to be the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) generates considerable uncertainty. The complex civil war in Syria and antagonism between the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and a fragmented Kurdish political spectrum generate many questions as to the future of these Kurdish areas in Syria. In the case of Turkey, old and new internal and regional factors have threatened the dialogue under way between Turkey and the PKK. These include the lack of clear state policies to resolve the conflict, Turkey's current internal crisis, the complications of cross-border dynamics, and the mutual impact of the Kurdish questions in Syria and Turkey. In Iraq, tensions continue between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the country's central administration. The consolidation of Kurdish autonomy – with new elements such as the energy agreement between Erbil and Ankara – continues to generate uncertainty in a context where many issues remain unresolved.

List of abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
BDP	Peace and Democracy Party
FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdistan National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
YPG	Kurdish People's Protection Units

Introduction

An accumulation of processes has once again placed the Kurds in the spotlight in the contemporary Middle East. The situation of the 23-30 million Kurds that are believed to live in the region – the fourth-largest group in the Middle East after Arabs, Persians and Turks – continues to be extremely diverse and is strongly marked by the internal paths of this population in each of the states the Kurdish areas were divided into at the start of the 20th century. The Kurdish question has always involved powerful cross-border and regional elements involving interactions between the main Kurdish actors at the regional level and between these actors and the states that are home to Kurdish minorities.

The Kurdish question is characterised by complex realities. In Syria, a great deal of uncertainty is generated by the emergence of Kurdish areas – which are territorially discontinuous – under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is considered to be the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a cross-border armed actor whose main focus until recently had been the Kurdish question in Turkey. These incipient self-governing areas controlled by the PYD have emerged with social support in

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1   Note: this report was finalised in February 2014 and some parts could therefore not reflect the most recent developments, as a consequence of the rapidly evolving situation particularly in Syria, but also in the wider region.

a context of political fragmentation among the Kurds in Syria and a dramatic civil war that is constantly changing and in which the various actors in the conflict do not trust Kurdish aspirations. In Turkey, there is concern over the fragility of the dialogue process between the Turkish government and the PKK that started in late 2012 and is increasingly affected by internal and regional factors that are compromising this new attempt to resolve a civil war that has lasted for 30 years. In Iraq, the autonomy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – which is partly supported by increasingly close ties in recent years with Turkey, in contrast to previous hostility – is generating concern among other Iraqi sectors in a context of ongoing internal tensions between the Kurdish authorities and the country's central administration.

There are also pressing cross-border issues. Among them stands out a cold war between the two main Kurdish regional actors, the PKK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), over the Kurdish leadership in the region, which mainly manifests in Syria. These are dynamic relations that move between intra-Kurdish regional antagonism and some degree of cooperation. Adding to these are the complex and fluctuating interactions between the Kurds and neighbouring states and the repercussions these interactions are having on the various Kurdish issues.

The Kurds in Syria: challenges and risks of emerging self-governing areas

In Syria, until the Kurdish revolts in 2004, and especially until the start of the armed conflict in Syria in 2011, the Kurdish question had remained mainly invisible. The Kurds in Syria, who are estimated to account for 8-10% of the total population and live in the north of the country, although they are more dispersed than their fellow Kurds in neighbouring states, have faced discrimination for decades. Historically, assimilation and exclusion in all spheres have included policies such 20% of the Kurds being stripped of their citizenship in the 1960s and the creation of an Arab belt along the border with Turkey and Iraq. The Kurds in Syria have mainly focused their demands on cultural, linguistic and citizenship issues. Although many Kurdish parties have sought self-determination, they have never claimed independence and only a few traditionally defended autonomous self-rule in Syria (Lund, 2012: 113).

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolt in March 2011 and the transformation of the protests into an armed conflict, the Kurdish scenario came to witness a complex new reality – the emergence in northern Syria of self-governed Kurdish areas controlled by the PYD (which is thought to be the Syrian branch of the PKK) with wide social support, rivalry between the PYD and its Kurdish political opponents, and suspicions among the actors in the conflict and international powers regarding Kurdish aspirations for self-government.

The two main Kurdish actors that came to lead Kurdish reactions amid the Syrian revolt and subsequent civil war were the PYD and the Kurdistan National Council (KNC). The PYD, created in 2003, publicly denies organic ties with the PKK and will only acknowledge ideological affinity. Nonetheless, many analysts and sources close to the PKK point out that the PYD is part of the PKK, which is a military and political organisation created in Turkey in 1978 that has sister organisations in the region. Legal and non-legal organisations such as guerrillas, political parties, and youth and women's organisations participate in this broad movement under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan. In Syria the PYD became involved in the opposition to the Baathist Assad regime during the first decade of the 21st century.

The KNC is an alliance of 16 Syrian Kurdish political parties that was created in 2011 where much of the fragmented Kurdish political spectrum in Syria converges, with the notable exception of the PYD, the KNC's main rival. The KNC's main political support comes from the KDP, the main Iraqi Kurdish party, and its leader and president of the autonomous KRG in Iraq, Masoud Barzani. One of the main parties in the KNC is the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, which is affiliated with Iraq's KDP. Another is the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria, with links to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Iraqi president Jalal Talabani.

Syria: the Kurdish cross-border question

The withdrawal of the Assad regime's troops from some of the Kurdish areas in the north of Syria in July 2012 allowed the PYD and its armed wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), to take control of them. Whether the withdrawal was an agreed step or a strategic unilateral move, right from the start it became clear that the unresolved Kurdish question would be a factor in the new antagonism between Syria and Turkey.

Turkey feared the emergence of a Kurdish region on the other side of the border in the hands of its great internal enemy, the PKK, due to the threat this could pose to its security and due to the impact that a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, the second to be established in the Middle East after Iraqi Kurdistan, may have on the still unresolved Kurdish question in Turkey, the country with the largest Kurdish population (comprising 15-20% of its population, and more than half of all Kurds worldwide).

Shortly before Assad's troops withdrew (in a partial withdrawal, since some troops kept a discreet presence in some areas), the main Kurdish actors and rivals in Syria, the PYD and the KNC, reached an agreement to share power. The Erbil Agreement of July 2012, fostered by Barzani, was supposed to encourage Kurdish unity in a context considered to be an historic opportunity. The agreement established a joint Kurdish Supreme Committee, with the participation of several groups. However, it never actually worked due to deep divisions, and in practice

self-government in Syria's northern areas was under the leadership of the PYD.

Among other factors, the failure of the Supreme Committee was the result of the regional rivalries between the KDP and the PKK for the leadership of the Kurds, as well as of specific factors that made Syria an area of greater influence for the PKK. This rivalry can be considered a programmatic and leadership competition. Masoud Barzani and Abdullah Öcalan – two charismatic, egocentric and politically savvy figures – compete to be the "father" of the Kurds through their respective organisations.

Another important factor is the clash over Kurdish parties' differing models of nationalism. The KDP is socially conservative and economically liberal, and favours family and tribal relations. The PKK is Marxist-Leninist, anti-imperialist and socially progressive, and places strong emphasis on the mobilisation and participation of the lower classes, women and youth. The KDP has managed to set its political, economic and social agenda in motion in its stronghold in Iraqi Kurdistan. There, Barzani and the KDP are hegemonic powers, while their historical rival – but also ally in the government – the PUK has lost political weight. Among the group of parties associated with the PKK, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) is an important PKK political force in Turkey with representatives in the Turkish parliament, while also controlling many local governments in south-eastern Turkey.

In addition, there are opposing alliances. Despite being enemies in the past, Turkey and the government of the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq, led by the KDP, are strategic allies and are establishing ever-closer economic relations. In contrast, as various analysts highlight, the PKK benefited from the antagonism between Turkey, on the one hand, and Syria and Iran, on the other, in order to take control of Kurdish areas in Syria.

Other factors include the PKK's presence in Syria since the 1980s,[2] which replaced the predominance of Iraqi Kurds in Syrian Kurdish political dynamics since the 1960s (Lund, 2012: 112); the disciplined and hierarchical nature of the PKK as an organisation; the party's emphasis on security, the provision of services and social participation, including of women; and the availability of material and human resources, all of which motivated Kurds with knowledge of their territory[3] and forces redirected to Syria by the PKK to take over the Kurdish areas in that country.

Factionalism among the remaining Kurdish political spectrum is partly the result of the Baathist regime's decades-long persecution of the Kurds. In contrast to the little militancy among and limited social support for most of its political opponents in Syria, the PYD showed itself as a mass party[4] and the YPG has proved to be an efficient military power with a popular character. In fact, some Arabs and Christians also joined the YPG.[5] The PYD has been accused of violent attacks on political opponents on several occasions (Lund, 2012: 122). The combination of all these factors influenced the hegemonic position of the PKK. All this made it difficult to implement power-sharing and political cohabitation.

Kurdish areas and the balance of power in the Syrian civil war

From the middle of 2012 to the end of 2013 the Kurdish majority areas in northern Syria controlled by the YPG remained fairly stable, in contrast to the situation of the Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo, which were very unsafe and fluctuating. Even so, the Kurdish areas in the north also faced growing clashes with other actors in the Syrian conflict, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and especially the main jihadist movements linked to al-Qai'da such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and the al-Nusra Front. In this volatile civil war context the Kurds shifted between violent confrontations with other groups and some ad-hoc military alliances.

At the end of 2013 there were three discontinuous areas under Kurdish control: a strip in the province of Hassakeh, from the border with Iraq to the mixed city of Ras al-Ayn (Serêkanîye in Kurdish) on the border with Turkey and slightly beyond; a strip around Ayn al-Arab (Kobani in Kurdish); and another one around Afrin. In October the YPG also took control of the Iraqi Yarubiya border crossing. These areas include geostrategically important areas containing oil reserves – which are relevant in Syria, but very small in terms of the global economy.

The PYD followed the roadmap anticipated in July. In November 2013 it announced the creation of a transitional administration and the establishment of three cantons (Cizire, Kobani and Afrin). It also announced its intention to connect the three areas territorially. Nevertheless, that was an unlikely objective, as even the Kurds themselves recognised.[6]

In September the PYD and KNC had managed to draw up a draft agreement on an interim administration. However, the project was finally approved without the support of the KNC, which criticised the PYD's unilateralism. Barzani, the KNC's main external political supporter, also criticised the PYD's project for leaving out other Kurdish actors in Syria.

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2 In the 1980s and 1990s Syria permitted the PKK to operate in areas under its control on condition that it did not involve itself in local Syrian Kurdish issues. Many Syrians joined the PKK and it gained social support. Öcalan took refuge in Syria until he was expelled in 1998 amid a Syria-Turkey crisis. The 1999 Adana Agreement between Syria and Turkey led the Syrian regime to persecute the remaining PKK forces in Syria (ICG, 2013: 12).
3 Author interview with Jordi Tejel via Skype and email, January 10th 2014.
4 Ibid.
5 Author interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg via Skype and email, January 10th 2014.
6 Ibid. Van Wilgenburg highlights that even if no rebel group in the field officially approves of Kurdish autonomy, they might come to realise that they cannot beat the PYD.

There have been differences between the PYD and other Kurdish and non-Kurdish actors – local and international – with regard to the system of self-government instituted by the PYD. The announcement of a Kurdish interim administration was strongly criticised by the Syrian opposition. The National Coalition accused the PYD of being hostile and separatist. The Syrian political opposition in exile had in turn been trying to emerge as the legitimate representatives of all Syrians opposed to the regime, even if it lacked control over many of the relevant actors in the field, including armed actors. The positioning of the National Coalition – which the KNC joined in September 2013 amid strong internal divisions and with many misgivings – also reflected the reticence of several sectors of the Arab opposition to forms of self-government such as autonomy or federalism for the Kurds. While in the field the dynamics of the war and the de facto control of territory prevailed, no armed rebel group or Islamist group officially accepted Kurdish autonomy.[7] Turkey was also very critical, warning that a unilateral step would lead to a greater crisis.

The declaration of a transitional government by the PYD was made in an area where it had clear military control and social support. But it also occurred in a context of internal and external isolation, even if the PYD benefited from the withdrawal of Assad's forces and the uneasy balance of military power in the fighting, where no one is a clear winner. The PYD's strategy appeared to be to consolidate itself as a local and legitimate power,[8] including by trying to incorporate non-PYD individuals into its project.

The Kurdish population and militias became more involved in and affected by the war dynamics in Syria, including the proliferation of radical Islamist and jihadist armed groups and the indiscriminate violence inflicted on civilians. In 2012 and 2013 there were clashes between the YPG and sectors of the FSA, and especially between the YPG and groups linked to al-Qai'da, such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS, who kidnapped and killed many Kurdish civilians and forcibly displaced others. The number of refugees in the area controlled by the KRG, most of them Kurdish, increased significantly. The areas under YPG control became more vulnerable than at the start of the war, raising future questions linked to the balance of power in the war.

Intra-Kurdish tensions in Syria: détente or long-term dispute?

At the end of 2013 – one-and-a-half years after the Erbil Agreement and just a few months after the ill-fated agreement on a draft for an interim administration – there were new efforts at Kurdish rapprochement. After a strong escalation of political and mediatised tension, the two large Kurdish regional parties, the KDP and PKK, held high-level meetings in Erbil in December to reconsider their relations in different spheres, including their Syrian agendas. They reached an agreement designed to gain external acceptance and legitimacy that, among others, included the intra-Kurdish dialogue in Syria.

This was followed by negotiations between the PYD and KNC that concluded with an agreement for joint representation at the Geneva II talks, but not on what type of status to defend (i.e. autonomy, democratic autonomy or federalism). They were also unable to agree on the main internal issues, such as the debate on the transitional administration declared by the PYD, although they reached agreement on other elements (the release of detainees in PYD custody, the reopening of the border with Iraqi Kurdistan and an independent investigation into violence attributed to the PYD) that left the door open for a process to build trust between the KNC and PYD.[9]

New unilateral steps by the PYD at the start of 2014 partly undermined an immediate détente in intra-Kurdish conflict dynamics. In early January 2014 the so-called Constituent Assembly for Democratic Autonomy, linked to the PYD, approved a social contract. Among other points, this alleged constitution ratifies the three cantons; parliamentarism; rights for women and children; and, for the canton of Cizire, trilingualism. Legislative elections with quotas for minorities were also foreseen. The message was one of intercommunity participation and cohabitation, but it left out the PYD's Kurdish political opponents.

The gap between the KNC and PYD in fact increased over the Geneva II talks. After international rejection of a Kurdish bloc, the KNC attended the talks as part of the National Coalition delegation. The PYD saw this as an unacceptable breach of their December agreement. Some media reported criticism of PYD unilateralism by the KNC representative to the Geneva talks and the head of the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria, Abdel Hamid Darwish. Other steps followed that deepened intra-Kurdish tensions. Autonomous governments were announced in January in each of the enclaves under PYD control. Some non-PYD individuals, including KNC members, joined them and the KNC announced sanctions. Letters exchanged between Öcalan and Barzani at that time also pointed to continuing tensions, but also to efforts to find solutions.

The future of the Kurds in Syria is uncertain and poses major dilemmas. These dilemmas include complex issues such as the intra-Kurdish struggle for and distribution of power in Syria and in the region, the sources of local legitimacy, and the various views on how the Kurds would fit into the future Syria. In the current context of civil war, most possible scenarios for the Kurds will depend on how

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7   Author interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg via Skype and email, January 10th 2014.
8   Author interview with Jordi Tejel via Skype and email, January 10th 2014.
9   The points on the release of detainees and an independent investigation could mean readiness for self-criticism by the PYD. Marcus (2012) also highlights the challenge of the PKK's involvement in Syria, given the organisation's historical lack of tolerance for rivals.

the balance of military power evolves and on the positioning of regional powers.[10] At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that regardless of what happens in the war in Syria, the PYD will be the main force in Kurdish politics there (Marcus, 2013). In any case, failure to solve the Kurdish question in Syria would mean an added destabilising element in the general crises affecting the country and would make it necessary to look for solutions later.

The Kurds in Turkey: a complex way out of the armed conflict

The rapid emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, which adds to the one already existing since the 1990s in northern Iraq, has made the pending challenges affecting the pressing Kurdish question in Turkey even more evident. Thirty years have passed since the start of the war between Turkey and the PKK, which is a Marxist-Leninist-inspired Kurdish armed group.[11] During the first decade of the 21st century the PKK changed its aspirations for the independence of Kurdistan to demands for political and cultural rights and a discourse of "democratic confederalism", claiming the right to self-government for the Kurds in the various Kurdish areas without having to dismantle the existing Turkish borders. Until the war in Syria and the emergence of an area of direct PKK influence in that country, the PKK prioritised the Kurdish question in Turkey.

The new regional scenario of Kurdish self-government led by the PYD in Syria has become a new element in the PKK's agenda, but it does not replace the dynamics of the Kurdish question in Turkey itself and the pre-eminence of the latter for the PKK. In Turkey, the current challenges are related to the fragile dialogue process between the government and the PKK, which is a new attempt to solve a conflict that has had an accumulated impact of 40,000 deaths – mostly members of the PKK – hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people (up to 3 million according to some local sources), a legacy of widespread sexual violence, even against Kurdish men, and high levels of trauma.

Background and the new impulse to dialogue

Since the 1990s there have been various attempts at dialogue between Turkey and the PKK (Çandar, 2012), combined with the intermittent continuation of violence by the PKK and the exertion of Turkish political, military and police pressure on the PKK and the Kurdish nationalist movement. In parallel, the democratising boost of the first years under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government – partly linked to a rapprochement with the European Union – partially eased discrimination against the Kurds, but did not address the root causes of conflict. Attempts at dialogue between the AKP government and the PKK gained momentum since 2005-06.

Contacts between Turkey and the PKK since 2006 were accompanied by initiatives in the political and social fields by all the parties to the conflict. The huge expectations these aroused were truncated by the rise in political and social tension – including the mass detentions of Kurdish politicians and activists – and the interruption of the secret dialogue in 2011 between Turkey and the PKK. Factors that influenced the situation were, among others, a series of accusations and counter-accusations, deep distrust, ambiguous strategies and a process that was still fragile. The latent conflict between the AKP government and the Hizmet movement, led by Islamic scholar Fetullah Gülen, may also have been behind the deterioration of the dialogue process. This was followed in 2012 by the largest military offensive by the PKK since the 1990s, partly because the PKK was strengthened by new antagonism between Turkey, on the one hand, and Syria and Iran, on the other, over the war in Syria. However, steps were taken to relaunch the dialogue and its resumption was announced in late 2012. For the first time the dialogue was publicly acknowledged by the government, which recognised Öcalan as a valid interlocutor.

As part of the new dialogue process, in March 2013 Öcalan called on his supporters to "silence weapons" and announced the withdrawal of PKK forces from Turkish territory. This was the first of a three-step process that, according to the PKK and Öcalan, should include a first stage involving a ceasefire and parliamentary mechanisms; a second stage involving the passing of new legislation to meet Kurdish demands; and a third stage involving the freeing of prisoners and attempts to find a solution to the problem of the future of the guerrillas, which would be understood as the transformation of the PKK into a political actor.

The impasse on the difficult road to peace in Turkey

The process rapidly deteriorated during the second half of 2013. The PKK stopped the withdrawal of its guerrillas in September, although the group stuck to its unilateral ceasefire and the dialogue mechanisms remained active. The new democratisation package announced by the government in September was also considered insufficient by the Kurdish movement.

The process then entered a state of impasse. Among the factors causing this impasse was the electoral cycle that was starting in Turkey (local elections in March 2014, presidential elections in August and parliamentary elections in 2015), where the governing AKP and the pro-Kurdish BDP (a political actor that forms part of the Kurdish nationalist movement) are competing for votes in the Kurdish south-east of Turkey. Thus, the joint visit by Barzani and Erdogan in November to Diyarbakir, the symbolic

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10 Author interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg via Skype and email, January 10th 2014.
11 The PKK is sometimes depicted as being part of the broad "Kurdish nationalist movement", which includes legal and non-legal organisations, political parties, and civil society groups. The Kurdish movement and the PKK enjoy large support in south-east Turkey, although Kurdish allegiances there and in the whole of Turkey are divided.

Kurdish capital in Turkey, and Erdogan's references for the first time to "Iraqi Kurdistan" were interpreted and criticised by the BDP as an electioneering tactic.

Another key factor at the end of 2013 was the deep government crisis in Turkey, which was unleashed by a corruption scandal that revealed the strong tensions between the AKP government and the Hizmet movement, and which led to purges in the police and judiciary by the AKP. This new crisis may affect the electoral and dialogue processes. Both the AKP and Hizmet perceive the PKK as an actor that opposes their interests, but while the AKP had chosen dialogue strategies – even if fragile and ambiguous – Gülen's movement wanted to eliminate the PKK (Van Wilgenburg, 2014).

Conditions for peace in Turkey?

Internal factors that helped open the door to dialogue and that could still help to resolve the conflict include acceptance by all parties that military victory is not feasible; acceptance by the main political actors and public opinion in Turkey of peace conversations and democratic reforms as an answer to the historical discrimination against the Kurds; acceptance by the PKK that the use of violence as a political instrument is obsolete; and the social, political and economic development of Turkey over the last decade. Regional and international factors that pushed for talks also included the isolation of the PKK in the last decade; regional cooperation to fight terrorism before the current regional crisis; the PKK's lack of international legitimacy; and lessons learnt from the experiences of other guerrillas in other conflicts around the world (i.e. the violent elimination of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the dialogue between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla movement).

The Kurds in Iraq: between the status quo and new challenges

The convulsion generated by the crisis in Syria and the general instability in the region have also placed the Kurds in Iraq in the spotlight. Hence, it is necessary to examine the current challenges faced by and the impact of this regional instability on this landlocked Kurdish "quasi state" (Natali, 2012) with its vast oil resources. It is recognised in the 2005 Iraqi constitution as an autonomous region and over the past decade has managed to remain mostly stable and make its economy prosper, in contrast to the rest of Iraq. When analysing these challenges, the ongoing internal tensions between Erbil (the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan) and Baghdad are especially relevant. These tensions have been exacerbated by new questions of a regional dimension, such as the impact of the new energy agreement between Erbil and Ankara.

The axes of conflict that have marked the post-Saddam Hussein era in the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq continue to exist. Chronic elements of tension are present, including the struggle between Erbil and Baghdad over the management of the natural resources in the territory of the KRG, the conflict over the final status of Iraqi Kurdistan and the management of the resources in the so-called disputed territories; tensions linked to the budgetary distribution; and the distrust of the KRG among some Iraqi sectors. These disputes are linked to what has been one of Iraq's main challenges to date: how to manage relations between the Iraqi state and the Kurdish autonomous administration (Urrutia & Villellas, 2012: 5).

The complex relationship between Erbil and Baghdad oscillates from conflict to pragmatic cooperation, making it difficult to solve the chronic tensions, but preventing the outbreak of greater conflicts. In 2013 the tension between the KRG and the Iraqi government decreased. Whereas in 2012 the Iraqi Kurdish leader, Masoud Barzani, was one of the main promoters of the vote of no confidence against the Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, as of mid-2013 there was a significant rapprochement. This was influenced by Baghdad's need to improve its relations with the Kurds in the context of a deeper Sunni-Shia crisis in Iraq and a pre-electoral period (general elections are due in April 2014). This rapprochement led to the creation of committees to try to overcome the chronic disagreements. However, the pre-existing tensions could simply continue, with no major changes.

In a context of a lack of political agreement on key unresolved issues regarding how to fit the Kurds into Iraq, the Kurdish agenda is focused on doing everything possible to reduce the level of Erbil's dependence on Baghdad.[12] Consequently the Kurds have continued to push for greater economic independence,[13] which in turn is often perceived as a step preceding greater political autonomy. Nevertheless, for the Kurds the independence card is a rhetorical threat and not a realistic objective. Both regional and international actors still see Iraqi territorial integrity as a necessary element to contain the dismantlement of the Iraqi state, which could further destabilise an already unstable region.

The energy agreement between the KRG and Turkey: a new cause of tension?

In the context of the apparent continuation of pre-existing tensions, the new energy agreement between Turkey and the KRG announced in November 2013 generated uncertainty, in a context of energy and trade cooperation in recent years between Turkey and the KRG that had already created tensions with Baghdad. This KRG-Ankara rapprochement has taken place against a background of tension between Turkey's AKP government and al-Maliki in

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12 Interview with Wladimir van Wilgenburg, January 10th 2014.
13 From 2007 to the start of 2012 the Kurdish region signed over 40 agreements with international oil companies (ICG, 2012). The KRG has also signed agreements with companies to operate in some areas of the disputed territories.

recent years and in a context of regional and sectarian polarisation that has placed them on opposing sides. Turkey has supported opposition forces in Syria, while the Iraqi government has been accused of collusion with Damascus and facilitating the provision of supplies to the Assad regime from Iran.

The energy agreement opens the door to oil exports from the territories governed by the KRG through a new pipeline built on its own territory so that oil can be exported via Turkey to international markets as of 2014. The agreement also includes building a gas pipeline and gas-processing plants. It would allow Turkey to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and Azerbaijan and would help it in its aspirations to become a new energy hub. For the KRG, the agreement will multiply its economic options and reduce its dependence on Baghdad. But doubts have emerged over whether this agreement would contribute to Iraqi Kurdistan's separation from Iraq.

The announcement of the agreement was met by strong criticism in Iraq, as well as distrust from other countries such as the U.S., due to the negative impact it could have on the unity of Iraq, which in turn led to accelerated consultations among Ankara, Erbil and Baghdad. For Ankara, the territorial integrity of Iraq is unquestionable and is a key element in efforts to prevent further and greater regional tensions, which would impact on Turkey and its interests. Erbil and Baghdad reached an agreement in December in terms of which the revenue generated from Kurdish oil exported via Turkey would go to the Development Fund for Iraq account that was set up in 2003 in a U.S. bank at the request of the United Nations. Revenue would be distributed through Iraq's central budget. Also, the agreement included exports through the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organisation in accordance with existing mechanisms for exports and prices.

Disagreements on pending issues linked to the energy agreement and to the Erbil-Baghdad negotiations over it led to the exchange of mutual threats between Baghdad and Erbil in early 2014. Tension between Baghdad and Ankara also increased. Nonetheless, the door was left open to further dialogue, with no prospect of drastic consequences for Erbil-Baghdad relations, because solutions were foreseen within a scenario of interdependence and Iraqi statehood.

Conclusion

An examination of the challenges relating to the Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq reveals complex and uncertain scenarios. This uncertainty is partly linked to the impact that the current instability in the Middle East (war in Syria, Sunni-Shia polarisation, the humanitarian crisis and forced displacements, and the jihadist threat, among other factors) is having on the dynamics in these countries. In addition, internal crises in the various countries also have an impact on the Kurdish question in each country.

Among the current Kurdish realities, the emergence of Kurdish self-government in the north of Syria led by the Syrian branch of the PKK generates a particular uncertainty. The situation of a complex civil war in Syria and antagonism between the PYD and a fragmented Kurdish political spectrum generates many questions on the future of these Kurdish areas. In Turkey, old and new internal and regional factors have threatened the dialogue process between the government and the PKK. These include the lack of clear state policy to resolve the conflict, Turkey's internal crisis, the complications of cross-border dynamics, and the mutual impact of the Kurdish questions in Syria and Turkey. In Iraq, the tensions between the KRG and the central government continue. The consolidation of Kurdish autonomy – with new elements such as the energy agreement between Erbil and Ankara – continue to generate uncertainty in a context where many issues remain unresolved.

On the other hand, the antagonism between the two major Kurdish players – the PKK and KDP – is consolidating as an omnipresent element, although oscillating between conflict and cooperation, adding uncertainty to the regional scenario.

It is also possible to promote more desirable scenarios, where the Kurds become actors for the stabilisation of the region. This opens new opportunities for international actors to help local actors – both Kurdish and non-Kurdish – to promote intra-Kurdish and state dialogue that acknowledges the political and community diversity of the Kurds and opens the way to fulfilling the legitimate local Kurdish aspirations of participation and self-government in forms that are agreed locally. Nevertheless, the context of violence and multiple axes of division affecting the region questions the viability of these more inclusive and more desirable scenarios, at least in the short term.

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