

Kurdish Disunity In Historical Perspective

by Michael M. Gunter

KURDISH IDENTITY, DISUNITY, AND THE FUTURE OF KURDISTAN

Kurdish nationalism is challenged not only by the more developed counter-nationalisms of the states in which the Kurds live (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria) but also by the problem of Kurdish disunity and infighting. The seventeenth-century Kurdish poet Ahmad-i Khani, for example, lamented in *Mem u Zin* (the Kurdish national epic): “If only there were harmony among us, if we were to obey a single one of us, he would reduce to vassalage Turks, Arabs, and Persians, all of them. We would perfect our religion, our state, and would educate ourselves in learning and wisdom.”¹ A century ago the Wigrams (Christian missionaries who chronicled their travels through Kurdistan) concluded that although the Kurds “are a very ancient people,” they ‘have no national cohesion,’ and “a ‘United Kurdistan’ is a...Utopian conception.”² Jonathan Randal (the then senior foreign correspondent of the *Washington Post*) jocularly “suspect[ed] a rogue chromosome in Kurdish genetics causes...fissiparous tendencies.”³

Kurdish disunity was on exhibit for all to witness yet again during the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq’s advisory referendum held on September 25, 2017. Its disastrous outcome led to the KRG losing half of its territory as well as access to its two modern international airports in Irbil and Sulaymaniyah, among other losses. In the first place, it should be noted that too often the Kurds and others discuss independence as if it were the end of a process, rather than the beginning. Thus, it would be invaluable to suggest the likely problems that would have been associated with KRG independence.⁴ In the second place, it should be clear that we are talking about sequenced or cascading independence for the KRG only, not some type of pan-Kurdish state that would also include the Kurdish portions of Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

Although many Kurds dream of a pan-Kurdish state, one is highly unlikely given the vastly different stages of Kurdish nationalist development in each state the Kurds inhabit. Thus, at least until the disastrous failed

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advisory referendum on independence, the Kurds in Iraq seemed to be the ones most likely to become independent soon, followed by those in Syria. Given the continuing strength of Turkey and Iran as viable states, the Kurds in these two countries were much less likely to follow suit, although those in Turkey were more likely to achieve some type of ethnic rights.

Thus, the question arose, what would be the relationship between an independent KRG and the other constituent parts of Kurdistan still part of Syria, Turkey, and Iran? Would the KRG make irredentist claims on these other Kurdish areas? Would the KRG offer automatic citizenship for all Kurds, as Israel does for the Jewish Diaspora? Would an independent KRG allow dual citizenship for Kurds living in other states? In addition, when Massoud Barzani finally did step down from the extraordinary and technically illegal extension of his presidential term in the KRG following the failed referendum on independence and Baghdad's reclaiming of Kirkuk, he continued as the president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), one of the two main political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, any new president or KRG leader would have less real power than the life-long president of the KDP. What kind of precedent would this constitute, and more importantly, what would this mean for the constitutional development of a successful, independent KRG?

What about other likely legal problems involving separate visa regimes and financial laws? How would an independent KRG organize its economy? Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) still seems a staunch advocate of socialism (Marxism), while the KRG pursues a capitalist route. Would the gas-rich KRG share its oil resources with the gas-poor Kurds living in Turkey? In other words, would KRG oil be a pan-Kurdish resource or a localized one? Similar problems existed among the Arab states and indeed were used by Saddam Hussein as a justification for invading Kuwait in 1990.⁵ Unfortunately, too many Kurdish officials have long seemed to put personal wealth accumulation ahead of pan-Kurdish munificence. On the other hand, rentier states dependent on oil resources provide an unstable foundation for solid economic development, as witnessed by the KRG's current economic problems.

In addition, what kind of economic infrastructure would an independent KRG have? At the present time, a banking infrastructure is non-existent, and ATMs remain few, forcing many people to carry their life savings around in their pockets or keep them stashed at home.⁶ The KRG is largely a cash economy, lacking a long-term sophisticated monetary policy, fiscal discipline, and sufficient reserves. Any attempt at creating a KRG currency would probably collapse. A possible compromise might be to create a

symbolic currency pegged to the U.S. dollar or euro. A precedent for this already exists in Liberia, Panama, and East Timor, which use the U.S. dollar. Furthermore, what about the large-scale crony capitalism and corruption prevalent today in the KRG? And in Turkey, what would be done with the Village Guards who still provide the income for some 50,000 Kurds and their families?

Early in 2016, the World Bank Group released a 219-page economic report on the KRG, proposing reform options for fiscal adjustment and the diversification of the economy. The report addressed the KRG's high dependency on the oil sector, the excessive role of the public sector in the economy, dependency on imports, weaknesses in the financial system, and dependency on a cash economy. According to the report, economic diversification could plausibly be affected by taking advantage of land and water resources, by greatly expanding the private sector through available human resources and entrepreneurial spirit, by exploiting the advantageous geographic location through the east-west trade routes between highly productive industrialized economies, and by taking advantage of foreign expertise. A World Bank study carried out in conjunction with the KRG ministry of planning, estimated KRG's stabilization needs at \$1.4 billion in 2015.⁷

What about water resources? An independent Kurdistan in Turkey would inherit a large proportion of that state's fresh water supply and its ability to generate hydroelectric power, which, of course, is an important reason why Turkey continues to oppose Kurdish independence. The KRG and Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), on the other hand, obtain their fresh water supplies from upstream Turkey and, on this point at least, are thus in a potentially much less advantageous position than their Kurdish brethren in Turkey. A lesser, but still important symbolic problem involves choosing a flag and national anthem. Currently, many Kurds do share "Ey Raqîp" (Hey Enemy) as a common anthem.

Shortly before the new Trump administration came to office on January 20, 2017, the Atlantic Council, a prominent think tank in Washington, issued a detailed report chaired by former Ambassador Ryan Crocker calling for the KRG to remain part of Iraq in the interests of future peace and stability.⁸ Faced with the KRG advisory referendum on independence, the Trump administration opted to support this recommendation for all the reasons detailed above and more. Trump's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared: "The United States does not recognize the Kurdistan Regional Government's unilateral referendum...The vote and the results lack legitimacy, and we continue to support a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq."⁹

Among the multitude of reasons for its position, the Trump administration specifically listed: maintaining unity in the fight against ISIS; shoring up the seemingly fragile Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi ahead of upcoming elections early in 2018; the KRG overreach by including the disputed oil-rich Kirkuk in the referendum; the KRG failure to postpone the referendum in exchange for promised U.S. support in negotiations with Baghdad; and the strong opposition of the neighbouring, regional states of Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Israel alone supported the referendum, which was understandably yet another negative, among others.¹⁰

After the Iraqi forces retook Kirkuk with considerable Iranian aid on October 16, 2017, a U.S. Pentagon spokesman claimed that U.S. commanders in the region were actively trying to mediate between the two sides in the city, but did not allude to the ironic situation that both the U.S. and Iran were on the same side. The U.S. embassy in Baghdad asserted that: “We support the peaceful reassertion of federal authority, consistent with the Iraqi constitution, in all disputed areas,” while Trump himself said: “We don’t like the fact that they are clashing, but we’re not taking sides.”¹¹

H.R. McMaster, Trump’s national security advisor, ambiguously affirmed that the president’s “sentiments are with both — with the Kurdish people and with the Iraqi people,”¹² and then elaborated that, “what we need to do though, is we have to work to mediate this conflict in a way that allows our Kurdish friends to enjoy the safety, security, and prosperity they built over so many years and not regress from that.”¹³ Six weeks later, McMaster reiterated that bringing Baghdad and Erbil together “is a big priority for President Trump and for Secretary Tillerson and the whole [Trump] team.”¹⁴ In a telephone call between Rex Tillerson and Nechirvan Barzani — the KRG prime minister and now highest-ranking KRG official following his uncle Massoud Barzani’s resignation as president a month earlier — Trump’s secretary of state “expressed his support for the democratic process...and hoped that the Kurdistan Regional Government will overcome the current challenges in the Region, for which he expressed his country’s support.”¹⁵ The Trump administration was trying to square the circle with two of its allies who were strongly at odds with each other.

However, in the end, probably the most important reason for the referendum disaster was KRG disunity. KRG President Massoud Barzani’s historic Iraqi Kurdish enemy, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), saw the referendum as mainly a ploy by Barzani to maintain his power at their expense, while both the Gorran Movement and Kurdistan Islamist Group (Komal) also opposed the referendum. Thus, when Baghdad sent its newly empowered forces to retake Kirkuk with considerable Iranian support on

October 16, 2017, the Kurds could not agree on defending their position and simply melted away. As Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the KRG representative in Washington, concluded: “Disunity is definitely our Achilles heel. Kurdish disunity is our worst enemy. Whatever we think of our opponents and detractors, our disunity is our worst enemy.”¹⁶

To understand better the continuing problem of Kurdish disunity, and how the seemingly well-positioned KRG partially collapsed so quickly following its referendum on independence, this article will seek to analyze Kurdish disunity in a historical perspective. In particular, among several other prominent examples of Kurdish Disunity that occurred in the past. It will analyze, as a historical case study, the outbreak of violence in September 2000 and again in December 2000 between two groups which seemingly had been on rather good terms, Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan’s Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The Kurds are often said to be the largest nation on earth without its own independent state, and since they have become increasingly important in the recent struggles in the geo-strategically important Middle East involving ISIS, the civil war in Syria, and many others, such an analysis promises to be useful.¹⁷

BACKGROUND ON ENDURING DISUNITY

Continuing primordial allegiances to tribes (*ashiret*) and other similar units (*tayfe, tire*), tribal leaders (*agha*), and religious leaders (*shaikh*) contribute to Kurdish disunity and fracture nascent Kurdish nationalism.¹⁸ At times, the modern Kurdish parties seem to function as neo-tribal confederations complete with their traditional spirit of disunity and infighting. Political and linguistic differences also promote disunity: Kurdistan is politically divided among four different states that frequently try to control Kurdish unrest by divide-and-rule tactics. Depending on how one counts them, there also are four different Kurdish languages: Kurmanji, Sorani, Zaza (Dimili), and Gurani, as well as numerous other dialects. The Kurds prefer to call these languages dialects so as not to call attention to their linguistic disunity.¹⁹

During the Iraqi Kurdish uprising of the 1960s, infighting between the Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Ibrahim Ahmad-Jalal Talabani factions sometimes seemed to upstage their very struggle against Baghdad. Their animosity helped lead to Barzani’s characterization of Talabani as an “agent for everybody,” and Talabani’s retort that Barzani was “tribal, feudal, and reactionary.”²⁰²¹ After Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s final defeat in 1975, this on-

again, off-again Iraqi Kurdish disunity continued between Barzani's son, Massoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The more conservative KDP was associated with the Kurmanji- or Bahdinani-speaking areas of the mountainous northwest, while the leftist-inclined PUK prevailed in the more cultured, Sorani-speaking areas of the southeast.

In October 1992, however, the then-allied KDP and PUK (in cooperation with Turkey) attacked Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group of Turkish Kurds sheltering in Iraqi Kurdistan from where they could raid into Turkey. Barzani and Talabani declared that the PKK was challenging the very existence of their fragile de-facto state that had been created after the defeat of Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War: "Ocalan's men acted as if they were the authorities and...threatened to expel the government and parliament from Irbil [the capital of the de facto Iraqi Kurdish state]."²² Ocalan, on the other hand, accused both Barzani and Talabani "of trying to stab the PKK in the back by cooperating with Turkey," and concluded that "these two leaders are now our enemies."²³

At the end of October 1992, the Kurdish infighting supposedly forced the PKK to surrender some of its forces to the PUK, whose territory — unlike that of the KDP — did not border Turkey. Soon many Turkish commentators began to accuse Talabani of having provided a new base and safehouse for the PKK in the Zaleh camp northeast of the PUK's stronghold of Sulaymaniyah. The situation helped lead to a détente in PKK-PUK relations, while those between the PKK and KDP remained hostile. Indeed, in March 1993, Talabani met Ocalan in the PKK's stronghold in Syria and helped to broker a brief, unilateral cease-fire between the PKK and Turkey.²⁴ In May 1994, the PUK and the KDP fell into an intermittent civil war that cost some 3,000 lives; tacitly involved Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq; and lasted until a cease-fire was finally reached through mediation by the United States in September 1998. The KDP-PUK fighting and resulting anarchy created new opportunities for the PKK to establish bases in Barzani's territory that bordered Turkey. Increasingly, therefore, the KDP looked toward Turkey to help it control and eliminate these PKK bases, while the PUK began to view the PKK as a second front against the KDP, its new enemy. For its part, Iran tended to support the PUK as a counterweight against further Turkish influence in northern Iraq.²⁵

In August 1995, the PKK suddenly attacked the KDP, claiming that as part of a settlement trying to end the KDP-PUK fighting, Barzani's party had promised to police its border with Turkey to prevent PKK infiltration. The PKK explained that the KDP had "to be wiped out because it was backing

Turkey's bid to crush PKK rebels."²⁶ In a lengthy interview, the PKK leader Ocalan termed Barzani's *peshmergas* (guerrillas) "primitive nationalist forces" who "have for 40 years slaughtered Kurdish patriotic forces for their own narrow tribal interests and in league with the Turkish intelligence services." By attacking the KDP now, the PKK "will play a significant role in putting an end to this" and "open the way for the people of south [Iraqi] Kurdistan to move towards a federation."²⁷ Ocalan added, "we do not expect the PUK to oppose these developments very much." Barzani retorted by reminding Ocalan that in the 1980s the KDP had given the PKK shelter and assistance in its struggle against Turkey. The KDP leader declared that "it is high treason to aim weapons at the legitimate Kurdish administration in the region, the KDP,"²⁸ and "confirmed that Ocalan is the enemy of Kurds."²⁹

In August 1996, the Iraqi Kurdish civil war between the KDP and the PUK suddenly escalated with a PUK offensive that Barzani claimed was supported by Iran, a charge Talabani denied.³⁰³¹ An increasingly desperate Barzani then did the unthinkable and turned to Saddam Hussein for help.³² The KDP leader rationalized his action as necessary to preserve Iraqi territorial integrity, which was supposedly being threatened by Iranian support for the PUK. Saddam Hussein, of course, obliged, and a joint Iraqi-KDP strike quickly forced the PUK out of Irbil and into a headlong retreat to the Iranian border. Barzani's apparent victory, however, was soon reversed when Talabani's forces launched a successful counterattack that retook much of his lost territory in October 1996. A tenuous cease-fire followed.³³

The so-called Ankara peace process initiated by the United States, Britain, and Turkey at the end of October 1996 sought to extend the cease-fire, in part, by creating a peace monitoring force of some supposedly neutral 200 Turkomen and Assyrians (living as minorities in Iraqi Kurdistan). Given the unresolved KDP-PUK power struggle and the suspicion that Turkey was actually seeking to use the peace monitoring force to further interfere in the region's affairs and possibly even to establish a Turkomen client state there, the Ankara peace process proved unsuccessful.³⁴

In May 1997, some 50,000 Turkish troops entered northern Iraq in another attempt to destroy the PKK units based there and to shore up the KDP forces Turkey hoped would help prevent future PKK attacks upon Turkey from the region. This time, however, the Turks did not fully withdraw after completing their mission, but maintained a military presence that amounted to an unofficial security zone. Barzani explained: "The PKK has behaved as an alternative authority and has denied the KDP the right to exercise its authority in the border areas inside Iraqi Kurdistan...Therefore, we would not feel sorry for their removal by whatever force."³⁵ Talabani

concluded, however: “Turkey has discarded its neutral role and is now an ally of Barzani,” while the PKK leader Ocalan threatened that the KDP would “be annihilated should you continue with your collaboration. Give up your dirty alliance [with Turkey] at once.”³⁶³⁷

In October 1997, some of the heaviest fighting of the entire KDP-PUK civil war broke out as hundreds were killed and thousands displaced. After the PUK made significant initial gains, the Turks, who had been carrying out military operations against the PKK in the region again, intervened heavily on the side of the KDP. Turkey bombed the areas controlled by the PUK along the strategic Hamilton Road northeast of Irbil and accused the PUK of actively cooperating with the PKK.³⁸ Barham Salih, then PUK spokesman in the United States and later prime minister of the PUK administration in Sulaymaniyah, renewed the charge that “the Turks have shifted from being a sponsor of the [Ankara] peace process to being a party to the conflict.”³⁹ Salih also claimed that Turkey did not want peace between the KDP and the PUK because it would “help consolidate a viable Kurdish self-government in Iraq, that some in Turkey view with alarm and [as] detrimental to their own Kurdish community.” Accordingly, with Turkish aid, the KDP reasserted control over all the territory it had just lost, and another cease-fire developed.⁴⁰

PKK-PUK CONFLICT

Given this background of PKK-PUK cooperation, Iranian support for the PUK, and the resulting Turkish enmity for the PUK; it was particularly ironic that, at the partial behest and support of Turkey, the PUK and PKK fell into a bloody conflict in September 2000 and again in December 2000. The roots of this chapter in the history of Kurdish disunity and infighting stemmed from Turkey’s capture of the PKK’s leader Ocalan in 1999 and the PKK’s resulting withdrawal to areas in northern Iraq under PUK administration. Based in Northern Iraq, the PUK perceived the PKK forces to be a threat to the PUK’s base of operations.⁴¹ The KDP remained neutral in this particular incidence of intramural conflict. This was a turnaround from less than two years earlier, when Turkey was aiding the KDP in its struggle against the PUK and also continuously accusing the PUK of supporting the PKK, while the KDP was assisting the Turkish army in its cross-border operations against the PKK.

The Washington Accord (or process) Barzani and Talabani reached in September 1998 to halt their infighting obligated both parties to prevent

the PKK from using northern Iraq as a base to attack Turkey. The Iraqi Kurds agreed because they needed Turkish acquiescence for their own local administration. Not only did Turkey have the military power to intervene regularly in the area, but also trade over the Turkish border was a prerequisite for the economic survival of the Iraqi Kurds. As Turkey's NATO ally, the United States supported the Turkish position, especially against the PKK. In addition, of course, as the KDP-PUK fighting against the PKK in October 1992 illustrated, PKK activities in northern Iraq potentially challenged the very position of the Iraqi Kurds. The PKK, of course, did not see it this way, arguing that *all* Kurds should be allowed access *anywhere* in Kurdistan. "Despite our party's intensive efforts to bring about national unity, peace, and democracy, the KDP and PUK refrain from making such efforts. They reject unity and peace and are tricked by foreign powers."⁴²

At the behest of their imprisoned leader Ocalan and to demonstrate their goodwill in calling for a cease-fire with Turkey that also hopefully would save Ocalan's life, the PKK began to withdraw most of its forces from southeastern Turkey in September 1999. After entrenching some 3-5,000 fighters in PUK territory at the northern end of the Qandil Mountains bordering the Iraqi-Iranian frontier, the PKK announced the formation of a local administration and began to requisition supplies from the locals. The situation even allowed the PKK potentially to threaten the nearby cities of Ranyia and Qalat Diza which lie along the road to the PUK capital, Sulaymaniyah.

Returning from talks in Washington, Talabani stopped in Ankara on July 25, 2000, and was prominently received by Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit and the military leaders.⁴³ Given their past tendentious relations, it was the first time the PUK leader had visited the Turkish capital in a year and a half. The mutually perceived PKK threat had changed the situation. Turkey wanted to prevent what it termed "the politicization of separatism" by totally eliminating the PKK before it could transform itself into a civilian force by using Turkey's EU candidacy and its requirements for greater democracy to pull political victory out of the jaws of its military defeat. Ankara also wanted to continue to foment Kurdish divisions that would hopefully prevent a Kurdish state from materializing in northern Iraq. Once the PKK was finished, Turkey would then encourage renewed PUK-KDP fighting that would either prevent the creation of an Iraqi Kurdish state or even facilitate Saddam Hussein's reassertion of control. Turkey called this policy of instigating the problem of Kurdish disunity and infighting, "letting dogs kill dogs."⁴⁴

For its part, the PUK needed Turkish support to eliminate the PKK threat. Talabani also hoped to win Turkish approval to open a special border

corridor between his territory and Turkey so the PUK could begin enjoying the lucrative trade benefits long monopolized by the KDP. The United States encouraged this PUK demarche as a way of weaning Talabani from his longtime dependence on Iran. To the satisfaction of their Turkish hosts, PUK officials claimed they had been preparing buffer zones to prevent the PKK from using PUK-controlled areas as a base for attacks on Turkey.⁴⁵ Talabani sought further to win Turkish support by claiming that since the Washington process was not functioning, the Ankara process needed to be revived.⁴⁶ Although in truth there seemed to be little to choose from between the two processes, and indeed both the United States and Turkey were involved in both processes, the very term *Ankara process* implied greater sensitivity to Turkish concerns, such as the position of the Turkomen in northern Iraq.

At the same time, Turkish relations with the KDP were cooling because Ankara objected to the KDP assuming state-like airs, with officials bearing titles such as prime minister and minister, as well as prominently displaying a Kurdish flag in conspicuous places under its authority. In addition, an Iraqi Turkomen party linked to Turkey was experiencing increasing difficulties with the KDP and was seeking to form an armed militia. Two Turkomen leaders in the KDP area had recently been killed during sporadic armed attacks, supposedly by KDP elements. In contrast, during his visit to Ankara, Talabani stressed that the Turkomen were another national entity in Iraq after the Arabs and Kurds, and that they should have the same democratic rights as all other Iraqi citizens. The PUK leader also had lunch with Turkomen representatives in the Turkish capital.⁴⁷

On September 14, 2000 — just six weeks after Talabani's visit to Ankara — fighting broke out between the PUK and PKK when the former apparently launched unsuccessful assaults in an attempt to prevent the latter from expanding its positions. Since reporters were not allowed into the area, however, reports were sketchy and contradictory. As many as 160 PUK fighters were killed, 250 wounded, and still, others captured before a tenuous cease-fire was declared on October 4, 2000.⁴⁸ Further fighting broke out on December 3, 2000, and lasted for approximately one week. Although specific figures were not available, one source indicated that possibly 150 PKK fighters had been killed, while as many as 200 PUK soldiers had also died.⁴⁹⁵⁰ Talabani himself asserted that a “big number” of people had died during the PKK-PUK clashes.⁵¹ PKK reports claimed that Turkey had provided up to \$80 million in aid to the PUK during the first round of fighting and another \$15 million during the second, figures which the PUK denied.⁵²⁵³

Further PKK reports asserted that Turkey had deployed some 5,000 troops near the contested area and dozens of armored vehicles, tanks, and

personnel carriers in support of the PUK.⁵⁴ The Turkish prime minister, Bulent Ecevit, retorted that his country had only given “technical and economic assistance” to Talabani’s party, while a Turkish foreign ministry official owned that Talabani “is putting up a very serious struggle against the PKK.”⁵⁵

In a communiqué on the fighting, the PUK asserted that “the PKK leadership commits the greatest and dirtiest national betrayal in the Kurdistan political history,”⁵⁶ with “the intention of imposing itself on the Kurdistan regional government.” In an ironic reference to Ocalan’s capture and offers to cooperate with Turkey, the PUK communiqué referred to the PKK leader as “the PKK defeated and kneeled down leader Abdullah Ocalan” who was pursuing “criminal policies, aggression and provocation,” with “the assistance of the occupiers of Kurdistan.”⁵⁷

Duran Kalkan, a member of the PKK presidential council that had been created after Ocalan’s capture in February 1999, retorted that “the PUK has become a pawn of the international conspiracy to liquidate the PKK.”⁵⁸ Murat Karayilan, another member of the PKK’s presidential council, added that although Turkish troops had entered Iraqi Kurdistan before, “what was happening this time was different...[and] was the first time that the TSK [Turkish military] had entered the Soran region....The aim is to render ineffective Kurdish institutionalization in this region and take it under their own control.”⁵⁹ A manifesto issued by the PKK presidential council referred to the “collaborationist politics of the feudal tribes,” and concluded that “a close relationship with external powers, not only offers no solution, but on the contrary leads to constant intra-Kurdish quarrels.”⁶⁰

The KDP denied reputed PUK claims that the Barzani-led group was supporting the PKK, and reminded its listeners what “the PUK leadership did throughout the last decade when it provided shelter for, supported, and encouraged the PKK gangs to fight the KDP.”⁶¹ The KDP then concluded that although the PKK “presence and activities in Iraqi Kurdistan constitute a threat to the region’s security and stability,” the “PUK leadership in its current bloody conflict with the PKK is only paying for its fatal political mistakes and it is reaping what it had sown.” KDP sources also asserted that although Turkey was trying to convince the KDP to join the PUK in the fight against the PKK, “at least for now, they did not want to fight against the PKK.”⁶²

On January 9, 2001, Talabani again visited Ankara for further high-level talks with Ecevit and other Turkish officials, declaring: “We want to bolster our co-operation with Turkey,” and “we will oblige [the PKK] by all means to leave our area.”⁶³⁶⁴ Turkish authorities replied that “we neglected

Talabani for a long time. Now we feel the PUK is doing an excellent job...in the struggle against the terrorist PKK group in northern Iraq and deserves Turkey's support."⁶⁵ Ecevit went so far as to claim that "the real struggle in the region is between the PUK and the PKK."⁶⁶

IRAQI ROLE

The PUK also claimed that the Iraqi military helped to transport PKK fighters sheltered under Baghdad's protection to the battlefield.⁶⁷ "The Iraqi regime, which hosts thousands of PKK fighters close to Kurdish-controlled areas, rushed many of them to the front in army trucks and personnel carriers."⁶⁸ The Iraqi motive was to weaken the PUK and facilitate eventual Iraqi reintegration of Iraqi Kurdistan. Supposedly there were three PKK bases contained within Iraqi military bases in Shekhan, Ayen Zala, and near Makhmor.⁶⁹ Iraq also remained extremely angry with Turkey for its continuing cross-border raids into Iraq in pursuit of the PKK.⁷⁰

Covert Iraqi support for the PKK was nothing new. Despite its overt cooperation with Turkey during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), some Turkish officials charged that at the same time Iraq secretly had supplied weapons to the PKK in return for information about the KDP. One Turkish officer explained: "The Iraqi regime has an interest in the border region where they cannot enter because of Barzani forces."⁷¹ He added that the Iraqis "give weapons and ammunition to the PKK in order to receive information on activities of Iraqi Kurds. The PKK, while on the one hand received support from those [Iraqi] Kurds, on the other sells them out for its own survival."

After Saddam Hussein's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, Turkish officials charged that "Ocalan and Saddam Hussain met in al-Mawsil [Mosul] some time ago and decided to cooperate."⁷² "The Iraqi government is arming and supplying the Kurdish separatist movement...in retaliation for Turkey's close cooperation with allied forces during the Gulf War."⁷³ Talabani himself agreed that the PKK "is cooperating with Saddam Hussein's administration."⁷⁴ The joint KDP-PUK Kurdistan regional administration also charged in 1992 that "the PKK is collaborating with Iraqi officials," adding that "the Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian governments help the PKK against the Iraqi Kurdish movement ...because they do not want our parliamentary and governmental experiment to be successful."⁷⁵ In June 1992, a Turkish source claimed that Saddam Hussein, "has received Abdullah Ocalan...with open arms after the latter was evicted from al-Biqa [the Bekka Valley] by Syria."⁷⁶ Six years later, after Syria had evicted Ocalan himself as well as his fighters from its territory, the PKK had an even greater rationale for seeking sanctuary from Baghdad.

IRANIAN ROLE

Having supported both the PUK and the PKK in the past, Iran now played an uncertain role as the two Kurdish parties fell into their internecine infighting in September 2000. Nizamettin Tas, a member of the PKK's presidential council, charged that Iran was supporting the PUK in its current fight against the PKK in an attempt to force the PKK back into Turkey, where it would renew violence and chaos in Iran's regional rival.⁷⁷ Others argued that Iran was supporting the PKK because it disapproved of the PUK's newly established cooperation with Turkey.⁷⁸ During his visit to Ankara in January 2001, Turkish sources declared that they "appreciate[d] the fact that Talabani [was] under intensive pressure from Iraq and Iran for his cooperation with Turkey."⁷⁹ Immediately after Talabani's return home, a high-ranking Iranian delegation visited the PUK leader for discussions about the talks he had just held in Turkey. Clearly, Iran was concerned with the situation.⁸⁰

Iran had long been dismayed over the implications to its own security involved in the continuing Turkish military interventions into northern Iraq in pursuit of the PKK. This concern deepened in 1995 when Turkey's president, Suleyman Demirel, briefly proposed a change in Turkey's border with Iraq in favor of Turkey, a proposal that potentially raised Turkey's irredentist claim to northern Iraq from the 1920s.⁸¹ The renewal of heavy KDP-PUK fighting in August 1996, which saw Turkey and Iran support opposing sides, exacerbated these tensions. An adviser to Iran's president denounced "the covetous eyes of the Ankara statesmen, which are focused on the oil resources in northern Iraq."⁸²

Accordingly, Iran also condemned the so-called Ankara peace process to end the KDP-PUK fighting (see above), as an attempt by Turkey's U.S. ally to establish "a spying base and springboard to carry out its malicious schemes in the region"⁸³ and, in a reference to Turkey's new alliance with Israel, "a concerted effort [by] the US and the Zionist regime...to create another Israel in the Kurdish areas."⁸⁴ The PKK saw the joint effort of the United States and Turkey that established a peace monitoring force of local Turkomen as a Turkish attempt "to create another Cyprus in the region"⁸⁵ and a Turkish "occupationist force."⁸⁶ In these characterizations, the PKK was clearly espousing a position similar to that held by Iran.

The May 1997 Turkish military intervention into Iraqi Kurdistan in pursuit of the PKK quickly led to yet a new low in Turkish-Iranian relations. Iran denounced the Turkish action "as not only a violation of all international laws but [to] the sovereign rights and territorial integrity of the

Iraqi Muslim nation.”⁸⁷ Turkey also accused Iran of not only supplying bases, transportation, medicines, hospitals, and uniforms for the PKK but also of supplying S-7 heat-seeking missiles that the PKK, in an unprecedented action, used to down two Turkish helicopters over northern Iraq.⁸⁸ Thus, when the PUK and the PKK fell out with one another in the fall of 2000, their infighting also involved an old and continuing Turkish-Iranian rivalry for influence in the region.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis of Kurdish disunity and infighting through a historical perspective gives useful background to current examples and vividly illustrates the famous French saying that the more it changes, the more it stays the same. However, the continuing problems of Kurdish disunity and the Kurds’ stunted sense of nationalism are not unique. In his iconoclastic analysis of the development of French nationalism, for example, Eugen Weber documented how most rural and village inhabitants of France did not think of themselves as members of the French nation as late as 1870 or even up to the eve of World War I.⁸⁹ As much as 25 percent of the population could not even speak French, while half the people considered it a foreign language. Indeed, even today, the *langue d’oc* survives as Provençal with some ten million speakers in southern France. The *langue d’oïl* of the northern Paris region gradually developed into modern French. Related dialects of each still persist as patois in some rural areas.

Despite the conventional view that the French were among the oldest nations in Europe, much of her population had yet to be truly integrated well into the nineteenth century. With the partial exception of the areas north and east of Paris, the typical French village remained physically, politically, and culturally isolated. As one nineteenth-century French observer put it: “Every valley is still a little world that differs from the neighboring world as Mercury does from Uranus. Every village is a clan, a sort of state with its own patriotism.”⁹⁰ To the majority of its inhabitants, the Jacobin model of a centralized, monolingual French nation-state remained a dream.

The similarity to the current Kurdish situation could not be more apparent. Weber’s findings suggest that if the now-prevalent sense of French nationhood had not penetrated into the psyches of the rural masses more than a hundred years after scholars had pronounced it to be in full bloom, then today’s fractured Kurdish nationalism and its problem of disunity and infighting should not be so surprising. In time, like French nationalism,

it may yet develop into a united Kurdish nationalism shed of its incessant divisions.

Furthermore, the persisting profusion of separate Kurdish dialects — Kurmanji, Sorani, Dimili (Zaza), and Gurani, among others — that is often blamed in part for the problem of Kurdish disunity is not unique. Two principal divisions of the German language still persist as *Hochdeutsch* (High German) and *Plattdeutsch* (Low German). The former is recognized as standard German. There are also two official forms of Norwegian: *bokmal* (book language) or *riksmal* (national language), and *nynorsk* (new Norwegian) or *landsmal* (country language). Modern Greek, too, has two different versions, a demotic or popular literary style, and a reformed classical style. What would help further develop Kurdish nationalism and, therefore, possibly moderate the dilemma of Kurdish divisiveness would be for one of the Kurdish dialects to emerge as the standard Kurdish language.

Kurdish divisions are perpetuated, however, because Kurdistan remains part of already existing states. An independent Kurdistan would threaten the territorial integrity of such states as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. No state on earth will support a doctrine that sanctions its own potential destruction. Kurdish unity would only emerge if there were a major collapse of the existing state system in the contemporary Middle East. Thus, Kurdish disunity is reminiscent of the Polish plight between 1795 and 1919. It took the upheaval of World War I to shake loose a Polish state from the shackles of internal colonialism imposed by Germany, Austria, and Russia. Although the Gulf wars against Saddam Hussein and the Syrian civil did result in the halting, defective emergence of rump, proto-Kurdish states in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria, only a total rerolling of the national dice that would follow another world war would be likely to lead to the creation of an independent pan-Kurdistan and Kurdish unity.

The predicament of Kurdish disunity is not primarily the fault of others, however. As detailed above, the Kurds have been victims of leaders guilty of selfish partisanship and greed. The PUK, for example, points out how the KDP justified Barzani's reasons for not joining the Kurdish regional administration created in 1992: "We shall not allow the sacredness and greatness of Leader Barzani to be disgraced" by "the questioning, criticisms, innuendoes and daily abuse" that would be entailed in the parliamentary process.⁹¹ Barzani himself has admitted that in part, at least the infighting, "has to do... with the question of hegemony."⁹² As one NGO worker in northern Iraq put it: "Barzani thinks he's the true leader of the Kurds. So does Talabani and they'll fight each other down to their last peshmerga to prove themselves right."⁹³ Although Barzani and Talabani subsequently

managed to achieve some unity in the guise of the KRG, it shockingly collapsed following the failed advisory referendum on independence held on September 25, 2017. So far, no Kurdish leader has proven able to make the transition from tribal or provincial warlord to a true national statesman. Since the Kurds lack a Bismarck or Garibaldi, they remain divided, as did Germany and Italy before their unification.

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