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## KURDISH ASPIRATIONS BETWEEN SELF-DETERMINATION AND GEOPOLITICS

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The battle against the Islamic State (IS, ISIL, Da'esh) in Syria and Iraq, as well as the escalation of violence in Turkey, have made the Kurds the centre of international attention. The media paint a picture of Kurdish unity which simply does not exist, nor is it likely to materialise in the foreseeable future. The factors working against it are the fragmentation of Kurdish territory across four countries (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria), the linguistic and ethnic differences characterising the Kurds, and, not least, their religious fractionalisation. Most detrimental to Kurdish interests, however, is their political disunity, rooted in ideology.

### Three Ideologies

The most important Kurdish organisations can be traced back to the following three ideologies: nationalism, Marxism, and Islamism. The Kurdish nationalists are strongest in northern Iraq, where they have established home rule in the Kurdistan Region, the government of which (KRG, Kurdistan Regional Government) is made up of the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), which work on securing what has been achieved and on a step-by-step emancipation from Baghdad, i.e. a state-building project. This is opposed by the revolutionary model espoused by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, now KCK, see below) which rejects any form of nationalism and views the foundation of a Kur-

dish nation state critically. Rather, a (utopian) model of 'democratic autonomy' is to be made reality, with which the PKK plans to fulfil the social and national aspirations of all Kurds as part of a Group of Communities in Kurdistan - KCK. The Kurdish Islamists have yet to present their own political model; they are either – in northern Iraq – a part of the state-building project dominated by the KDP and the PUK, or play – in south-east Turkey – a role at the local level as a Kurdish-Islamist party, underestimated by most observers. Finally, Turkish and Iraqi Kurds also play a certain role in the IS.

### Problems of Kurdish Politics

Even without ideological fault lines, Kurdish politics is faced with what seem to be

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intractable problems: the nation states suppressed the political and cultural organisations of their respective Kurdish minorities, or severely curtailed them, which, in some cases (Turkey, Iraq), went as far as attempted genocide. Regional powers manipulated and instrumentalised Kurdish organisations in order to undermine the governments of neighbour states; the same applies to the big powers. The logical result was the consolidation of militant groups to the detriment of Kurdish organisations and parties focused on civic initiatives and the rule of law, without providing the Kurdish population with increased security and prosperity. Internecine Kurdish wars (brakoji) for which no side is devoid of blame, were another consequence of the important role militant groups played in Kurdish politics. At the beginning of the 1980s, the PKK eliminated its Kurdish competition, and in the 1990s a civil war between PUK and KDP nearly destroyed the Kurdish area of home rule in northern Iraq.

Despite this, the rule still applies that only those Kurdish parties have political clout which boast their own militia (guerilla, Peshmerga). Even the attempt by the West to transform the PUK and KDP party militias (Peshmerga) into a Kurdish military has produced little result. This is even more surprising, as the creation of a unified Kurdish armed force should be in the Kurds' self-interest. Independent of, and in competition with, the Peshmerga, the PKK supports its own guerrilla, based in Iraq and active especially in Turkey, Syria, and Iran. The organisation and activities of both Peshmerga and PKK are relatively well known. This is less the case with militant Islamists whose activities are shrouded in obscurity; the only thing known about the groups active in Turkey is that in the past few years they set up a new, armed group whose tradition goes back to Hizbullah, an organisation active in the 1990s. With the Kurdish militant Islamists in Iraq the legacy of Ansar al Islam looms large, a group connected to Al-Qaeda at the begin-

ning of the new millennium. There are currently no reliable data available concerning the number and affiliations of Kurdish IS fighters, numbering only a couple of hundred, according to unconfirmed estimates.

At the international level, all important Kurdish groups have been listed as terrorist organisations. This also applies to renowned parties such as the KDP and PUK, which cooperated with the West at intelligence and, subsequently, political levels. From the point of view of the big powers, however, this was a case of *realpolitik*, from which no right to a state can be derived. Even Articles 62-64 of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), regarded in Kurdish circles as a broken promise of a Kurdish state, were, at best, statements of intent, which became obsolete following the settlement with Turkey in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Even the short-lived Republic of Mahabad (1945), supported by the Soviets, was soon sacrificed by Moscow to overriding strategic interests. Only in 2003, as part of the Iraq invasion, i.e. following decades of cooperation between the USA, GB, and the Iraqi Kurds, did an international document mention the Kurds for the first time.

The changing strategic circumstances provided also the PKK with greater freedom of action. Thus, beginning in 2005 at the latest, the organisation set up new parties and militias in Syria and Iran, and strengthened its underground structure in Turkey, with the aim of making 'democratic autonomy' a reality. This aim was doggedly pursued by the leadership in the Kandil Mountains, irrespective of peace talks with Turkey. These ideas, however, were first implemented in Syria, where, from 2012 onward and in the course of the civil war, the PYD, a PKK-offshoot, managed to push back the regime's influence.

### **Escalation**

The establishment of a PKK-dominated entity along the Syrian-Turkish border was

alarming for Ankara, whose Syria policy pursued two goals: toppling Assad and bringing the Muslim Brotherhood to power, as well as frustrating the establishment of a PKK power base in northern Syria. In Turkey itself, President Erdoğan secretly negotiated with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, and expected the pro-Kurdish HDP to support his constitutional changes, something the party refused to do, however. The collapse of the negotiations coincided with the 2015 Turkish election campaign and resulted in the long-feared confrontation between the Turkish security establishment and the PKK's underground forces in the towns and cities. The big political loser in this is the HDP, which, following its succès d'estime in the June elections with 13,12%, only just managed to clear the 10% hurdle in the November ballot. Since then, its political room for manoeuvre has been severely limited by both the PKK and the Turkish state. From autumn 2015 to spring 2016, heavy battles raged between Turkish security forces and various PKK militias in both urban and rural areas, with devastating results for the affected population, thousands of whom had to leave their homes.

First signs of an escalation in Turkey already appeared in autumn 2014, in the battle for the small Syrian town of Kobane. The struggle between the YPG (the PYD's militia) and its Marxist allies from Turkey on the one side and IS on the other politicised and polarised public opinion in Turkey. At that time, the political leadership in Ankara still hoped that the YPG and other PKK units would be obliterated in Kobane. That this did not happen was due to help from an unexpected side: US air support.

Since the appearance of IS, the USA has pursued a clear policy of containment, in which cooperation with local forces - Iraqi government troops, Peshmerga, and guerilla - plays a central role. The enhanced status of both PYD and YPG, whose PKK affiliation is well known, can also be read as an expres-

sion of American irritation vis-à-vis Turkey.

When talking about cooperation with "The Kurds", it must always be made clear whether what is meant is the PKK or the KRG. International politics has reacted insofar as extensive arms shipments were sent to the Peshmerga in 2014, with the aim of strengthening them in their fight against IS. In other words: Western policy towards the Kurds remains subordinate to other strategic goals (i.e. fighting IS) and has not considered Kurdish aspirations in any way. The importance of the Kurdish factor can, however, no longer be denied: the weakness of the nation states since 2003, the political cooperation of Western states with Kurdish organisations, which has been going on for decades, as well as the numerous Kurdish and pro-Kurdish lobbies in Europe and the USA make a Western Kurdish policy seem indispensable.

In this, European priorities have to be differentiated from American priorities: due to geographic proximity, the refugee problem, and the ongoing accession process, the question of the Kurds in Turkey comes first for the EU, followed by Syria and Iraq. In contrast to this, American policy vis-à-vis the Kurds has Baghdad as its origin and focuses on fighting IS, as well as its relationship with Turkey. This means that the following deductions and recommendations can be made:

1. *Turkey:* European politicians and governments have made repeated critical comments concerning the status of Kurds in Turkey, yet contributed little towards a solution to the problem. As a rule, they have taken sides (pro-Turkey or pro-Kurds) and thus undermined their own credibility. And yet it would suffice vis-à-vis both the European as well as Turkish public to condemn the brutality of the Turkish security forces as well as the unscrupulous stunts of the PKK/KCK. This would also make

the voices and arguments of those Turkish intellectuals heard again who were silenced for political reasons.

2. *Turkey*: one of the reasons for the collapse of the peace talks was the realisation that both sides understood completely different things by autonomy and federalism - PKK supporters, for example, expected the establishment of security forces of their own, while Turkey demanded that their arms be laid down. Here, two elements must be clarified: the wide field of cultural autonomy, which especially envisages that the mother tongue be used in schools, as well as the reform of the security forces. These are two fundamentally different processes which have to be instigated from the outside. In this, the complex terminology must first be clarified, and the best practices developed in the international protection of minorities introduced into the debate. If supported and fostered by politicians, this task can be accomplished by the world of academe (institutes, think tanks).
3. *Syria*: Concerning Syria, the US has not only created political faits accomplis through its support of the YPG and the PYD in order to fight IS, but has also indirectly recognised the home-rule area of Rojava. This was done, however, without having included the Syrian Kurds in a possible post-war order for Syria. So, following Turkish pressure, the PYD has still not been invited to the Geneva peace talks. This produces the first political compromise the international community must demand from the Syrian Kurds: their strict non-interference in Turkey. In return, there could be further political reevaluation, for example through official recognition of the Rojava as a Syrian administrative district, as well as economic aid.
4. *Iraq*: The Iraqi Kurds have the longest and most intensive experience of home rule. Hopes for an independent Kurdish state are highest with them, something the European governments and the US must take into consideration. It was they, after all, who fuelled Kurdish hopes by their reevaluation of Erbil. However, social tensions are dramatically increasing in the KRG and are threatening the fragile stability. There is also a political impasse between the parties, resulting in political standstill and developments which are highly questionable from a democratic point of view. In general, the KRG's administrative structures are still very weak and dependent on the political parties. Overcoming these weaknesses requires a big reform of the KRG's security, administrative, and justice sectors, which, realistically, can only be conducted by the USA and Europe.
5. The points mentioned require that Europe and the US intensify their political and military commitment in the region in the long term - with uncertain outcome. This is because "the Kurds" can no longer be ignored as a political factor despite their political disunity, and because inaction is no political option, as has been proven by the West's activities up to now.

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