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# SCHRÖDINGER'S KURDS: TRANSNATIONAL KURDISH GEOPOLITICS IN THE AGE OF SHIFTING BORDERS

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H. Akin Ünver

*As the Middle East goes through one of its most historic, yet painful episodes, the fate of the region's Kurds have drawn substantial interest. Transnational Kurdish awakening—both political and armed—has attracted unprecedented global interest as individual Kurdish minorities across four countries, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, have begun to shake their respective political status quo in various ways. It is in Syria that the Kurds have made perhaps their largest impact, largely owing to the intensification of the civil war and the breakdown of state authority along Kurdish-dominated northern borderlands. However, in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran too, Kurds are searching for a new status quo, using multiple and sometimes mutually defeating methods. This article looks at the future of the Kurds in the Middle East through a geopolitical approach. It begins with an exposition of the Kurds' geographical history and politics, emphasizing the natural anchor provided by the Taurus and Zagros mountains. That anchor, history tells us, has both rendered the Kurds extremely resilient to systemic changes to larger states in their environment, and also provided hindrance to the materialization of a unified Kurdish political will. Then, the article assesses the theoretical relationship between weak states and strong non-states, and examines why the weakening of state authority in Syria has created a spillover effect on all Kurds in its neighborhood. In addition to discussing classical geopolitics, the article also reflects upon demography, tribalism, Islam, and socialism as additional variables that add and expand the debate of Kurdish geopolitics. The article also takes a big-data approach to Kurdish geopolitics by introducing a new geopolitical research methodology, using large-volume and rapid-processed entity extraction and recognition algorithms to convert data into heat maps that reveal the general pattern of Kurdish geopolitics in transition across four host countries.*

No historical period since the end of World War I has been so transformative for the Kurds as the events that unfolded during the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The civil war created multiple ripple effects across Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, disrupting the fragile social contract these countries had with their respective Kurdish populations. The subsequent disruption of the *status quo* allowed Kurds in four host countries to get opportunities in various degrees of independence, autonomy, or self-rule that they

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*Journal of International Affairs*, Spring/Summer 2016, Vol. 69, No. 2.

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would not have otherwise. Even though the process hasn't united the Kurds into a singular political consciousness of state formation, it has nonetheless united them in a centrifugal force away from their respective host countries, in varying intensities. How this centrifugal force interacts with its periphery, namely the countries that encircle the Kurdish habitus (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria), as well as within itself (relations between different Kurdish factions), presents us with certain continuities and historical patterns that allow us to predict and explain the Kurdish political behavior. These continuities and patterns, such as the Russo-Persian Battle of Ganja in 1804 and the subsequent opening up of the Kurdish homeland to Russia, the current Russian military presence in Syria, and the resultant influence of Moscow over the Syrian Kurds, all follow a certain geographic structure. Similar geopolitical continuities factor into how Turkey and Iran cooperated or conflicted in history, through almost exact geographic formations that form the Kurdish habitus.

It is this re-emergence of historical-geographic fault lines that cause state weakening in Syria and Iraq, which subsequently allows the Kurds to get chances in statehood that they otherwise did not have. Furthermore, the Syrian Civil War changed the conventional wisdom that a hypothetical Kurdish state would be landlocked, and be at the mercy and goodwill of its neighbors. The rapid expansion of Kurdish gains in northern Syria rendered the possibility of acquiring Mediterranean access more plausible than it has ever been in history, giving a once-in-a-lifetime chance for the carving-out of a Kurdistan with naval access. However, among the analytical toolbox of geopolitics, rising Kurdish youth demographics and the looming "youth bulge" are perhaps the most important determinants of the Kurds' future.

Geopolitics study how human and physical geography influences regional and international politics. In studying political power and decisions in relation to geographic space, geopolitics follow a deterministic view on human and political behavior. Whether it focuses on physical geography (mountains, rivers, terrain, climate) or human geography (demographics, population, identity), geopolitical study aims to offer a historical and predictive analysis of political units. Especially famous in late-19th century and through the Cold War, geopolitics has been an integral part of policy planning and forecasting. Mark Sykes (of the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1916) conducted one of the first formal anthropological studies of the Kurdish tribes in the Ottoman Empire, which formed the basis of his later geopolitical negotiations with French diplomat Francois Picot.<sup>1</sup> Since then, identifying and predicting Kurdish politics through the use of geographic designations has become somewhat of a regular practice.

It is perhaps one of the most fascinating paradoxes of world history that Mark Sykes went onto craft the agreement that would divide the Kurdish homeland across four countries and become the single-most spell of doom over Kurdish unification

attempts in the succeeding century. Still, the geopolitical approach towards studying the transnational Kurdish awakening may be criticized for various reasons. First, geopolitics may be interpreted as geographic determinism and thus be criticized as disregarding the impact of agency of the Kurdish question. Second, a geopolitical approach may be considered to be "buried in the 20th century," reflecting too much Cold War thinking to be useful in modern politics.

## GEOGRAPHY OF KURDS: A HISTORICAL BUFFER ZONE BETWEEN GREATER POWERS

Geography has been one of the most frequently used disciplines in studying the Kurds in history and contemporary politics. First, the Kurds themselves have self-identified through geographic designations such as mountains and rivers in their own literature and poetry. They have consciously used the mountains in history to exert disproportionate influence over strategic considerations of much larger powers such as the Ottomans, Safavids, or Russians, and in turn, found refuge and shelter from these much larger powers. This led to Kurds embracing their geographic situation, as well as their buffer role between greater powers, both as a strategic tool and as a way of life. As the famous Sulaymaniya-born Kurdish poet Şêrko Bêkes (1940–2013) wrote:

*My name is a dream, I am from the land of magic, my father is the mountain, and my mother the mist, I was born in a year whose month was murdered, a month whose week was murdered, a day whose hours were murdered.*

*-The Cross, the Snake, the Diary of a Poet<sup>2</sup>*

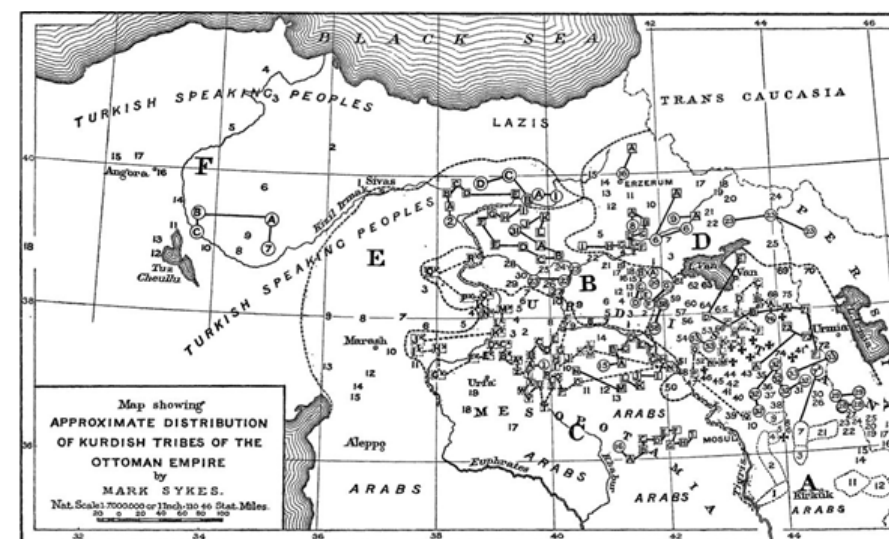


Figure 1. Mapping Kurdish tribes in the early 20th Century.

[Source: Mark Sykes, "The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 38 (July-December 1908), 451-86.]

Another famous Kurdish poet, Abdullah Goran, also frequently defined Kurdishness in geographic designations:

*I have been nurtured by these valleys, summits and hummocks, My breath is full of the fragrant breeze of your highlands, My lips are satiated by your snow waters, My gaze is used to the sight of your silvery twilights Reflecting on evening snows, My ears are habituated to the music of your waterfalls Pouring down from high quarters above snow to green landscapes.*

*My tongue bloomed with your beautiful speech, With words of your mountain songs, The words of folk tales told around fireplaces, The words of your children's lullabies. When blood stirs in my veins, It does so under the power of your love, I know.<sup>3</sup>*

In traditional geopolitical view, the Kurds are connected to and identified by the Zagros and eastern Taurus Mountains. Yet rather than these mountains facilitating Kurdish unity, they have ended up preventing it, as rugged terrain forced the Kurds to live in cut-off, isolated tribal structures. The political expression of such geographical impositions conform to similar state-society relations in Scotland: fragmented tribes, mixed resistance against nearby flatland culture (England, or Switzerland), and a fragmented political system in the form of increased local administration and canton formations. The impact of geography on Kurdish politics has been a systemic formation of principalities and emirates that have come under the control of, or became part of the rivalry between, larger power sources in surrounding flatlands: the Iranian Plateau, Upper Mesopotamia, and Anatolia.

Second, geography has been an important perspective on the study of Kurdish politics from a historical point of view. Scholars of Kurdish history, such as Hakan Özoğlu, Janet Klein, and Ebru Sönmez, converge on the observation that Kurdish political history was shaped by their buffer status between empires, which in turn was imposed on them by their geography.<sup>5</sup> Clustered around distant and cut-off administrative centers, they were ultimately unable to unite against empires that come from flatlands. This has contributed to the fragmenting of Kurdish political sociology into different administrative units competing against each other, under the control of the empires that they reside in. While the rule of the Kurdish ruler Saladin Şalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb (1174–93) could be considered the first attempt to bring Kurdish tribes together, this was short-lived. Rather, the polarization of the Kurdish homeland assumed a more structural character first, when the Kurdish homeland was divided between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires following the Battle of Chaldiran in the 16th century.

The Ottomans in turn established the formal structure of their internal relations with the Kurdish tribes through İdris-i Bitlisi (1452–1520), a Kurdish statesman of the Ottoman administration. According to Bitlisi's policies, Kurdish tribes were formally taken under Ottoman defensive structure to act as borderland irregulars

and tribal patrol units, retaining their autonomy and gaining Ottoman official titles and prestige in return. The Kurds and the mountains they inhabit were both used as frontier defense against the Safavid Empire and as domestic policing outposts against Ottoman Kızılbaş, Alevis, long considered a threat to domestic stability.<sup>6</sup> Thus began a more than two centuries-long rivalry between Ottomans and Safavids over the Kurdish tribes and emirates—the mountains being the primary flashpoint in the rivalry. During the entire span of this competition, according to Özoğlu, “The *beys* of frontier regions enjoyed greater autonomy than the *beys* who ruled *sanjaks* closer to the Ottoman center. In Kurdistan, a frontier region, one can observe this administrative variation very clearly.”<sup>7</sup> Kurds' consolidation under Ottoman rule was a relatively easy choice, given the amount of persecution they faced under the Safavids (especially during Shah Tahmasp period of 1524–76), which became a permanent and brutal imperial state policy.<sup>8</sup>

The second most profound change in Ottoman–Kurdish relations came with the *Tanzimat* (Reform) Period from 1839 to 1876. In hopes of centralizing a stagnating empire for more efficient administration and in order to compete with highly centralized European states, Ottomans had engaged in a number of sweeping state restructuring reforms, ending up creating a successfully centralized core, yet a far weaker hold over their hinterland. The Kurds' relationship with the Ottoman state, which was structured on the very idea of autonomy, was being threatened as Ottoman centralization attempts began to disturb the existing *sanjak* (canton) structure.<sup>9</sup> In tandem with these centralization movements, an expansionist Russian Empire came into contact with various Kurdish tribes, as a product of its war with the Persian Qajar Dynasty and Russian expansion in the Caucasus. The Battle of Ganja (1804), which resulted in Russian victory against Qajars, thus opened up the door to Kurdish homeland to northern invaders and enabled Russians to enter into the historic competition over Kurds between Turks and Persians. The Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828) moved the Russian border at the expense of Qajars as far down to include modern-day Azerbaijan, reaching the northern hinterlands of the Kurdish homeland. In addition, by the mid-19th century, the Kurds were also coming under increasing pressures of the Russian Orthodox and European Catholic and Protestant missionary influence in terms of their relationship to the Armenians—which both sides aimed to bolster, for various reasons.<sup>10</sup>

Increasing secularization of Ottoman imperial administration as a result of *Tanzimat* left a void in its relations with the Kurds, which was structurally based on a religious understanding. When *Tanzimat* secularization weakened that link, the Kurds grew disconnected from the imperial core against what they felt to be a growing Christian involvement adjacent to their homeland.<sup>11</sup> This call for pan-Islamism, against non-Muslim influence, would later be answered during Abdulhamid

II's tenure (1876–1909), when the Ottoman state effectively resurrected İdris-i Bitlisi's 16th-century social contract with the Kurds. The result was the Hamidian Brigades, an irregular Kurdish cavalry modeled after Russian Cossack regiments.<sup>12</sup> Just as the Kurdish cavalry of the 16–17th centuries patrolled the Ottoman-Persian border, simultaneously maintaining domestic stability (at the expense of occasional massacres against the Kızılbaş), the Hamidian cavalry of the late-19th century patrolled a troublesome Ottoman-Russian border, simultaneously cracking down on the Armenians domestically, playing a major role in the Armenian massacres of 1894 to 1896 and the genocide in 1915.<sup>13</sup>

It could be argued that the strategic rationale for the Armenian mass deportations was the major disruption of the Russo-Ottoman border, whereby Ottomans' main line of defense, the Third Army, was broken during the Sarıkamış Battle in December 1914 to January 1915. Once the entire Kurdish-Armenian homeland became vulnerable to Russian invasion (Russians did indeed capture as far as Erzincan and Van in 1918), a Russo-Armenian, making a unified Orthodox Christian front against East Anatolian Muslims, became a major driving rationale for the genocide. Yet, regardless of such brutal and extreme measures, and even though the Kurdish tribes prevailed over Armenian nationalists, the empire lost the war. Michael Reynolds argues that Kurdish support for the Ottomans was not unilateral, as Russia did manage to charm an influential Kurdish notable, Abdürrezzak Bedirhan, into cooperating against Ottoman interests.<sup>14</sup> Following the total Ottoman defeat in World War I in the Middle Eastern Front, the Kurdish homeland was first split between Great Britain and France; and later, between Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. This split is widely recognized as the main reason for the unforthcoming resolution of the Kurdish question and becoming one of the most protracted questions in the Middle East. Yet, the Kurds, bound to their geographical homeland, continued their historical mission in competing borderlands. Even during the Cold War, separated between four states, the Kurds continued to act as a buffer between four major systems: The Arab world, NATO, the Warsaw Pact and the Central Asian bloc.

#### WEAK STATES AND STRONG NON-STATES: THEORIZING RECENT KURDISH TERRITORIAL SHIFTS

The geo-historical account of superpower/imperial competition over the Kurds should not be understood as geographic determinism, but as an attempt to draw a geographic historiography of the Kurds, for the sake of perspective. Although geopolitics may be seen as a Cold War relic, the power relations the Kurds find themselves within today is very similar to the region's systemic setting in early 20th century. Exactly a century later, the regional and global implications of Syria render it as the world powers' high school reunion of the First World War. After all, both Iraq and

Syria are perhaps not significantly different, or worse off, in terms of state structures and intermediary institutions than how both states left of World War I as Ottoman vilayets (provinces). It is this state weakening that puts the Kurds, not as a unitary, but as a vertically competing, transnational entity, into the driving seat of their own fortunes for the first time since the end of World War I.

Robert I. Rothberg states that when a weak state becomes a failed state, it also causes ripple effects across its neighborhood, both in terms of further destabilizing existing weak states, and in terms of intensifying underlying discontent in those countries.<sup>15</sup> A state's failure thus increases the decay of adjacent weak states and exports the type of discontent that has caused the state to weaken and ultimately fail in the first place. Anthony Vinci, on the other hand, demonstrates how armed groups that emerge as a result of domestic anarchy and state failure connect to the regional and international system through “mixed security dilemmas” that arise “vertically” within a territorial entity, and “horizontally” between adjacent territorial entities.<sup>16</sup> This explains how state weakening in Syria and Iraq creates competing armed groups that intensify the interaction between vertical competition, such as that between ISIS and YPG (People's Protection Units of Kurdish Syria, a home-grown fighting force of mostly Kurds); and horizontal competition, such as between ISIS and Iraqi Armed Forces, or YPG and Turkish Armed Forces.

**What if the state is not failing and will not fail, yet will continue to be unable to establish control over its territory?**

In May 2015, Aaron Lund asked a critical question: “What if no one is winning the war in Syria?” In other words, what if the state is not failing and will not fail, yet will continue to be unable to establish control over its territory or eliminate vertically competing armed groups?<sup>17</sup> His answer was “the Somalization of Syria” and its descent into a prolonged conflict between a weakened state, foreign powers, and nonstate armed groups. Michael J. Mazarr questioned the concept itself in his 2014 article, “The Rise and Fall of the Failed-State Paradigm,” in which he compares Francis Fukuyama's 2004 observation that failed states would be the biggest problem in world politics, with Stephen Krasner and Carlos Pascual's statement that failed states pose the biggest threat to global security.<sup>18</sup> Mazarr concludes that it is not weak states *per se* that generate problems, but the involvement of the outside superpower that exacerbates the problem in weak states. His argument follows that without external involvement, the states are eventually capable of resolving their internal crises.

The scholarship on weak and failed states has grown considerably cautious since the inception of the Syrian Civil War; a far cry since Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner wrote a blueprint article in 1992 on how the United States could “put back” together failed states.<sup>19</sup> With the academic and policy wisdom shifting away from favoring intervention, the combined systemic shift and state weakening in Iraq and Syria may well generate a bloody, yet long-term opportunity for the transnational rise of Kurdish nationalism. Even though the effects of Kurdish nationalism will not be transformative in strong states like Iran and Turkey, it will nonetheless have long-term implications where there are strong Kurdish actors in weak states such as Iraq and Syria. Mikaelian and Salloukh use the Hezbollah in Lebanon as such a case study, whereby strong non-state actors within weak states lead to quasi-statelets and parallel decision-making bodies.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, with regard to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which already has an autonomous, functioning proto-state, even though it is dependent on outside help to finance itself, and the Syrian-Kurdish groups such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People’s Protection Units (YPG), it is possible to talk about such strong non-state actors versus weak state competition. Mikaelian and Salloukh indicate that this competition does not always lead to the emergence of new states—and if the competition becomes protracted and unresolved, it may lead to localized legitimacies within a single state. If the competing strong non-state actor can build sufficient inroads into the state security apparatus, it may as well hijack the apparatus, or certain aspects of its decision-making. Such aspects may either relate to security enforcement towards a particular geographic unit, or a particular identity.

While this article focuses on the post-Syrian Civil War Kurdish awakening, it is important to put things into perspective. The Kurdish awakening happened in Iraq a decade ago, in the 2003 war, after which Iraqi Kurds succeeded in establishing relatively successful KRG. It built upon the Kurdish statebuilding efforts that began after the Gulf War in 1991. Such an autonomous entity was previously interpreted as a national security issue by Turkey, Iran, and Iraq itself, fearing that it would generate the kind of horizontal competition Syria witnesses today and cause a combined Kurdish revolt. What rendered KRG a reality was in fact outside intervention—namely, the presence of overwhelming U.S. forces that could impose such autonomy upon neighboring countries like Iran and Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey, for its part, chose to transform this unavoidability into a lucrative business opportunity, and Turkish companies began investing heavily in Erbil and Kirkuk, as construction cooperation gradually evolved into energy partnership.<sup>22</sup> It was also easier for Turkey to accommodate an autonomous KRG in Iraq as Ankara’s long nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was forced into interregnum following the capture of its founding leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999. With Turkey’s own

Kurdish question coming under control, dealing with a neighboring Kurdish autonomous region posed few threats for Ankara.

For Iran, KRG’s rise was much less of a cause for celebration, since the Iraq War that brought about such rise was seen as threatening for Iran—especially after U.S. president George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech, which defined Iran as a potential target for the U.S. military.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously, however, Iran supported federalism in Iraq in order to end the country’s recent history of acting as Iran’s western barrier to Middle East access.<sup>24</sup> This was legally facilitated in Iraq’s 2005 Constitution, in which Iran recognized Iraqi Kurdistan as a federal entity within Iraq, and this was followed by the KRG opening up a “coordination and representation office” in Tehran in 2007.<sup>25</sup> Yet even though Iran and Erbil moved closer after the Iraq War, KRG had nonetheless moved along a narrow limit, as Tehran and Washington have been suspicious of each others’ motives on Iraqi Kurds. A similar suspicion existed between Turkey and Iran,

in relation to the KRG, as both sides attempted to influence KRG elections, while simultaneously cooperating against a resurgent threat from PKK and its Iranian wing, PJAK.<sup>26</sup>

## For a long time, Baghdad rejected the idea of a separate oil and gas policy in KRG, viewing it as a sign of further dissolution of Iraq as a unified state.

The major geopolitical competition surrounding the KRG during that period was twofold. The first was resource geopolitics; namely, how to institutionalize KRG’s vast oil and gas fields. More specifically, the debate orbited around the extraction and export rights of KRG’s natural resources and revenue-sharing between the Iraqi and KRG governments. For a long time, Baghdad rejected the idea of a separate oil and gas policy in KRG,

viewing it as a sign of further dissolution of Iraq as a unified state. Until the expansion of ISIS forced Baghdad into signing the revenue sharing agreement with the KRG in November 2014, such resistance remained.<sup>27</sup> The second geopolitical contestation was related to the status of Kirkuk—both as a cultural/historical landmark, and as an oil-rich city. A referendum to determine the status of Kirkuk was planned in November 2007, but was delayed on the grounds that Saddam-era depopulation campaigns have disrupted the “natural demography” of the city.<sup>28</sup> While these two simultaneous issues went on, the fallout of the Syrian Civil War changed this serious, but sustainable competition.

## GEOPOLITICAL DEMOGRAPHY: THE KURDISH YOUTH BULGE

One of the most critical precursors of the post-Syrian Kurdish awakening was the Arab Spring. As the old regimes and their hegemonic *status quo* crumbled, different analyses pointed to different causes for the surge in youth movements, including economic, historical and demographic. Among the demographic causes is the “youth bulge”—defined as the expanding population pyramid, in which rapid birthrates and increases in child survival causes disproportionate swelling of the younger segments of a population. This explanation of the Arab Spring has been particularly influential in Washington, with two seminal analyses, Jack Goldstone’s *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (1991) and Gary Fuller’s CIA report (1995), discussing how youth bulge demographics eventually lead to either external war, internal violence, or a revolution.<sup>29</sup> Gunnar Heinsohn expanded on the argument in 2004 by elaborating on how excess young-adult male population causes a number of security problems, including riots, revolts, and war.<sup>30</sup>

The Kurds responded to the aftershocks and ripple effects of the Arab Spring in various ways. The KRG, for example, was uneasy with the domino effect of the Arab Spring, as protests from February to April 2011 rocked the legitimacy of the government, accusing it of corruption, nepotism and social injustice.<sup>31</sup> It was effectively suppressed, both due to security measures, and accommodating political response.<sup>32</sup> Iraqi-Kurdish leaders Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, for example, emphasized that protests were a democratic right, and their main complaint is legitimate.<sup>33</sup> Turkey has also experienced Kurdish protests. There were sporadic Kurdish riots within Turkey from March 2011 to November 2012, with different complaints: Turkey’s Kurdish protests rather focused on repression, racism, discrimination, and ban on Kurdish parliamentarians. Another specific source of unrest was the Turkish military airstrike on 34 civilians in Uludere district.<sup>34</sup> In response, the Turkish government lifted the ban on certain Kurdish political candidates, paid compensation to the families of 34 victims of the airstrike, and passed a law paving the way for Kurdish-language education in schools.

Iranian Kurds did not rise up in riots, like they did in Iraq and Turkey, but the attacks of PJAK against Iranian military targets intensified after the Arab Spring. Following PJAK attacks against Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Sanandaj and one police outpost in Marivan in March 2011, hostilities flared, resulting in extended fighting between the IRGC and PJAK.<sup>35</sup> In July, PJAK followed up by blowing up the Turkish-Iranian natural gas pipeline.<sup>36</sup> Finally, in Syria, the February 2011 killing of Kurdish leader Mashaal Tammo and the subsequent firing upon the crowd at his funeral, the Syrian-Kurds have systemically moved into the Syrian opposition and launched the Kurdish rebellion.<sup>37</sup> By late-2011, Kurds in all four countries were undergoing profound transformation—or preparing for one.

The simultaneous awakening of the Kurds can both be explained through their persistent tensions with their host governments, as well as the “youth bulge” argument discussed in the first paragraph of this section. Coupled with perceived discrimination, political mismanagement, and corruption or repression, booming Kurdish youth populations manifested as successive protests in all four host countries.

In Iraq, the median age of Kurds is estimated at just over 20, with more than half under 20 years of age. The KRG’s average age is 26 years old.<sup>38</sup> In Turkey, the predominantly Kurdish southeast region sees the highest birthrate in the country, with an average 4.2 median births per household. According to the Turkish Statistics Institute, both the lowest percentage of old populations and the highest percentage of youth population are concentrated in the Kurdish southeast, with Hakkari, Şırnak, Van, Siirt, Bitlis, Muş and Ağrı being the youngest cities.<sup>39</sup>

Lack of infrastructure, low levels of youth unemployment, poor upward mobility, and existing identity problems with the central governments have all contributed to radicalization of Kurdish politics along the theoretical lines of the youth-bulge literature. Unable to earn a living and depart from nuclear families, Kurdish youth come under increased traditional, religious, and tribal pressures. This has traditionally been one of the main drivers of PKK recruitment, especially among Kurdish young women who have fled their tribes and families in order to pursue a more gender-equal, albeit physically difficult, life in the mountains.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the youth pressure against traditional and religious families has enabled Kurdish youth movements to develop a secular, or even anti-religious rallying ideology, pushing them closer to the Marxist-Leninist discourse of the PKK.<sup>41</sup> Such youth-related population pressures and their ideological spillover effects were diagnosed both by Turkey and Iraq by 2012, but a proper policy to address such diagnosis has been unforthcoming.<sup>42</sup> The resulting population pressure and youth bulge is one of the biggest structural elements that enables and strengthens a major shift in transnational Kurdish nationalist movement in its four host countries.

The abundance of a radicalized youth population is the PKK’s urban-centered “revolutionary people’s war” (*devrimci halk savaşı*) tactic, imported from Maoist lexicon into PKK literature by Abdullah Öcalan and recently refurbished in 2011 by one of PKK’s senior founding commanders and the chairman of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan Murat Karayılan.<sup>43</sup> The revolutionary people’s war aimed to tap into Kurdish urban youth grievances towards both the state and the traditional family structures they were born into. Outlined in detail in PKK’s media outlet, Serxwebun, in April 2015, this strategy aimed to cultivate the youth bulge in two ways: first, by recruiting them into the Qandil headquarters for training and later deployment as militias against Turkish military or against ISIS in Syria.<sup>44</sup> Second, the strategy employed “city defenses,” urban resistance units made up of teenagers. Suitable

demography, along with sufficiently intensified grievances benefit PKK's strategy and became one of the main reasons why PKK was able to expand its influence and control over the Syrian Kurds, and why PYD and YPG were able to coordinate with the PKK so effectively.

## GEOGRAPHIC ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO KURDISH AWAKENING

As much as population and demographic trends are key to for geopolitical analysis, it is incomplete without a structural reading of its geographic access points and barriers. The intersection between a nation, its geography and its cultural self-perception can be referred to as *Lebensraum*, a late-19th century term which followed a rather problematic political expression in the first half of the 20th century. In Friederich Ratzel's conception of *Lebensraum*, a society is likened to a biological organism, which expands and contracts depending on its natural habitat.<sup>45</sup> Although the very concept of *Lebensraum* is quite a dreaded one due to its connections to the National-Socialist ideology in Germany and other racist strands across Europe, a non-aggressive understanding of the Kurdish *Lebensraum* could be adopted with regard to its historical-geography. There are two Kurdish *Lebensräume*—urban and rural. Kurds' urban *Lebensraum* primarily includes Diyarbakır, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah, with significant middle and upper-middle class and relatively higher levels of education, as well as urban culture. Smaller and competing extensions of this urban consciousness exist in Iran in Mahabad and Sanandaj, and in Syria in Rojava. It is also a paradoxical

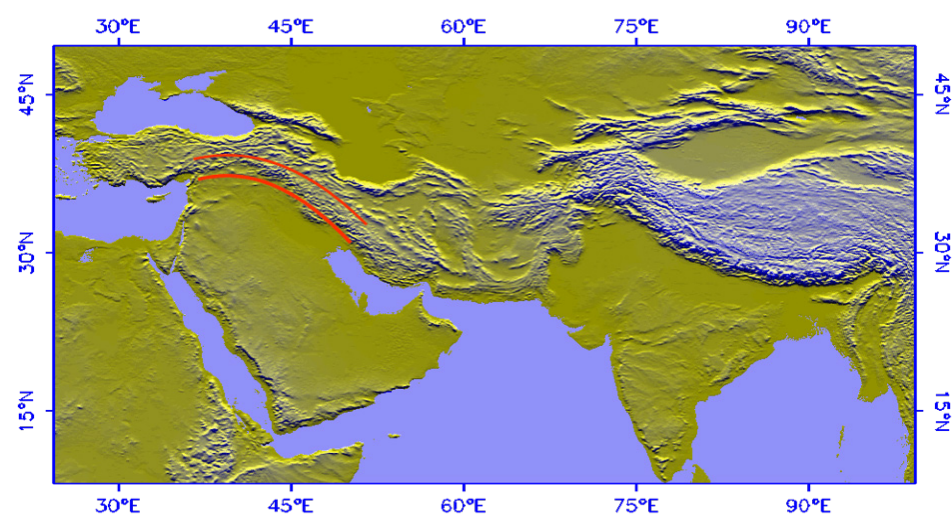


Figure 2. Topographic map of Asia and Asia Minor, with Taurus-Zagros mountain corridor highlighted.

but important point that the highest concentration of the Kurdish population is in Istanbul, around 3 million, and Germany, around 800,000, shifting the balance of Kurdish urbanization into somewhat disconnected territorialization.<sup>46</sup> It is however, the rural Kurdish *Lebensraum*, which is also its literary and historical habitat, that gives it a coherent, geopolitical form.

As elaborated earlier, this rural *Lebensraum* has become the main lens through which the Kurds have been viewed by outside powers, as well as how the Kurds themselves have self-defined in their literature. The Zagros and Taurus Mountain systems anchor Kurds geographically, whereas the Tigris river system sets its western Iraqi barrier with the recent Kurdish expansion in Syria, this was moved as far west to the Euphrates river. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers, both major sources of water originating within Turkey, have been key geopolitical assets Turkey used in the past to control the flow of water to Syria and Iraq through the Southeast Anatolian Project, or Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP). While the Tigris enters Iraq through the pro-Turkish KRG territory, the flow of water has not been a geopolitical contestation in recent years.<sup>47</sup> However, as the Kurdish expansion towards the Euphrates river in Syria has been defined as a security threat by Turkey, their liberation of the Tashrin Dam from ISIS in January 2016 renders them able to control Turkey-origin water into the rest of Syria, thereby rendering PYD and YPG with significant strategic gain.<sup>48</sup> Controlling the southbound flow of both the Tigris and the Euphrates result in the structural expansion and consolidation of the rural Kurdish *Lebensraum*. At the time of writing this article, a Kurdish canton existed in Afrin, but it was still cut off from the rest of Rojava. In order to prevent this, Turkey proposed a “safe zone” into which Turkish troops would be deployed, clearing the area from ISIS, as well as preventing Kurdish cantons from uniting along the Turkish border.<sup>49</sup>

The southern reaches of the Kurdish *Lebensraum* have historically been defined in relation to its distance to the Zagros and Taurus mountains. After World War I, the negotiated space between the Kurds and their respective host states Iraq and Syria took place as a result of how far away from those mountains Kurdish insurgencies could survive against standing armies. In Iraq, for example, the Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk–Sulaymaniya line became the Kurds' natural defensive line against Saddam Hussein's forces, largely owing to their proximity to the mountains that offered shelter. It is for the same reason that Kirkuk, as a historically Kurdish city that is a bit more distant to mountains, was relatively more vulnerable for Saddam's Arabization campaigns population displacement and resettlement compared to other three main Kurdish cities.<sup>50</sup>

In Syria, the Kurds haven't been separated from the Damascus core through a geographic barrier; their territorialization rather owes to their sheer distance to the country's administrative core in the southwest. Despite Syrian Arabization policies in

the 1970s similar to Saddam Hussein's, an Arab cordon (Hizam Arabi) was established along the Turkish border, pushing the Kurds into the country's northeastern fringes.<sup>51</sup>

The northern and eastern borders of the *Lebensraum* have been negotiated largely by the PKK, or its more recent Iranian wing, PJAK. Both Turkey and Iran have been unable to extinguish the territorial challenge mounted by the militant insurgency, although they have been able to localize and contain it. To that end, the mountains once again emerged as the Kurds' natural habitat as both the PKK and PJAK operated in close proximity to Qandil mountains. In Turkey, PKK's area of activity directly corresponds to the region's topography as the mountainous and Kurdish-dominated Hakkari, Şırnak, Van, Batman, Bitlis, and Bingöl provinces became synonymous with insurgency. In the east as well, PJAK's attacks against the IRGC took place along the eastern reaches of Mount Qandil and into Mahabad, Urumia, Marivan, and Sanandaj, benefiting from the rugged terrain that makes surprise attacks easy and defense against standing armies much less costly. Mount Qandil has also proven as a safe refuge against airstrikes as both PKK and PJAK learned to dig into Afghanistan-style cave networks that are immune to aerial bombing.

The Syrian Civil War and the rise of ISIS changed the southern and western extent of the Kurdish *Lebensraum* in two ways. First, ISIS' replacement of Syrian and Iraqi Armed Forces near the Kurdish areas has eliminated standing militaries as a legitimate form of barrier that prevented Kurds push further south. Second, ISIS' security challenge, both against Damascus and Baghdad, weakened the states and prevented them from exerting the kind of pressure that kept the Kurds pushing further south. Seizing on the opportunity, the PYD, for example, has emerged from its underground role and established itself as a competent administration, rallying other Kurds in the region against ISIS. Unable to carve self-administering regions from their powerful neighbors, PKK branches in all four countries began to join PYD's war against ISIS, hoping to create a self-administering Syrian Kurdistan within Syria in Rojava. The war against ISIS was internationally legitimate and thus became a national liberation war of sorts for the Kurds. The left-wing, socialist nature of Rojava campaign naturally made it a rival to KRG, which was a good ally of Turkey and the proponent of the idea of Islamism as a common bond.<sup>52</sup>

Increasingly frustrated with the conservative state ideology and accompanying repression of Turkey, Kurdish youth within Turkish borders also went to Rojava to create an autonomous Kurdistan there.<sup>53</sup> However, the reverse migration, Syrian Kurds fleeing Rojava, must also be mentioned in addition to the fact that the migration issue is a source of friction between the KRG and Rojava.<sup>54</sup> Once Syrian government forces withdrew from Kurdish-dominated areas in 2012, these regions consolidated as self-ruling cantons Afrin, Jazira and Kobani in November 2013, under the banner of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, and Desteya Bilind, a Kurd. However its subsidiaries,

both the PYD and its militant wing YPG have been accused by the Turkish government as being the extensions of the PKK, while the PKK leader Cemil Bayik denied direct links, but found their struggle "legitimate and worthy of support."<sup>55</sup> It is this relationship with the PKK that Turkey also defined PYD and YPG as "terrorist organizations."<sup>56</sup> Yet, it is also these groups' battlefield utility against ISIS that has prevented Ankara from selling the idea to its NATO allies.<sup>57</sup> Together with the U.S. airstrikes, YPG was instrumental in breaking ISIS defensive positions near Rojava and clearing the Turkish border from ISIS presence.<sup>58</sup>

No particular event or place reinforced the idea and ideology of the newly emerging Rojava more than the defense of Kobani, Ar. Ayn al-Arab, from September 2014 to March 2015, as well as cementing security cooperation between YPG and PKK. While having minor strategic importance as a small town overlooking Turkish border, its main importance was ideological and historical. Kobani was the entry point of PKK's founding leader Öcalan to Syria from Turkey in 1980, following the military coup, thereby relocating the PKK into Syria.<sup>59</sup> For a long time, Kobani in particular has been defined by the PKK as the "little south" or "leadership area", where Öcalan ran direct grassroots organization and mobilization. Militants recruited from this area joined PKK ranks through the 1990s and the 2000s,

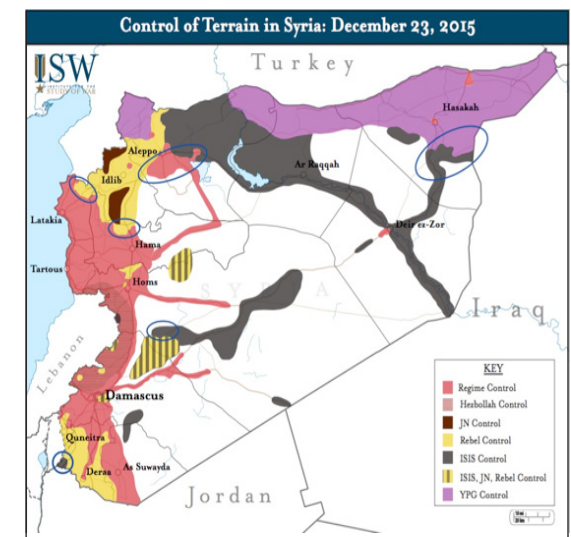
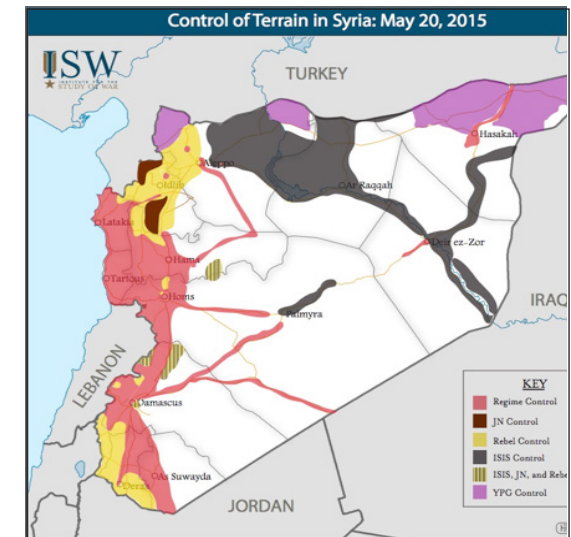


Figure 3. Syrian-Kurdish control of territory. Note the rapid unification of Kurdish cantons (purple) in the north from May to December 2015.

fighting both Turkish military forces and other rival Kurdish militant groups. Kobani recruits of 1980s, namely Bahoz Erdal, Nurettin Sofi, and to a lesser degree Murat Karayılan rose up in PKK's ranks over time, becoming its main militant commanders. Kobani was also a key location in 1998, when Turkey's pressures forced Hafez al-Assad's Syrian government to expel Öcalan from his refuge in Damascus. In October 1998, before fleeing Syria, Öcalan held his final meeting in Kobani, ordering a group from town's political network to make preparations for the establishment of a political party in Syria. While this first attempt had failed due to the success of the Syrian intelligence, the second attempt in 2003 succeeded and led to the creation of the PYD.

Citing a PKK source close to Öcalan during the 1998 meeting, *BBC Turkish* claimed that Kobani was then planned as Öcalan's revenge against the Assad government for "backstabbing" him by forcing him away from Syria. Despite its military-strategic insignificance, Kobani was of gargantuan importance for the PKK with immense ideological and historical baggage. It was also the pilot area for an Öcalan-style administration and the blueprint of a future Öcalanist Kurdistan. For the same reason, Kobani was also the key connector between PKK, PYD, and YPG.

That's why the defense of Kobani was of vital importance for the Kurds—and it was also why ISIS targeted the town in order to deal a *coup de grace* against the Syrian-Kurdish nationalist movement. The U.S. strategy, too, was developed on this importance. Having as many ISIS forces and supplies as possible clustering around Kobani was an excellent way to divert its attention.<sup>60</sup> While ISIS' focus was on Kobani, it was easier for the U.S. to develop defenses and organization in other parts of the frontline, especially in Iraq, while dealing a psychologically significant amount of aerial damage on ISIS concentrated around the town. Although the U.S.-supported Kurdish defense held against a numerically superior ISIS attack, Turkey's ambivalent stance towards the town's relief became a major threshold in changing the relationship between Turkey and its Kurds.<sup>61</sup> Protests in Turkish cities erupted after Ankara's inactivity on helping the relief of Kobani—first by preventing YPG militants from crossing the border into Kobani to defend the town and then after President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's October 2014 statement on the imminence of the town's fall to ISIS' hands.<sup>62</sup>

The Turkish official view was that Kobani was essentially outside of Turkey, which doesn't render Ankara responsible for its defense; and that Kobani was PKK's problem and it was unclear why Turkey should help its nemesis in defense of an external territory.<sup>63</sup> For critics, however, the complaint was two-fold. First, Ankara's inactivity was causing a major rift with its Kurdish population and preventing a unified resistance against ISIS that could later become the foundation of permanent peace in Turkey.<sup>64</sup> Second, such inactivity was interpreted by the Kurds as tacit support for ISIS, which they believe was using Ankara to extinguish the emerging Kurdish nationalist awakening in Syria.<sup>65</sup> The resultant riots, known as the "6-9

October Incidents," spread across Turkey, leading to 46 deaths, 682 injuries and 323 arrests, substantially changing the course of state-society relations between Ankara and the Kurds. While the peace process was already in ruins, the PKK defined the 6-9 October incidents as the singular act that has effectively "buried the process."<sup>66</sup> After that, the PKK began preparing for its urban defensive campaign in major Kurdish cities.<sup>67</sup>

The defenses in Kobani ultimately held, aided by U.S. airstrikes, providing the Kurds with the psychological victory. This gave the necessary push to the development of Rojava, both through increasing the number of recruitment and youth migration there and through consolidating the security partnership between PYD, YPG, and PKK. After Rojava, the Kurds continued pushing westward, gradually clearing the Turkish-Syrian border from ISIS, and thus significantly validating Turkey's main strategic nightmare: an uninterrupted Kurdish belt, beginning from Kars and spanning through Turkey's entire eastern border, connecting to the Qandil mountains and arching westward, through the KRG and reaching into Rojava.<sup>68</sup> While the Iraqi segment of that belt, namely the KRG, would be closer to Turkey, the rest of the belt would include PKK and its local fractions or allies—a geopolitical reality which reinforces Turkey's sense of being isolated from the Sunni-Arab sociology with a clear and uninterrupted Kurdish belt.

In traditional Kurdish geopolitics, a hypothetical Kurdistan would be completely landlocked and would be at the mercy and goodwill of its neighbors for trade and survival. The Syrian Civil War changed this thinking. Once ISIS was defeated at Kobani, the Kurdish cantons of Afrin, Kobani and Jazira would unite along the border, creating a singular territorial reality, resting at the edge of Turkey's Hatay province – which would be the only gap that would prevent a unified Rojava from accessing the Mediterranean Sea. Not only would the Kurdish belt's access to the Mediterranean would be an immense geopolitical goal that would render unification and state-building, it would also open up KRG oil fields to naval export without having to deal with neighboring Turkey, Syria, Iraq or Iran. A key detail about the Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF—a renamed version of YPG—is that its official flag is a map of Syria, which contains Turkey's Hatay province; however, several Syria experts this author interviewed noted that the same map of Syria is used by the majority of factions fighting in Syria, including those supported by Turkey.<sup>69</sup> Kurdistan, which has a geographic-defensive core, the Qandil mountains; southbound control of two of the largest rivers in the region; the Tishrin, Gomaspan-Bastorah, Dukan, Darbandikan and Duhok dams; extensive oil and gas reserves in KRG; and Mediterranean access through Rojava belt; would not only strengthen its bid to become a state, but it would also increase incentives for the unification of Kurdistan—whether in federative, canton, or unitary form.

At the time of writing this article, the SDF was pushing further south, taking Jarablous and Qarah Qawzaq bridges along with the October (Tishrin) Dam.<sup>70</sup> The territorial shift of focus of this hypothetical Kurdistan would help alleviate the existing Kurdish tensions in Turkey and Iran, as Kurds unhappy with the existing status quo in those countries would likely search for a future in this new and more sustainable territoriality. Following the collapse of Turkey's peace process and the subsequent launch of anti-PKK operations had an adverse effect on Kurdish civilians as large scale migrations began in December 2015.<sup>71</sup>

### MAPPING KURDISH "BIG DATA:" TRANSNATIONAL KURDISH ARMED MOVEMENTS, 2014-2016

In order to identify trends and shifts in the Kurdish *Lebensraum*, I have utilized a map-based "big data" approach. For this study, I use the Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier definition of "big data:" "The ability of society to harness information in novel ways to produce useful insights or goods and services of significant value" and "...things one can do at a large scale that cannot be done at a smaller one, to extract new insights or create new forms of value." I thereby depart from the original 1997 NASA term or more recent, widely quoted 2011 McKinsey study that focus on the sheer size of the data, rather than the novelty on how it is used.<sup>72</sup>

In partnership with EQLIM Risk Intelligence Data Analysis, I have specified an event set, which included the main actors, armed groups, key locations relevant to the transnational Kurdish movement. Then, these variables were input into the EQLIM engine, which processed large-volume, open-source data points into heat maps based on a large number of activities, including terrorism, riots, sabotage, armed conflict and smuggling. The heat maps (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7) show these incidents from 1 February 2014–2 February 2016, over six-month intervals:

The heat maps reveal a number of key trends on the shifting focus of the transnational Kurdish movement. Through February 2014 to August, main armed events are scattered across mainly Iraq, and less so in Syria and Turkey and follow no particular, united trend. Sporadic incidents in Diyarbakır, Elazığ, and Van in Turkey; Mosul and Kirkuk in Iraq; and Aleppo in Syria can be observed. Then from August 2014 to February 2015, there is a substantial clustering of incidents along Iraq-Turkey Pipeline (ITP) and the new KRG-Turkey natural gas pipeline that is under construction. In Syria, Aleppo remains as a flashpoint and Kobani emerges as a new zone of conflict. Lesser incidents can be observed in Diyarbakır and Van. Through February 2015 to July Tel Abyad, A'zaz and Hasakah become key conflict zones in addition to Aleppo and Kobani in Syria, whereas Kirkuk and Mosul remain flashpoints in KRG. In this period, Kurdish involvement in Turkey is minimal, with the exception of isolated incidents in Diyarbakır. Finally, through August 2015 to February 2016, Kurdish armed

incidents cluster within Turkey in an unprecedented way, covering a large swath of Turkey's predominantly Kurdish areas. In Syria, the Aleppo conflict intensifies, with a lesser profile in A'zaz, whereas smaller-scale incidents go on in KRG.

There are a number of observations that can be made through this "big data" approach to Kurdish armed movement. First, this kind of large-volume, extended-period overview of the Kurdish incidents validates our basic geopolitical premise: that the Kurds are deeply anchored to the Taurus and Zagros Mountains and are heavily involved in and around the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. To that end, Figure 2 gives a near-perfect overlap between 2014 and 2016 activity heat maps and the Taurus-Zagros mountain corridor. Second, operating from the rugged and defensible nature of this corridor, the Kurds have secured southbound control of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, gaining a historic geopolitical advantage against their Arab neighbors in the south. To that end, Kurdish control of Tishrin, Mosul, Badush, Bastora, and Dukan dams will inevitably lead to calls to establish a common water policy between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, and will bring them together on issues related to water security. Similar advantages are gained through the control of Jarablus and Qarah Qawzaq bridges that will enable Syrian Kurds to unite an uninterrupted territorial belt along Turkish border.

Third, Kurds now have control of both Iraqi and Syrian oil fields and establish control over Kirkuk, Mosul and Rimelan reserves. From a purely geopolitical reading—and excluding culture-specific factors—this may bring Iraqi and Syrian Kurds together over a central administration of oil policy. One key variable here is the entry of Russia into Syria and from the Latakia port, the closest access point for the Syrian Kurds into the Mediterranean. Due to increased Russian support for PYD and YPG, it is safe to assume that Moscow will enable and facilitate the Kurds' access to the Mediterranean. In that, the Kurds need not acquire a coastal territory to access Latakia port; rather, Moscow can offer this access either through its own base in Latakia, or through facilitating a deal between Damascus and PYD. Syrian Kurds' access to the Mediterranean will inevitably draw a wedge between KRG and Turkey in terms of exporting oil and gas. With a Mediterranean access route, even through Russian or Damascus-controlled coastal territory, Kurds may indeed choose to sideline

**Kurdish control of dams will inevitably lead for calls to establish a common water policy between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, and will bring them together on issues related to water security.**

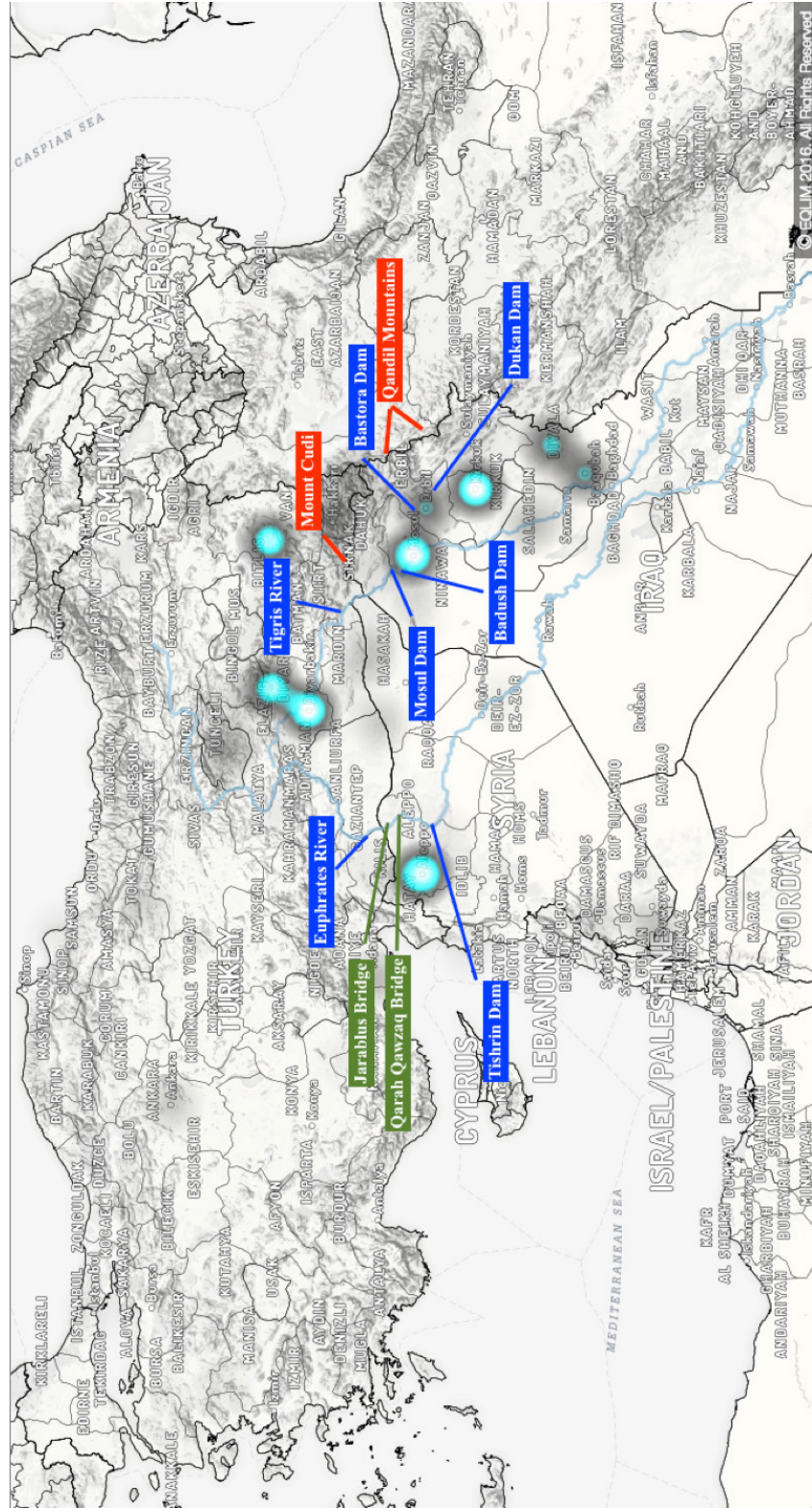


Figure 4. Heat map of main Kurdish armed events and main geographic faultlines (1 February 2014 to 31 July 2014).  
Source: The author.

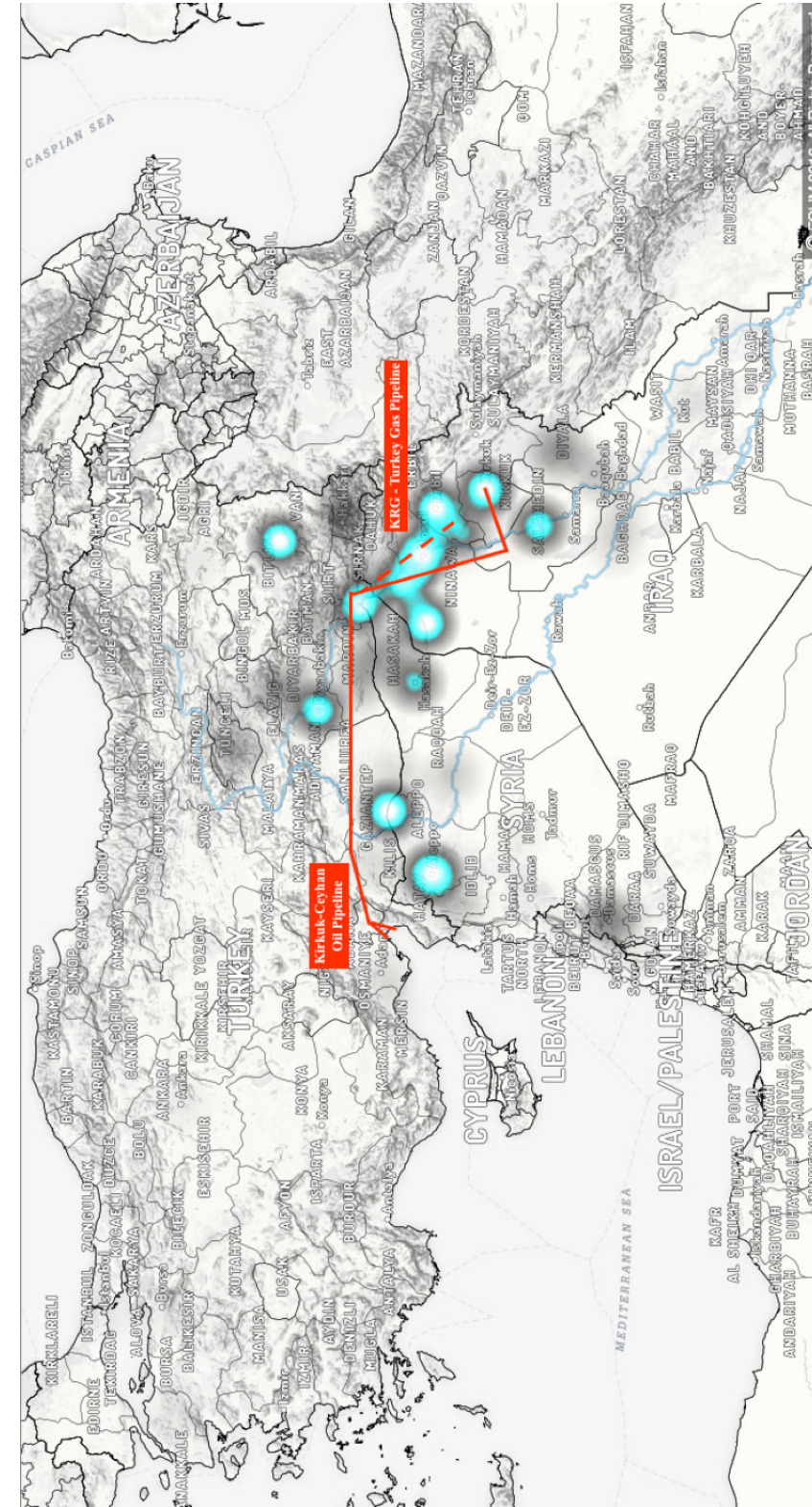


Figure 5. Heat map of main Kurdish armed events and KRG-Turkey oil and gas infrastructure (1 August 2014 to 31 January 2015).  
Source: The author.

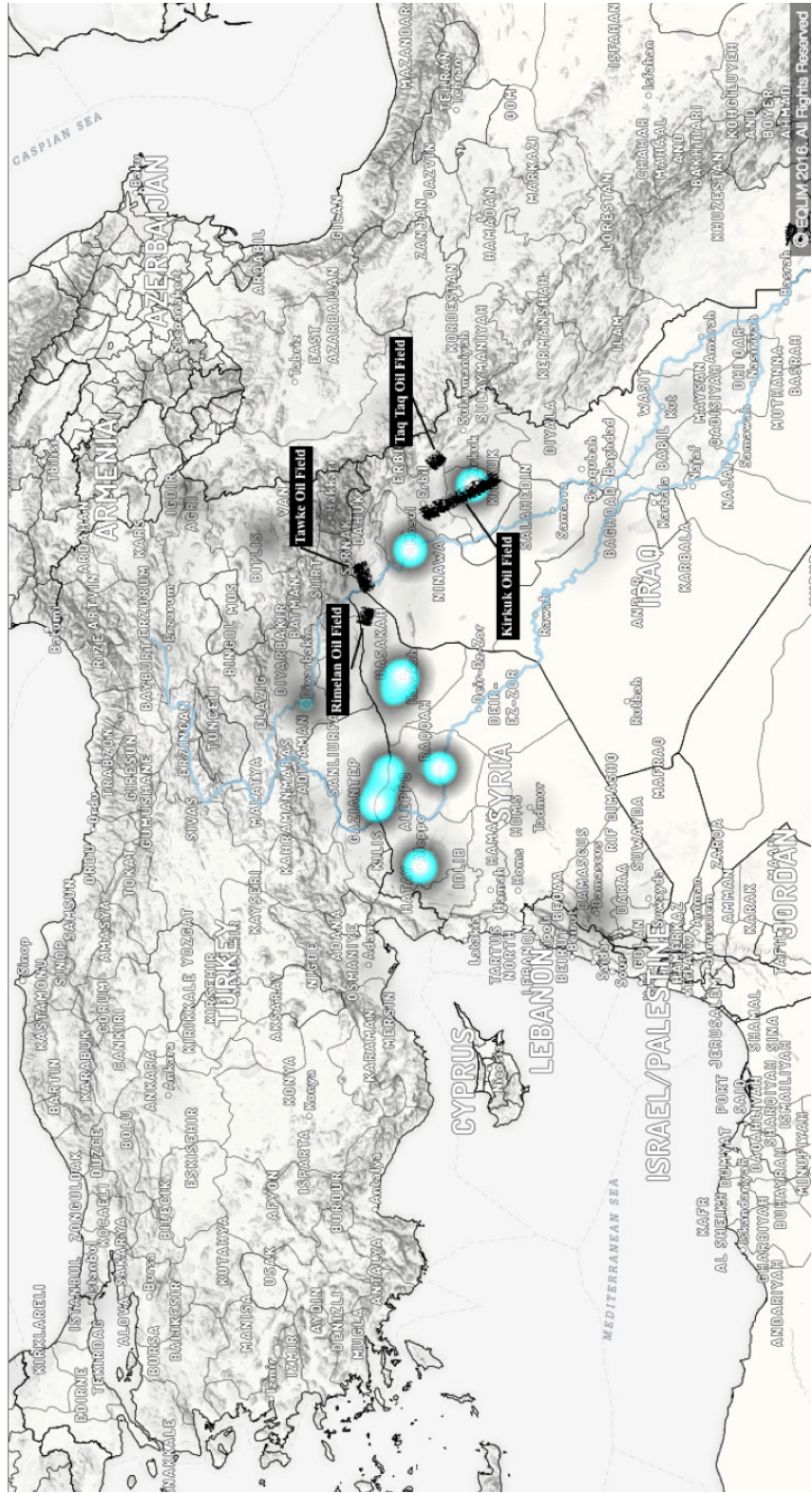


Figure 6. Heat map of main Kurdish armed events and main Kurdish oil fields (1 February 2015 to 31 July 2015).  
Source: The author.

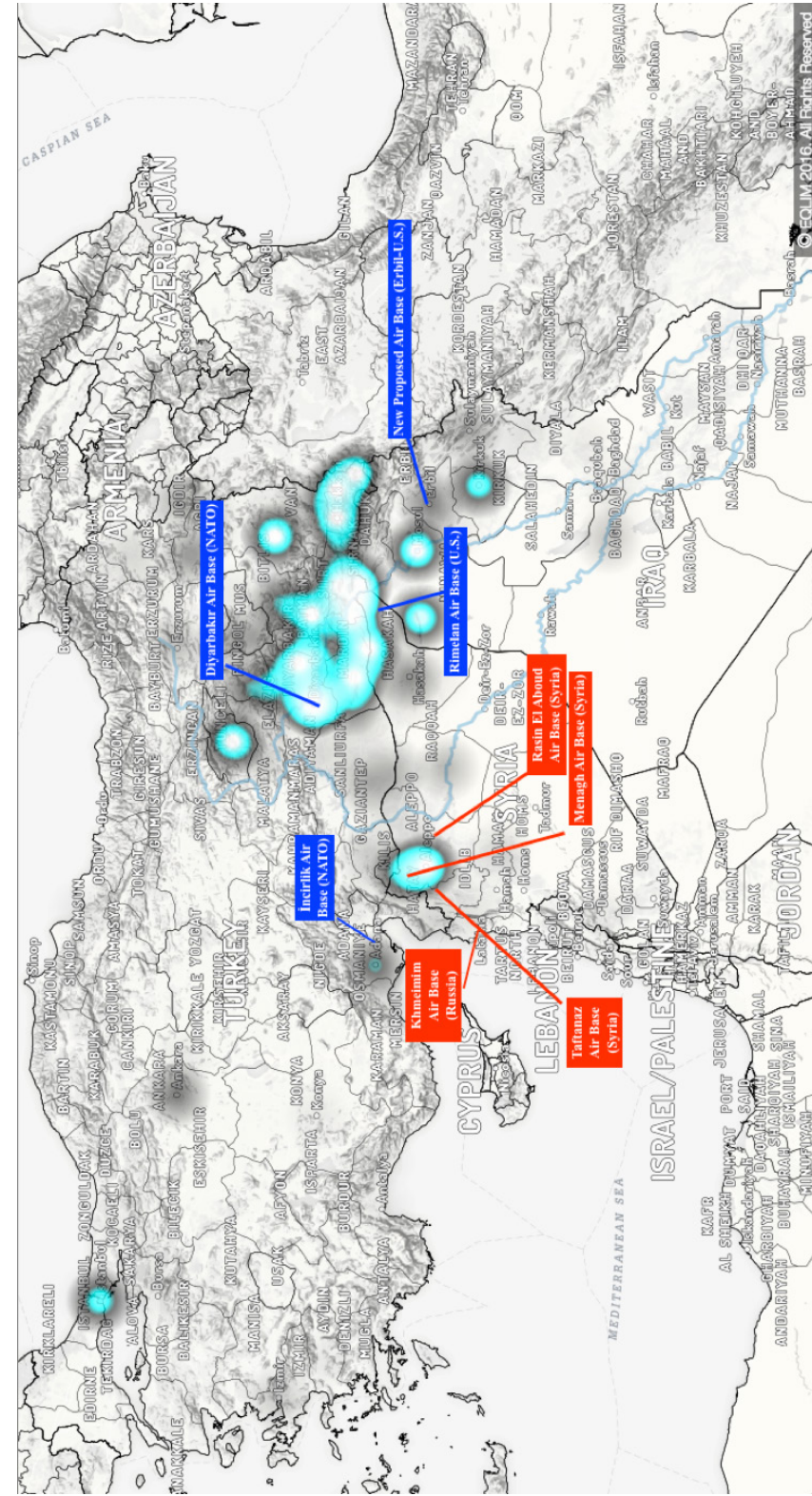


Figure 7. Heat map of main Kurdish armed events and main military air bases in the region (1 August 2015 to 2 February 2016).  
Source: The author.

Turkey and work on a direct pipeline export option that remains south of the Turkish border.

Finally, the establishment of the Russian Khmeimim Air Base and the American Rimelan Air Base in two ends of Syrian Kurdistan divides Kurds' aerial demarcation along eastern and western control zones. While the Russian–Syrian control zone in the east is currently closed to Turkish flights, it is unclear whether the U.S. Air Base in Rimelan will also ban Turkish or Iraqi military flights into Rojava. This may mean that northern Syria will be a *de facto* no-fly zone, potentially protecting Kurds against Turkish and Iraqi jets. These two newly-established air bases in northern Syria are an indicator that both Moscow and Washington are invested in the future of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds.

### OIL, TRIBALISM, ISLAM, AND SOCIALISM

Natural resources are another significant variable in geopolitical analysis. While an abundance of natural resources is regarded as a geopolitical advantage, oil-producing countries have demonstrated radically different performances in terms development, growth, and statebuilding. The “rentier state paradigm,” a terminology within Marxist lexicon, asserts that if a country earns the majority of its revenues through the sale of an indigenous resource to outside interests, such as the sale of oil, gas, gold, or diamonds to international companies, and if the size of the workforce involved in the production of the exported product is small so that they cannot unionize, then the state develops an authoritarian character and engages in economic waste. Severing the link between taxation and representation, rentier state paradigm asserts that strategic commodities such as oil and gas can have negative impacts on democracy and economic development in a country, especially if governance was undemocratic when the resources were discovered.

Both KRG and Rojava are simultaneously blessed and cursed by abundant oil and natural gas fields. The KRG has an estimated oil reserve of approximately 50 billion barrels and a natural gas reserve estimated between 5.7 and 9 trillion cubic feet (tcf), with Sulaymaniya holding “almost 80 percent of that gas reserve.”<sup>74,75</sup> This renders KRG the world's eighth largest oil reserve holder, whereas more appraisal study is needed to properly situate the region in global gas reserves. Syria's oil reserves are much smaller, at 2.5 billion barrels, with a fraction of it sitting in reserves around Qamishli and Hasakah, within Rojava's Jazira canton. While the natural gas reserve balance is tipped strongly in favor of KRG, if Rojava succeeds in carving out an opening into the Mediterranean, it will allow KRG to export to European markets directly, without passing through Turkey, or the rest of Iraq, into Basra. As this will create a mutual dependence, it may increase the incentive for KRG–Rojava unification.

However, there are fundamental cultural differences between KRG and Rojava in terms of their administrative structures, their approach to religion and their global orientation. According to Serhat Erkmen, the KRG has “undergone the nation-state process by incorporating tribalism into a monopolized governmental institution, while on one hand also protecting the chieftains.”<sup>76</sup> In contrast to KRG, the PKK and KDPI leadership, according to Ofra Bengio, were “not tribal, but urban,” implying how the founding leaders of both groups were urbanized and educated, instead of coming to leadership positions directly from tribal structures.<sup>77</sup> This is indeed a controversial statement, given how the KRG's current state is urbanized and is well-structured, whereas PKK still operates from the rural. Yet, it is important to highlight that Bengio was referring to the background of the founders of the PKK and KRG, not their current state. Indeed in the past, Turkey's Kurdish tribes have been an ally of the state against the PKK, serving both as irregular “village guards” and as ideological support against the military campaigns against the PKK.<sup>78</sup> This is also why the KRG and Turkey's Kurdish tribes have been closer to Turkey's position, rather than the PKK, demonstrating a case where traditional and Islamic power relations trump ethno-linguistic ones.

This difference in the Kurds' approach to religion is one of the reasons why the PKK has emerged both as a reaction against Turkish state, but also against the tribal-religious pressures within the Kurdish society. Gullistan Yarkin argues, “When founded in 1978, the PKK defined itself as a socialist movement aiming to create a classless society through the formation of a new state-power,” largely owing to the main political alternative source of support of the time being the Soviet Union.<sup>79</sup> The resultant ideology—an amalgam of Marxist-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism—was instrumentalized by Öcalan as “Apoculuk” (Apoism) and was defined as a “Kurdish proletariat-revolutionary movement” and a “national liberation struggle.” In this context, Aliza Marcus argues: “The PKK, despite its Marxist-Leninist ideology, never took an open stand against Islam,” and later asserted that the PKK's Fifth Congress “issued a statement affirming that Islam was not contrary to Kurdish nationalist goals.”<sup>80</sup> Öcalan himself clarifies this, indicating that it is not Islam *per se*, but the Middle East's “inability to criticize religion,” as “a great deficiency for the Islamic world.” In addition, Öcalan's critique of religion stipulated that “Phenomena brought [sic] about by class society, like power, state and monarchy, became most articulate in religious monotheism.”<sup>81</sup>

It has been further argued that the PKK's relationship with Islam was mostly about its social, economic and political power relations, its alternative being a new form of egalitarian power relations, rather than the abandonment of religion altogether. From this point of view, Öcalan's understanding of religion is in fact secularism, which supports state's control over religion, but the latter surviving as a

personal and spiritual function nonetheless. From this point of view, Apoculuk—with a hefty dose of controversy—may be likened to Kemalism of the 1920s, and even 19th-century Ottoman secular thought that aimed to re-operationalize religion, rather than abandoning it altogether.

Thus emerged two different religious identities in the Kurdish *Lebensraum*: the tribal/conservative strand, which today dominates the KRG and Turkey's Kurdish rural hinterland; and the secular/socialist strand, embodied within the PKK and its variants. The role of religion and communalization mechanics in both identities allow analysts to forecast their statebuilding styles and also how these identities will interact with their respective natural resources.

In Marxist theory, “rentierism” is defined as the monopolization of access to a particular resource and its utilization without benefiting the society itself. The concept was taken into the international relations literature by Hossein Mahdavy in 1970 and was further developed by Hazem al-Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani as a type of state structure, whose economy is dependent on the sale of natural resources to external clients.<sup>82</sup> In cases where the economy is dominated by the sector associated with the natural resource, where no other competing industry exists and when the state is the primary recipient of the revenue originating from the sale of resources, the “rentier state paradigm” emerges, leading to corruption, under-development, and economic stagnation. This renders state revenues dependent on fluctuations of the global price of the commodity that is subject to rent and may lead to economic collapse once the commodity is sold at below-production prices.

Especially in oil politics, rentierism is an oft-cited byproduct. In assessing rentier oil policy, the state's discovery of oil before or after its switch to a more representative system is usually considered as an important threshold. After all, Norway, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are all oil producers, but the effect oil had on all four economies is largely dependent on whether they were democratic, authoritarian or tribal at the time of their discovery of reserves.

David McDowall asked in 2004 whether KRG was a democracy or neo-tribalism. He argued that although Kurdish tribalism disappeared in the 1970s “as the prime form of socio-political organization,” it nonetheless reappeared in the 1990s as a form of “neo-tribalism” in which “two major confederations competed for hegemony in Iraqi Kurdistan.”<sup>83</sup> Although the PUK later embraced socialism, KDP nonetheless hung onto tribal structures as a way of statebuilding. This, in turn, rendered its institutions weak and subject to nepotism and favoritism.<sup>84</sup>

Such an approach to resource management worked fine while global oil prices were high and the revenue generated from rent still compensated for the lack of efficiency of the KRG economy. This picture changed in the second half of 2015 and still continues at the time of writing this article, as oil prices fell down to a historic low of

\$30 (U.S.) per barrel. Even before, the Iraqi government had stopped budget payments to the KRG starting in February 2014, as a rebuttal of KRG's unilateral handling of its oil policy, which the Baghdad government interpreted as a form of “separatism.” With two blows coming simultaneously, the KRG's finances grew exceedingly thin, to the extent that it was unable to support and pay its Peshmerga forces, functioning through cash injections from Turkey.<sup>85</sup> This means that while the KRG seems to be

**While the KRG seems to be better-off financially, due to its oil reserves, the inevitable effect of rentierism and tribalism nonetheless renders it dependent on the goodwill of external actors.**

better-off financially, due to its oil reserves, the inevitable effect of rentierism and tribalism nonetheless renders it dependent on the goodwill of external actors—be it the United States or Turkey—unable to dominate or pacify other Kurdish actors in its vicinity, such as the PKK and its local variants.

This begs the question: Can the Rojava avoid falling into rentierism? Is secular/socialist communalization a better form of government for the Kurds compared to tribalism? While Rojava has been able to protect itself and self-administer through the concept of “radical democracy,” which Öcalan imported from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, it has so far been dependent on nationalist mobilization and the threat of ISIS to continue to act as a rallying point.<sup>86</sup> The model was also criticized for being a “delayed Soviet one-party experiment.”<sup>87</sup> While the constant alertness and self-sacrifice required as part of the war against ISIS have proven important in sustaining the basis of statebuilding, it is unclear how the experiment will unfold once the war ends and Rojava starts building a peace-time administrative system.

Will socialism or radical democracy fare better in mobilizing and directing the resources of a new state once the rallying and unifying threat is gone? Or will competing religious/conservative movements emerge in peacetime, similar to the urban and conservative-modernist approach similar to Turkey's AKP? If Rojava's experience in democratic confederalism and canton-style political structures prevail in peacetime, will this spillover into the KRG, or will both Kurdish enclaves remain culturally opposite and irreconcilable in their worldview? Also in terms of their diplomatic orientation, will they ally with the same external power (such as the United States) or will they sit at the opposite ends, as KRG stays with the U.S. and Rojava comes under Russian influence?

## CONCLUSION

This article discussed history, geography, demography, access to waterways, and oil as some of the key drivers of the Kurds' near future. Among these drivers, age and youth are perhaps the most important and will likely to be the most transformative. The next several decades will witness a global "age divide," in which rapidly aging advanced countries will be rendered globally insignificant by the rise of robust manpower growth in low-income countries. Around the Kurdish *Lebensraum* too, this age disparity is fast emerging. As birthrates in Kurdish-dominated regions increase the youth population in neighboring Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, it brings a number of potentially transformative developments in the form labor and capital relations, political preferences and state-society relations.

Kurds' future will remain firmly anchored to their geographic relationship to the Taurus and Zagros mountains, with the wars in Iraq and Syria enabling them control of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, thereby rendering the Kurds in charge of how much water will flow to their Arab neighbors to the south after it passes from Turkey. This will significantly increase the Kurds' bargaining power in Iraqi and Syrian futures. In terms of resources, while the KRG has politically meaningful amounts of oil and an exciting natural gas future, its ability to export them depends hugely on Iraqi government's will and which neighboring country will take the risk of exporting it at the expense of deteriorating relations with Baghdad. So far, this has been Turkey, but once Rojava unites into a single territorial entity, and reaches the Mediterranean, this may no longer be required and KRG may choose export its resources through northern Syria. This, however, depends entirely on whether KRG's ethnic kinship to Rojava will trump its Islamic understanding with Turkey.

In terms of how intra-Kurdish rivalries will develop, tribalism, Islam, secularism and socialism will be the main drivers of political identification and two different experiments in statebuilding. While the tribal-religious foundations of the KRG made it a good Turkish and Saudi ally, the same tribalism has prevented state reform and seen the region slip into a rentier economy. During low oil price periods, KRG will find it difficult to sustain itself economically, growing even more dependent on Turkey or another neighboring country to survive. Rojava, on the other hand, emerged with the ideal of a more egalitarian and progressive society; yet it is unclear whether these ideals can be translated into statebuilding and daily administration of its territories during peace time, much less be sustainable as the responsibilities of standing administration began to weigh heavily. These two types of Kurdish statebuilding will be the main source of contestation in the near future.

In Turkey, a collapsed peace process will see a return back to military-PKK conflict, whose end is currently unforeseen. While the Turkish government has suggested

the possibility of a return back to the peace process, it is unclear how that will unfold, or whether it will resume in a way either side expect it to. Most importantly, following the civilian toll of the security operations, the Kurds in Turkey may grow irreversibly suspicious of future peace processes and offer more political resistance towards the type of resolution offered by Ankara. With the Peace and Democracy Party (HDP) sidelined both by Ankara and the PKK, a political bridge that can legitimately voice the grievances of the Kurds may be long unforthcoming. This in turn will continue as an unresolved crisis, with its demographic aspect a ticking time bomb.

Iran will emerge as the least affected country from the new Kurdish awakening. While PJAK attacks have been easily contained locally in the past, Tehran doesn't have substantial defensive vulnerability against the group. Although the Mahabad riots of May 2015 reminded Iran that its Kurdish question hasn't yet been resolved fully, with Iran's improving international image, there will be much less global interest over Iran's Kurdish question. To that end, even though Tehran may choose to brutally suppress any Iranian Kurdish uprisings and riots, it will either be kept away from the eyes of the media, or will be overlooked by the world's diplomatic focus. Moreover, Tehran may clandestinely choose to support both the PKK and Rojava, given the united agenda of fighting ISIS and disdain towards Sunni influence in the region. A Kurdish belt under Iranian influence will remain Turkey's nightmare and will continue to negatively impact Turkish-Iranian relations. That said, such negative impact has been going on since the 16th century.

Iraqi Kurds are largely faced with an internal administrative problem, rather than an external one: how to escape rentierism and tribal politics, moving towards a reform and progress-oriented future? While KRG is the best-established of all Kurds, with an autonomous administration, oil reserves and the protection of Turkey and the United States, it is still not fully on its own feet and will require continued external help and risk becoming a colony or protectorate. In addition, its future with the Iraqi government is in serious question over oil production and exporting rights—a problem that will likely continue longer. Syrian Kurds, on the other hand, are in great flux, having carved a larger portion of territory than they historically occupied in Syria. While Rojava has been a success story in terms of its victories against ISIS, these came at a very high human and material cost. Unless Rojava fails in uniting its cantons and push for a Mediterranean opening, it will be a socialist version of the KRG, minus oil reserves, rendering it weak and externally dependent in the future.

The arrival of Russia into Syria is the main wild card in this calculus. Together with the Syrian government forces, Russia has been able to weaken the moderate Syrian opposition, which is supported by Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Territorially, weakening the moderate opposition allows for the uniting of the Rojava cantons, although it is currently unclear whether Russia will sponsor such a unifica-

tion militarily. Nonetheless Russia, in alliance with Iran, will likely become the main protectors of Rojava, and by extension, the PKK, YPG, and PYD, including their offshoots. With the support of these two regional powers and the relative apathy of the United States and Europe towards the Russian-Iranian support for Rojava, this may in fact allow for an autonomous Kurdish statelet in Syria. Whether such support will include an opening into the Mediterranean remains the biggest question of them all. 

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In this study we used the following variables:

Groups: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) - Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG (People’s Defence Forces) - Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star, YJA STAR (Free Women’s Units) - Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK (Group of Communities in Kurdistan) - Teyrênbazê Azadiya Kurdistanê, TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) - Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratî, PYD (Democratic Union Party – Syria) - Tevgera Ciwanan Welatparêz Yê Şoreşger, YDG-H (Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement) -

Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG (People's Protection Units) - Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ (Women's Protection Units) - Yekîtiya Niştimanî ya Kurdistanê, PUK (The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) - Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) - Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, KNC (Kurdish National Council) - Peshmerga (Pêşmerge) - Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK or HRK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) - Hêzên Parastina Jinê, HPJ (Women's Defence Forces) - Yekîneyên Parastina Rojhilatê Kurdistan, YRK (East Kurdistan Defense Units) - Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê, YPŞ (Sinjar Resistance Units) - Parastin u Zanyari (Protection and Information – KRG official intelligence) - Quwwât Sûriyâ al-Dîmuqrâţîya, SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces)

Names: Murat Karayılan - Cemil Bayık - Bese Hozat - Bahoz Erdal (Fehman Huseyn) - Sofi Nurettin - Zubeyir Aydar - Salih Muslim - Sipan Hemo - Giwan Ibrahim - Roshna Akeed - Masoud Barzani - Jalal Talabani

Incidents: aerial\_attack, armed\_clash, border\_incident, chemical\_attack, drone\_strike, espionage, explosion, military\_exercise, military\_operation, sabotage, shelling, shooting, curfew, protest, riots, road\_blockade, assassination, bomb\_defusal, corruption, kidnapping, security\_incident, security\_operation, smuggling, air\_traffic\_disruption, food\_shortage, pipeline\_damage, pipeline\_shutdown, diplomatic\_relations\_establishment

Date range: 1 February 2014–2 February 2016.

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