



“The Reality of Intra-Kurdish Rivalry Undermines the Notion of Pan-Kurdish Nationalism”

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I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of Kurdish self-determination has been and continues to be *en vogue* within the ranks of Western liberal and left-leaning circles. And, true, it seems like a cause that is easy and uncontroversial for these circles to get ten-fingers-and-ten-toes behind; the Kurds have, throughout history, faced an onslaught of persecution, guised in various forms: attempts at linguistic and cultural extirpation; the abrogation of fundamental political rights; colonial domination; ethnic cleansing; a genocidal campaign. Affronts to the conscience. Still, however great the Western liberal will, though, it belies the reality that intra-Kurdish rivalry undermines the concept of self-determination – because, in the liberal aggrandisement concerning the very notion of ‘Kurdistan’, there is a fundamental misapprehension about what the ‘self’ is.

There is no Kurdistan in the Westphalian sense (nor has there ever been). Therefore, discussions around Kurdish nationalism must ultimately start with the thankless task of airing difficult toponymical and typological contentions – often irreconcilable. In examining the labelling of any such entity, one inevitably succumbs to the difficulties of “the biases, intellectual and political, of their originators.”¹

Kurdistan (whether a state, a region or an area) is a social construct of political actors throughout history – in this sense, it is unexceptional.² Kurds, having been largely sub-state actors, found themselves “at the margins of, or within several early empires”, thus ancient Kurdish history “comes largely from the accounts of their neighbouring cultures or subjugators.”³ Indeed, the earliest examples of ethnically delineated self-governance for the Kurds appear in Arab historian writings about 10th Century principalities⁴ – but even these territories were enclaved, truncated and, whilst being ruled by Kurds, were not united under a Kurdistan umbrella. Modern conceptions of Kurdish frontiers broadly relate to the Treaty of Sèvres.⁵ Whilst unratified (and shelved) due to the impromptu Turkish War of Independence, territorial provisions were carved out roughly along the lines of today’s Kurdish population

¹ Agnew, John, ‘Regions on the Mind Does Not Equal Regions of the Mind’, *Progress in Human Geography* 23/1 (March 1999), p. 95

² See the context of European region-building in Browning, Christopher S., ‘The Region-Building Approach Revisited: The Continued Othering of Russia in Discourses of Region-Building in the European North’, *Geopolitics* 8/1 (Spring 2003), p. 48

³ O’Shea, Maria T., *Trapped Between the Map and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 65

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 68

⁵ There are some glaring contentious points though, such as the inclusion of today’s Arab-heavy Mosul.

distribution. The *Institute Kurde* in Paris has a map (with the caveat that “all maps are an abstraction of reality”)⁶ claiming the following as Kurdish: south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northern Syria, western Iran.⁷

Ultimately, the laborious task of demarcating Kurdistan’s borders is an apt preface for examining the incompatibility of pan-Kurdish nationalism and intra-Kurdish rivalry: if there is no consensus on what Kurdistan is, how can there possibly be consensus over who will rule over it? I will approach the topic of intra-Kurdish rivalry from two perspectives: first, I will examine the factionalism at an inter-national level, vis-à-vis the competition between the Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian Kurds; second, I will zoom in to look at the role played at an intra-national level, meaning how even rival factions (especially in Iraq) within the aforementioned nations naturally play an undermining role in pan-Kurdish nationalism.

II. INTER-NATIONAL RIVALRY

This section will examine the conflict between Kurds in the four Kurdish regions of Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey, from a familiar triptych of symbiotic perspectives: socio-cultural, political and economic.

In terms of socio-cultural rivalry, the most notable distinction between Kurds is language. Kurdish broadly comes in two flavours: Kurmanji (Latin script, prominent in Turkey and Syria) and Sorani (Perso-Arabic script, prominent in Iraq and Iran). The development of written Kurdish is a fairly recent phenomenon,⁸ however spoken Kurdish “has often been an indicator of divergence rather than political unity.”⁹ Whilst Sorani and Kurmanji are “easily recognisable as a form Kurdish”, they are simultaneously “almost entirely mutually incomprehensible.”¹⁰ This fissure is perhaps to only be amplified the longer the Kurds live under quartered governance, as the lingua franca of the host nation (i.e. Turkish, Arabic and Farsi) garners creeping influence in common parlance. All the above goes without mentioning the local dialect continuum, which demonstrates varying degrees of mutual intelligibility.¹¹ Language matters, for Anderson, as its primacy in national identity-building stems from its ability to force

⁶ White, Paul, *Ethnic Differentiation among the Kurds: Kurmaci, Kizilbas and Zaza*, (JAIMES Vol. 2, No. 2, 1995), p. 18

⁷ O’Shea, Maria T., *Trapped Between the Map and Reality*, p. 157

⁸ Ibid. p. 134

⁹ Stansfield, Gareth R. V., *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 37

¹⁰ O’Shea, Maria T., *Trapped Between the Map and Reality*, p. 135

¹¹ Ibid. p. 134

“imagined communities,”¹² ergo the absence of Kurdish linguistic unity undermines the importance of language as a symbol of ethnic identity for the Kurds.¹³ Language is the low-hanging fruit for the Kurds “without resorting to criteria of territorial sovereignty”¹⁴ – and inter-national differences ultimately block even this.

Religious differences, whilst not as significant in and of themselves, are important because they draw a different axis from the linguistic (Syria-Turkey/Iraq-Iran): the Shi'a Iranian Kurds are in contention with the Sunni Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. Iranian Kurds have been prone to identify along religious cleavages rather than under a Kurdish umbrella in the past,¹⁵ with their relatively more acquiescent host government managing to even “mobilise them against the Kurdish nationalists.”¹⁶

Whilst socio-cultural issues have rarely and insubstantially entered the realm of armed confrontation between inter-national Kurds, the political divides do – whilst also adding to the complicated, incestuous nature of inter-national alliances and rivalries. An obvious starting point would be the 1992 deadly armed conflict between the dominant sub-state actor in Turkey, PKK, and the Iraqi Kurdish counterparts, a KDP/PUK alliance (IKF). The conflict ended in a quasi-surrender from PKK in the form of a ceasefire agreement, however the ink was barely dry when the PKK allied with the PUK in the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War of 1994-8, against the KDP. It was in that war that the KDP were supported by a military intervention from the Turkish military, the main enemy of PKK and Kurdish self-determination in Turkey. The Washington Agreement peace treaty co-signed by PUK and KDP marked another twist, in that PUK turned on PKK; the treaty denied the right for PKK to set up camps in northern Iraq.¹⁷ The temperamental nature of PKK and Iraqi Kurdish alliances in this period reflected the very cynical self-interest of each actor. At best, it demonstrated fraternity's descent to fratricide; at worst, it demonstrated an entirely expendable relationship based on convenience and strategy for political power-grabbing. Iraqi Kurdish alliances with the PKK may have been rational when they were in a weak position with little to lose, as was the case in the 1980s when dozens of insurgencies competed in Iraqi Kurdistan. As power consolidated around the Barzanis (KDP) and the Jalilis (PUK), the benefits of PKK alliance were outweighed by receipt of economic,

¹² Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 6-7.

¹³ Entessar, Nader, *Kurdish Ethnonationalism* (London and Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), p. 44

¹⁴ Aziz, Mahir, *The Kurds of Iraq: Nationalism and Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan*, (London & New York, NY: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2011), p. 50

¹⁵ Van Bruinessen, Martin, 'Religion in Kurdistan', *Kurdish Times*, 4 (Summer/Fall 1991), pp. 7-14

¹⁶ Van Bruinessen, Martin, 'Diversity and division among the Kurds', *Warreport, Bulletin of the Institute For War and Peace Reporting*, No. 47, November/December (1996), pp. 29-32

¹⁷ For a detailed timeline of the 1990s intra-Kurdish conflicts, see Černý, Hannes, *Iraqi Kurdistan, The PKK and International Relations: Theory and Ethnic Conflict*, (London: Routledge, 2017)

diplomatic and military capital from international actors, as a result of the Washington Agreement.

Such caprice has flourished recently in the Levant, too. In the wake of the Syrian Civil War and the rise-and-fall of IS, the resultant appetite for opportunism amongst Kurdish political actors is causing further entanglements between inter-national Kurds. Iraqi *peshmerga* forces have come into conflict with Yezidi PKK proxies in the Sinjar region of northern Iraq,¹⁸ as PKK look to take control of a strategically important corridor to Syria¹⁹ that Iraqi Kurds also have eyes on, in a post-IS world. It is true that PKK and Syrian Kurdish forces (namely YPG/YPJ) are an example of a cross-border alliance, however there are two potential problems with this idea: either the alliance serves to highlight the conflict with the Iraqi Kurds, who have been allied with Turkey (who consider PKK and YPG to be terrorist groups); or, YPG is merely an extension of PKK²⁰ and cannot, therefore, be considered a true inter-national success. Indeed, the concept of *Rojava* is grounded more in the reality of 21st Century nation-building exercises by Ocalan-inspired YPG, than in any long-standing struggle for Syrian Kurdish self-determination.²¹

Finally, the economic sphere sees splits in pan-Kurdish unity. Again, this mainly plays out in the arena of Turkey-Iraqi Kurdish competition, with the most notable point of contention being the strong trading relationship that KRG enjoys with Turkey. It is estimated that oil exports have comfortably averaged over 500,000 barrels per day,²² with the majority of those going through Turkey – which consider PKK terrorists. Loyalty: for sale to the highest bidder.

The significant discount applied to KRG oil and gas exports is important in the division of Kurdish unity for a few reasons: the illegality – vis-à-vis the Federal Iraqi constitution – of autonomous deals means norm-flouting international trade partners are in short-supply; the geographic realities narrow the trade partners down further to neighbours (i.e. Iran and

¹⁸ 'Rival Kurdish Groups Clash In Iraq's Sinjar Region', *Al Jazeera Media Network*, 3 March 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/rival-kurdish-groups-clash-iraq-sinjar-region-170303071119811.html> (accessed 1 October 2017)

¹⁹ 'Kurdish Forces Enter Sinjar in Northern Iraq', *Deutsche Welle*, 13 November 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/kurdish-forces-enter-sinjar-in-northern-iraq/a-18847128> (accessed 1 October 2017)

²⁰ "The Middle East's Complex Kurdish Landscape", *Deutsche Welle*, 17 May 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/the-middle-east-complex-kurdish-landscape/a-38863844> (accessed 1 October 2017)

²¹ Traditionally, Kurdistan has been conceived of in Northern (*Bakurê*) and Southern (*Başûrê*) areas, with Western (*Rojava*) and even Eastern (*Rojhilatê*) being recent additions to the discourse – perhaps to conveniently divide along the borders of the four nations. Some evidence for this assertion can be found in looking at popularity of Google searches for the term *Rojava*, which suggests it was an extremely obscure term until (especially August) 2013. Google Trends, *Google*, <https://trends.google.co.uk/trends/explore?date=all&q=rojava> (accessed 1 October 2017)

²² 'How Iraq's Kurdish Independence Referendum Could Impact Oil Markets', *Bloomberg*, 20 September 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-20/iraq-s-kurds-seek-independence-what-impact-for-oil-markets> (accessed 1 October 2017)

Turkey); the mid-2014 oil price cratering means the bargaining power of Turkish and Iranian negotiators is higher still, as the “rentier state”²³ qualities of KRG ensure an overdependence on hydrocarbon revenues. This contrives to mean that KRG is likely to be acquiescent to the demands of the governments Turkey and Iran, who obviously oppose notions of Kurdish nationalism within their borders. Simply put, Kurdistan already “has few economic and communication links between its parts”²⁴ – such trends from the KRG will only serve to atomise the inter-national economies further still.

III. INTRA-NATIONAL RIVALRY

This section will view the notion of Kurdish discord through the prism of intra-national rivalry, with a focus on Kurdish Iraq owing to KRG most resembling an independent nation state out of the four national parts of Kurdistan.

It is impossible not to touch upon the aforementioned Iraqi Kurdish Civil War of 1994-8 when looking at the state of intra-national conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan today, as it was the most violent manifestation of intra-national factionalism. It is tempting to see the subsequent Washington Agreement as a panacea for KDP/PUK contention however the realities of today do not show an entirely united Iraqi Kurdish front. I will focus on KRG politics, the military and the economy to support this theory.

First, Iraqi Kurdistan is split down tribal lines in terms of governance: KDP and PUK rule in a coalition, with Erbil/Dohuk being the former’s territory and Sulaymaniyah (traditionally)²⁵ being the latter’s; operationally, the two territories mostly function autonomously. It is true that KRG has been a success story in the region, as a relative oasis of peace, stability and growth. However, that is probably *despite Kurdish disunity* rather than *because of Kurdish unity*, as the political construct was largely guided by foreign hands (Washington Agreement, Iraq Liberation Act, US divvying up responsibilities between the Barzani [KRG President] and Talabani [Iraqi Presidency] clans).

Second, and following on from the point of party political schisms, the military of KRG – the feted *peshmerga* – are not actually a unified force. It is estimated that ~40,000 *peshmerga* fighters form the apolitical RGBs, however the remaining ~75% of the *peshmerga* forces are

²³ Mills, Robin, ‘Under the Mountains: Kurdish Oil and Regional Politics’, *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, WPM63, (Oxford: OIES, 2016), p. 31

²⁴ O’Shea, Maria T., *Trapped Between the Map and Reality*, p. 2

²⁵ The Gorran Movement for Change, founded in 2009, has proved a somewhat disruptive political entrant; it commands the second most seats in the Iraqi Kurdish Parliament, however it is side-lined from governance and superseded by the PUK due to the coalition government.

halved somewhat evenly along party political lines.²⁶ Indeed, the politburos of each party have occasionally used their respective *peshmerga* brigades against opposing Iraqi Kurdish factions, such as the KDP-allied brigades firing on Gorran protestors in KDP-hostile Sulaymaniyah in 2015.²⁷ Moreover, veteran *peshmerga* commander Mohammed Haji Mahmoud clarified that "despite ... a united front, when the political parties call them back, they will go back to the respective parties,"²⁸ – probably reflecting the mutual suspicion due to perceived betrayals in the Baathist mid-1990s.²⁹ Military inaction also shows the lack of unity within KRG, in the case of the Iraqi *peshmerga* retreat from Sinjar³⁰ – allowing IS domination of the Yezidis; in spite of 'Kurdishness' and international support for the manumitting of the Yezidis, the "us and them" mentality prevailed even here.

Finally, the economic sphere matters at an intra-national level as well as an inter-national level, when explaining the factionalism. Clientelism, patronage and nepotism are the modi operandi of the KRG. So, for example, the *peshmerga* brigade salaries "are paid through partisan commanders rather than apolitical ministries" and thus "soldiers are directly connected to and controlled by the main political parties rather than by state institutions."³¹ Finally, the internal petro-politics of KRG also pose an impediment to Kurdish unity, insofar as KDP's long domination over the oil portfolio has led to it "increasing its powers versus ... PUK," whilst the recent war spoils of PUK-dominated Kirkuk (and its super giant oil field) may upset the traditional petro-economic hegemony of the KDP (hence KDP attempts to slow the functionality of Kirkuk oil operations).³²

²⁶ PUK's 70th Brigade = ~58,000 troops; and the KDP's 80th Brigade = ~58,000 troops; apolitical RGB = ~42,000. 'Over 150,000 enlisted as *peshmerga* troops in Kurdistan Region, official data shows', *Rudaw*, 3 April 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/03042017> (accessed 1 October 2017)

²⁷ 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Ruling Party Forces Fire on Protesters', *Human Rights Watch*, 21 October 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/21/iraqi-kurdistan-ruling-party-forces-fire-protesters> (accessed 1 October 2017)

²⁸ 'Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces', *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*, 16 December 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/12/16/kurdistan-s-political-armies-challenge-of-unifying-peshmerga-forces-pub-61917>

²⁹ "The KDP's temporary alliance with Saddam Hussein to expel the PUK from Erbil in 1996 is still remembered as a grave betrayal; conversely, many KDP members recall being driven out of other territories by the PUK." Ibid.

³⁰ 'UN report: 'Islamic State' is committing genocide against Iraq's Yazidis', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 June 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/un-report-islamic-state-is-committing-genocide-against-iraqs-yazidis/a-19335619> (accessed 1 October 2017)

³¹ "Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces", *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*

³² Mills, Robin, 'Under the Mountains: Kurdish Oil and Regional Politics', p. 31

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper has been to persuade that the Kurdish nationalist cause lusted for by Podsnappian ‘Western Friends of the Kurds’ is not anchored in reality – a reality of competing self-interest amongst various sub-state actors. Nonetheless, I must concede that reality is malleable; throughout history, greater divisions than the Kurds possess have proved surmountable in the pursuit of unity and nationhood (e.g. India is more heterogenous in just about every conceivable category, whilst also lacking in common history and myth owing to its enormous scale). It is hard to find credence in arguments made by the likes of Pelletiere in 1991, that the Kurds are somehow “ungovernable” due to some sort of inherent bellicosity that submits to an inevitable inclination for tribalism.³³ The unstoppable force of urbanisation has proved, is proving and will continue to prove a tool for the destruction of tribalism – whether it is a wrecking ball or a chisel is immaterial to the eventuality

I have argued that the KRG demonstrates the myth of pan-Kurdish interest however I must also acknowledge that its very existence – however precarious, threadbare, artificial or externally constructed – *is* an example of intra-Kurdish unity! Research suggest that intra-ethnic conflicts are more probable when there is a proliferation of sub-state actors,³⁴ so perhaps the KDP-PUK (-Gorran) consolidation under the KRG umbrella bodes well for a trend of unity. The intra-KRG autonomous factions are also not obstacles to the idea of a nation state in and of themselves, as mature federalist experiments (e.g. US, Canada, Belgium) show.

The recent Kurdish Independence Referendum in KRG has shown a rare united front from the Kurds on the point of nationalism. Interestingly, the unity is seemingly in the face of rationale and pragmatism; the referendum is near-universally seen as a huge, unnecessary risk and an exercise in masochism by KRG – not just for Iraqi Kurds, but there are suggestions of government crackdowns on Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iran and Syria as a consequence of KRG’s brazen manoeuvres. And, yet, there is universal support for the cause from the various Kurdish sub-state actors, across the four nations – something history tells us, I have argued, is usually thrown aside when factional self-interest is at risk. Perhaps the support is just superficial, as it often has been? Or, perhaps, there is a genuine (if grossly misguided) sense of torschlusspanik gripping Kurdish leadership, to seize a unique opportunity for pan-

³³ Pelletiere, Stephen, *The Kurds and their Agas: An Assessment of the Situation in Northern Iraq*, (Philadelphia, PN: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1991), p. 1

³⁴ Gallagher, Kathleen Cunningham, et al., “Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes”, *Journal Of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 56, Issue 1, pp. 67-93 (1 February 2012)

nationalism in a political vacuum? Whatever the motivations, the reality is worth mentioning for its exceptional nature.

It would also be a worthy investigation to try and see if the Kurdish leaderships (e.g. Barzani, Talabani, Ocalan etc.) are actually reflective of their subjects, as – given the centralisation of power within small clans, if not entirely with a single leader – there is no way to say if the rival-driven policy actions of the leaderships are purely means for emolument rather than anything ideological. My personal travels in Kurdish Iraq, Turkey and Iran linger over this assertion inasmuch as I experienced anecdotal compatibility of differences amongst the Kurds with pan-Kurdish identity (especially around the anniversary of the Al-Anfal attacks in Halabja).

Irrespective of 'potential' for Kurdish unity, I hope to have conveyed that the present situation offers a grim prospect for any such endeavour. The even greater-than-usual tumult in the region is *not* providing a unique opportunity for pan-Kurdish nationalism. The co-operation between inter-national actors in Kobane, for example, must be seen in the context of exception rather than trend; as the campaign against IS begins to wind down, we are already seeing familiar power plays for territory, natural resources and political capital through transparently opposing motivations. The Kurds may not be eternally ungovernable but that will not stop intra-national and inter-national rivalries continuing to play out in the region for the foreseeable future.

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VI. ABBREVIATIONS

IKF – The Iraqi Kurdistan Front

IS – The Islamic State

KDP – The Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG – The Kurdistan Regional Government

PKK – The Kurdistan Workers' Party

PUK – The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

RBG – The Regional Guard Brigade

UN – The United Nations

US – The United States

YPG – The People's Protection Units

YPJ – The Women's Protection Units