



Kurdish report

March 15, 2016

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The Kremlin's Kurdish Card

by Evangelos Diamantopoulos

The scattered Kurdish population offers Russia different strands of influence in the Middle East and a significant lever of pressure on its latest rival, Turkey. During the 2000s Russia avoided exploiting its ties with the Kurds in order to maintain good relations with Ankara, Damascus and Tehran. Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had even agreed to help each other on the thorny issues of Chechnya and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).¹ However, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Moscow proclaimed itself a defendant of minorities in the Middle East and sought to develop its ties with the Kurds who appeared to be one of the few forces on the ground who could defeat ISIS. From a Russian point of view, the Kurds represent a secular, democratic and moderate Sunni force which is increasingly important to the fight against the Islamic State and the Syrian chessboard in general.

The free-fall in Russian-Turkish relations, following the downing of a Russian military jet by Turkish fighters, came during the same period with the collapse of Ankara's peace process with the PKK. Russia is well aware that the Kurdish issue is Turkey's weak spot and rushed to further promote its relations with the Kurds. Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of Turkey's pro-Kurdish Peoples'

Democratic Party (HDP), was formally invited in Moscow last December from where he castigated the downing of the Russian Su-24 jet.² In addition, the Russians stepped up their support for the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party (PYD) and its military wing the People's Protection Units (YPG). Moscow finds it unreasonable that the Kurds of the Rojava region were kept out of the Geneva peace talks and pushes for their participation in future diplomatic negotiations. For Russian policymakers, not only the Kurds of Syria weaken the capacity of Turkey to support rebel groups but their military victories work to the advantage of the Assad regime as well. Furthermore, Russia tries to balance Washington's influence on Syrian Kurds even though the empowerment of them in order to defeat the Islamic State on the battlefield is one of the few things the Russians and the Americans can agree upon in Syria. Thus, it was no surprise that most of the interested parties (USA, Russia, UN) have called Turkey, in various tones, to show restraint after its recent bombardments against Kurdish YPG forces operating in Northern Syria.³

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Another important evidence of the strengthening of ties between Russia and the Syrian Kurds is the opening, with much publicity, of a representative office in Moscow last month. The Democratic Autonomous Administration of Rojava (West Kurdistan's government, Syria) described the opening of its first representation office outside Kurdistan as a historic move.⁴ However, the Russian Foreign Ministry was cautious not to grant the office an official embassy or consulate status but rather an NGO one in order to avoid disturbing Damascus.⁵ Hence, the interests of Syrian and Iraqi nationals will continue to be advocated officially by their respective embassies. In a clear sign of their increasing importance, the Rojavan authorities plan to open similar offices in London, Berlin, Washington and some Arab countries in the near future. Time will show how far the Russian support for the Kurds will go but meanwhile Turkish officials should keep in mind an old Russian proverb: "If you invite a bear to dance, it's not you who

decides when the dance is over. It's the bear."

FOOTNOTES

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How the Kurdish Factor strains Turkish - Iranian Relations

by Iris Pappa

Numbering some 30 million, Kurds, the largest ethnic stateless minority, inhabit a rapidly changing and volatile region that lies mostly within the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In the current fragile balance of power in the Middle East, the Kurdish factor constitutes once again a crucial aspect in the regional interstate relations, due to the noticeable Kurdish participation in the Syrian conflict. Iran and Turkey, two of the most important players in the region, have maintained during the last decade cooperative relations, but the continuing conflict in Syria seems to stretch the limits of their cooperation.

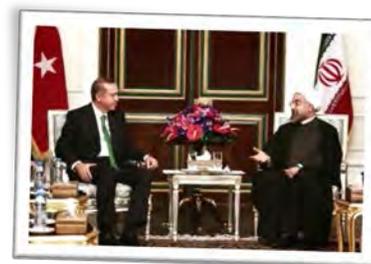
The fact that both countries have large Kurdish minorities on their ground has led, in the past, Turkey and Iran to share intelligence in an attempt to combat the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Party of Free

Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) so as to prevent a possible emergence of an independent state; but due to "the growing strains over Syria, intelligence cooperation has been significantly cutback since the end of 2011."¹ The political rivalry between them over the Syrian conflict (Iran's support to the Assad regime against Turkey's support to Sunni insurgents) and the following cutback in their intelligence cooperation over the Kurdish issue, led to the gradual deterioration in their relations.

Since the end of 2011, the Kurdish factor turned from a shared security interest into a means for Iran to put some pressure to Turkey and keep it out from Syria. Iran, back in September of 2011, reached an agreement with the PJAK, in which the latter agreed to end its armed activities in the region, and started turning "a blind eye to PKK activity along the Turkish - Iranian border,"² while Turkey, on the other hand, agreed to install NATO's anti-ballistic missile system on its soil so as to prevent any potential attack from Iran. Turkey's ability to combat PKK attacks gradually decreased and as a result there was an upsurge of PKK violence which, according to Turkey, is still fueled by the Iranian policy.

In the summer of 2015, Turkey started launching strikes against ISIS and PKK while recently it renewed its bombardments against the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria; actions that have been criticized and

characterized as a strategic mistake by Iranian officials who grab lately every opportunity to present themselves as the protectors of the Kurds in the region. More particular as President Rouhani stated during his visit at Kurdistan Province in Iran after the nuclear deal: "Iran protects Erbil and Baghdad just as it protects Iranian Kurdistan. Without Iran's help Erbil and Baghdad would be in the hands of terrorist groups right now."³ Undoubtedly, this new Iranian approach over



the Kurdish issue raises questions regarding the reasons behind this policy shift. As Israeli scholar Michael Tanchum argues: "a Kurdish-Iranian alignment would provide Tehran with more widespread influence in Iraq and Syria, fundamentally altering the region's geopolitical chessboard {...} while it would turn Tehran into an influential force across a quarter of Turkey's territory."⁴

Whether a Kurdish - Iranian alignment, however, is truly taking root remains to be seen in the near future. For the moment Iran

sees Kurdish groups as a means of putting pressure on Turkey in the wider struggle in Syria, where Turkey and Iran have conflicting interests. ■

FOOTNOTES

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Southern Kurdistan: from autonomy to incorporation, 1918-1925

by Charitini Petrodaskalaki



The political future of Southern Kurdistan, or else the Vilayet of Mosul of the Ottoman Empire, after the latter's dissolution, was uncertain until 1925. The autonomous Kurdish entity of 1918-1919 was short-lived, although Britain recognized in principle the national aspirations of the Kurdish people, and provisions for a Kurdish state were declared in the Treaty of Sevres. However, the emergence of Kemalist Turkey, with claims over the Vilayet, further destabilized the region, and in 1925 it was decided that Southern Kurdistan should be part of Iraq.

The Kurds initially saw the British advance on the Vilayet of Mosul favorably, and cooperated with them in order to free themselves from Ottoman rule; the desire for autonomy and self-rule was evident among the Kurds who believed the declarations of the Allies for self-determination of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire. A Kurdish government had already been formed in Sulaimaniya with Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji elected as its head. As the British were in no position to make military or financial commitments, but needed Kurdish consolidation to secure their interests, they

chose to rule indirectly through advisers and to recognize Sheikh Mahmud's authority.¹ Therefore, by the end of the First World War, at the British-administered Vilayet of Mosul, two systems were in place: the autonomous entity around Sulaimaniya, and the areas under direct British rule. In addition, assurances were given by Britain in 1918 that the Kurds would not come under an Arab government against their will.²

Problems soon emerged; the Kurds considered the autonomous entity as the nucleus of a future, independent Kurdistan, and although tribal and clan disputes prevented the acceptance of one single leader, many areas expressed their wish to merge with the Kurdish entity.³ Sheikh Mahmud attempted to expand his control, and as the British decided to remove him, a widespread anti-British revolt was sparked; his declaration of an independent Kurdistan led to his exile, and the era of Kurdish autonomy came to an end.

The end of the revolt did not pacify the situation; on the contrary insecurity, disorder and low-scale insurgency, mainly from

Mahmud's supporters, continued. Despite the declaration in the Treaty of Sevres of an autonomous Kurdish state, the Vilayet of Mosul came under the direct control of the British High Commissioner in Iraq in 1920. To make things worse for the stability of the region, Turkish influence reemerged, as Kemalist Turkey claimed the Vilayet for itself.

In 1922, the British were forced to bring back Sheikh Mahmud, in an attempt to bring order into the chaos and curb Turkish influence.⁴ Within a month of his return he proclaimed himself King of Kurdistan and focused on building a Kurdish state. The national symbols that he was using, such as the Kurdish flag, were the source of his legitimacy. In the meantime, the Mosul question was excluded from the Lausanne negotiations, and was to be discussed between Britain and Turkey directly. In 1923, British troops occupied Sulaimaniya and other cities until reaching a decision, thus ending Sheikh Mahmud's rule once again.

The League of Nations decided in 1925 to award the Vilayet of Mosul to Iraq, subject to

limited autonomy, namely Kurdish administrative personnel and Kurdish official language and education. By then the idea of an autonomous Kurdistan had been abandoned in order to appease Turkey, who did not wish for an unruly Kurdistan that would potentially threaten its security and territorial integrity.⁵ Thus, incorporation of Southern Kurdistan to Iraq seemed the only option. All this confirmed the de facto situation since the end of WWI: Ottoman Kurdistan was to be divided between Iraq, Syria and Turkey, despite the declared promises for respect of the Kurdish wish not to be subjected to Arab rule. ■

FOOTNOTES

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5. Sluglett, Peter, "The Kurdish Problem and the Mosul Boundary: 1918-1925," *Britain in Iraq: 1914-1932*, London: Ithaca Press, 1976
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Kurdish Women's Military Organization and Active Political Role

by Alik Sofianou

Amidst the violent and long-lasting Syrian civil war, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) fight against the Islamist rebel factions. The conflict erupted between the two groups in the city of Ras al-Ayn in 2013, where the Syrian Kurds attempted to take control of the areas that were formerly controlled and governed by the Islamists.

One thing that drew international attention though, besides the numerous casualties and the profound breach of hope and confidence for the future of Syria, was the rather determined and well-organized participation and resistance of the members of the Kurdish Women's Defense Units (YPJ). Specifically, YPJ is a Kurdish military organization that was formed in 2012 as the female brigade of the People's Protection Units militia.

The successful political involvement of women has a profound impact on the guarantees of the developmental plans and policies of a state in general and of a functioning government in particular. Many times, political participation is limited to men, while there are many women who are willing to take action and aim to change or criticize particular governments or policies that directly affect them in their societies.

On the one hand, the all-female militia takes part and fights against the Islamic State in Syria in order to protect the Kurdish populations from militants and on the other hand, these women are challenging the gender roles in the region.¹

Yet, the YPJ alongside the YPG are part of a general Kurdish freedom movement in which are both resisting and fighting against the Islamists in Syria and Iraq. The reconceptualization of freedom by the Kurdish movement is part of the larger impacts of the conflict.

The YPJ grew out of the Kurdish resistance movement and seeks to defend and protect the Kurdish population from attacks by both

the Islamist militants and the Syrian government. The group comprises of seven thousand volunteer fighters between the

ages of 18 to 40. This all-female group allegedly receives no funding from the international community or the Kurdish population or groups outside Syria. However, there is some information about YPJ and YPG

receiving twenty-four tons of small arms and ammunition along with ten tons of medical supplies from the U.S., and the Iraqi Kurdistan during the siege of Kobani.²

In other respects, the striking feature of this women's militant group is the ideology behind its formation. Notably, apart from the military protection they offer to the Kurdish population, the group decisively confronts traditional gender expectations and redefines the role of women in conflict in Syria. YPJ has been praised by many feminists and it is seen as an all-female initiative. The YPJ example mainly illustrates



the increasing interest of women around the world in the Kurdish women's movement.³

Erin Trieb, a photographer who documented the daily lives of these women, argues: "They want equality between women and men, and a part of why they joined was to develop and advance the perceptions about women in their culture, they can be strong and be leaders."⁴

Thus, Kurdish female fighters are contributing to the articulation of women's liberation. Namely, these women reject to comply with the premises of the global patriarchal capitalist nation-state order, they are breaking the taboo of women's militancy and they are also reclaiming legitimate self-defense. The group is fighting a brutal force not on behalf of the imperialist forces, but in order to create their own terms of liberation.⁵

At last, Dilar Dirik, a Kurdish activist and researcher stated: "Kurdish women have always been excluded from history-writing, but now their power has gone down in history. We are proud to belong to a generation of young Kurdish women, who will grow up



having witnessed and identified with such a glorious struggle. It is not an empty pride in meaningless things such as nationalism, but a pride in resisting and sacrificing oneself for fundamental principles, for life. We do not need any myths or romanticizations to justify our demands for freedom". ■

Kurdish pop music: An exercise in modernization

by Costas Faropoulos

The Kurds always had a distinct characteristic that differentiated them from other states of the Middle East, that is their commitment to a secular society, one driven by the rule of law and democracy. The efforts at state-building, both in Iraq and Syria, in the two de facto autonomous Kurdish regions, share a common characteristic: the attempt at creating a modern secular political culture. Especially, Rojava, the Kurdish region to the northern borders of Syria, is a prime example of this secularization process. Women have risen to leading positions, education is highly encouraged and democracy is practiced on the streets.¹ While the Kurdistan Regional Government of the Iraqi Kurdistan adheres to more traditional values, still the secularization trend is visible there too. Consequently, what would be labeled as "western values" in other parts of the Middle East, are very much exercised in Kurdistan.

A quite interesting part of this modernization process has been the emergence of a rich Kurdish pop culture, namely pop music. A new generation of Kurdish musicians, both in Kurdistan and in the diaspora, is contributing to the creation of a modern Kurdish national narrative. Having as a starting point the wealth of the musical tradition of Kurdistan (which also continues to be explored today by contemporary musicians, like Aynur and Sivan Perwen) these artists utilize it either by incorporating in it western musical elements, or by turning to a purely western musical style.

Pop star Helen Abdullah – known as "Helly Luv" - has made quite an impression in the last two years with her two videos, both filmed in Iraqi Kurdistan. While her music is typical western pop, she still sings in Kurdish and her videos are overly political, especially the second one titled "Revolution". Here we see

Helly Luv singing on top of a tank, amidst Kurdish fighters charging the enemy. Moreover, she has been very critical against ISIS in her interviews and has even received death threats, due to her light dressing in her videos.²

One of the most popular young Kurdish artists is Serhado, a hip hop artist who grew up in Sweden. He sings in Kurdish, and has implemented in his music traditional elements of Kurdish music, creating a unique blend of hip hop and traditional music. He is a strong advocate of the Kurdish struggle for independence, and this has made him quite unpopular with the Turkish authorities.³ In his song "Ez Kurdistan Im" ("I am Kurdistan") Sarhedo sings about Kurdistan and his longing for independence. He describes himself as "a prisoner, oppressed, detained in a cage", but also as "the country, the nation, the heart of a new sunrise".

Other examples of young Kurdish artists creating new, diverse music are musicians like Renas Miran, who mixes traditional music with house beats, Rapsan Belagat, a political hip hop artist, and also the band Adirjam, which plays a fusion of traditional music and rock/blues.⁴ A special mention must be made to the band Ferec, the most known Kurdish heavy metal band, a music genre not so popular in the Middle East.

If there is a common element to be found almost in all these Kurdish artists is the fact that they incorporate in their music the notions of homeland, nation and sacrifice, not very differently than poets and writers of the 19th century did in Europe. Either through video imagery, or lyrical content, or musical influence, these artists are contributing in the reshaping and formation of a contemporary Kurdish national identity. Either by reviving traditional Kurdish music, which is a political act in itself, or by rapping about Kurdish independence, these musicians are doing their part in shaping Kurdish society, and by extension the Kurdish nation. ■

FOOTNOTES

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