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The Elusive Quest for a Kurdish State

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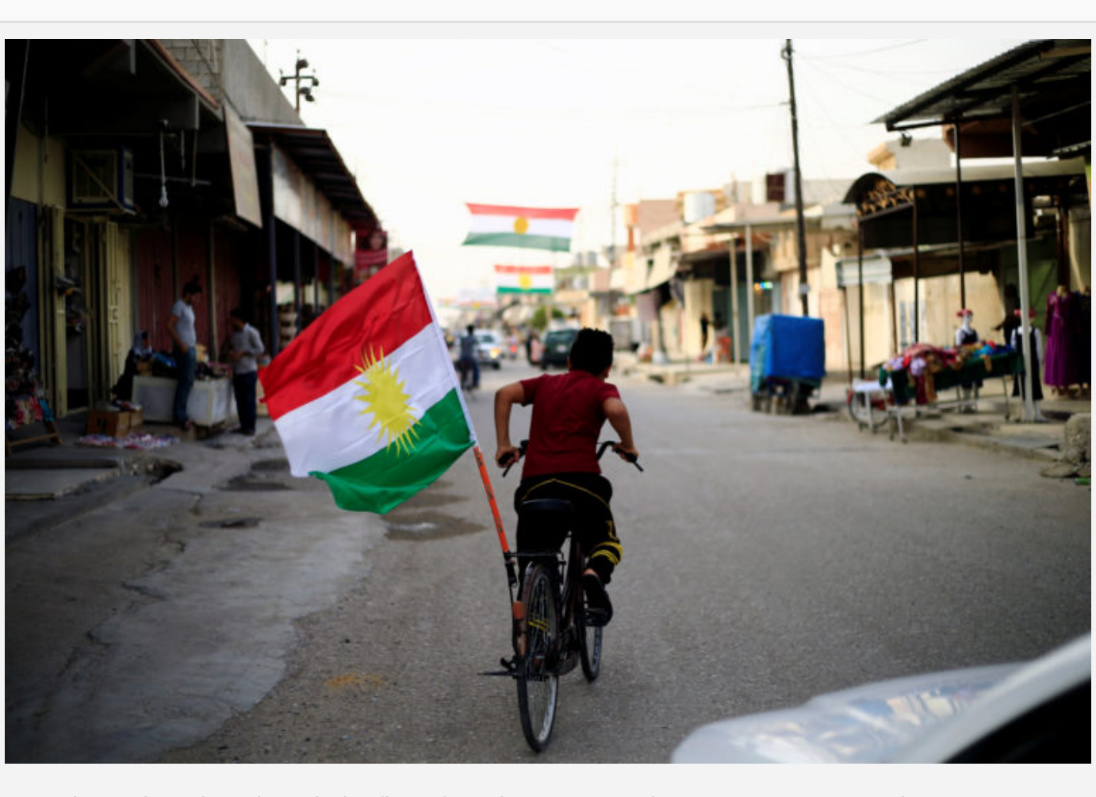
In June 2014, Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, or KDP) and president of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region, made the historic announcement that his administration would make preparations to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence. Stating that Iraq was already "effectively partitioned,"[1] Barzani's proclamation came amid a profound crisis for the Iraqi state: In May 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had launched a successful offensive into Iraq from strongholds in Syria. Within a matter of weeks, ISIS had taken control of much of the Sunni Arab northwest, including the city of Mosul, and proclaimed its leader, Ibrahim al Samarrai—better known by his nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the caliph of a new Islamic state.



A boy rides a bicycle with the flag of Kurdistan in Tuz Khurmato, Iraq, September 24, 2017.

Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters

With Iraqi forces in disarray, the Kurds moved to fill the power vacuum left in the so-called disputed territories, including the oil rich city of Kirkuk. The status of these areas had long been a major source of contention between the Iraqi central government and the Kurds. With Baghdad's power and prestige at a nadir and their own territorial ambitions satisfied, it seemed to the Iraqi Kurdish leadership that events had provided them with a seemingly unparalleled opportunity to secure national independence.

In August, however, ISIS turned its attention to Iraqi Kurdistan by striking at the regional capital of Erbil and seizing the Yazidi town of Sinjar. The timely intervention of American air power saved Erbil, but the repercussions from the fall of Sinjar were disastrous. Abandoned by Iraqi Kurdish forces, ISIS subjected the Yazidis—a Kurdish-speaking religious minority—to a genocidal campaign of murder, rape and enslavement.[2] One outcome of this calamitous turn of events was to force the postponement of the referendum until the threat of ISIS had been eliminated. Over the next three years, Iraq's Kurds worked alongside the Iraqi army, Shi'i militias and their Iranian backers, as well as US troops, to drive ISIS back.

Following the recapture of Mosul by Iraqi forces in 2017, the Kurds were finally able to move ahead with the independence referendum. Despite opposition from Baghdad, on September 15, 2017, people went to the polls in the three provinces that make up the Kurdistan Region of Iraq—Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah, plus the disputed territories that the Kurds had taken control of in 2014. The result was decisive: 92 percent voted in favor of independence.

The referendum proposed a limited Kurdish state. The Kurdish homeland—Greater Kurdistan—stretches out in a crescent across the rugged uplands that separate the Anatolian and Iranian plateaus, encompassing not only northeastern Iraq, but also southeastern Turkey (home to the largest concentration of Kurds), northwestern Iran and northern Syria. Iraqi Kurdish leaders, who had long cultivated relationships with Turkey, Iran and Syria, were careful to emphasize that they held no irredentist ambitions, stressing that they sought independence for Iraqi Kurdistan only. Nevertheless, the vote met with condemnation not only from Baghdad, but also from Ankara, Tehran and Damascus. Almost immediately, Iraqi Kurdistan's neighbors, working in concert with Iraq's central government, placed the region under embargo.[3]

The hostility of countries with their own restive Kurdish populations is perhaps predictable. Whatever the intentions of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, Kurdish secession from Iraq would have been seen as precedent setting and bound to fuel Kurdish separatism beyond Iraq. The United States, however, also remained opposed to Kurdish independence, despite the close relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and US military during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. When Iraqi forces attacked Kurdish troops stationed in Kirkuk on October 15, 2017 the United States remained aloof from the conflict. Within a matter of hours, Shi'i militias, wielding modern American weaponry, drove the Iraqi Kurds, who relied on antiquated Soviet armaments, from their positions in the city.[4] In the immediate aftermath of the fighting as many as 100,000 Kurds fled the city and within weeks Barzani had resigned from office, although he was replaced by his nephew Nechirvan Barzani.

In the end, the Iraqi central government largely restricted military operations to the disputed territories and, while the loss of Kirkuk was a deep humiliation for the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, the institutions of Kurdish autonomy in the provinces of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah remained intact. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the question of Iraqi Kurdish independence will be on the agenda again in the near future.

The events of autumn 2017 highlight the formidable obstacles facing Kurdish nationalists in their quest for statehood. While it would be a mistake to regard Kurdish political activism as fully synonymous with separatist nationalism, the 2017 referendum was by no means the Kurds' first unsuccessful attempt to achieve independence. Divisions within the Kurdish movement, whether resulting from ideological considerations or personal rivalries, are often seen as playing a significant role in the inability of Kurdish nationalists to win statehood. At best, however, such divisions are of secondary importance. Rather, it is the broader geopolitical architecture of the Middle East and the reluctance of the Great Powers to make adjustments to that order in favor of the Kurds that constitute the primary reason for the Kurds' political failures in the modern era.

The Quest for Independence

The Kurdish desire for independence, with origins dating back to the late nineteenth century, is hardly a novel phenomenon. As early as the 1880s, Sheikh Ubeydullah, an influential religious leader, sought to justify his rebellion against both the Ottoman and Iranian governments through the idiom of Kurdish nationhood. Ottoman and Iranian forces eventually crushed the revolt, but contemporary observers were certainly aware of its political significance: the British Consul at Tabriz, W.G. Abbot, noted that, "It will probably be asked hereafter, what is to be done with Kurdistan."[5] His observation proved to be one of oracular precision. Over the subsequent decades, there was a slow but steady growth of Kurdish political agitation that manifested in the proliferation of newspapers, civil society organizations and, by the early twentieth century, armed groups—all seeking to represent the interests of the Kurdish community.

In retrospect, perhaps the most critical moment in the modern history of the Kurds came in the aftermath of World War I when the defeat of the Ottoman Empire paved the way for its dissolution and eventual partition. Imperial interests, most notably those of Britain and France, played a determining role in shaping the post-Ottoman order in the Middle East. The construction of this new regional order was influenced by the rise of the principle of nationality—codified in Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's theory of national self-determination and US President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points—and specifically the notion that the peoples of the Ottoman Empire had the right to national self-government. The establishment of the League of Nations' mandate system was an uneasy compromise between the principle of nationality and overt colonialism: Britain and France were given administrative control over the new states carved out of the Ottoman empire and were tasked with guiding those states to eventual national sovereignty.

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Kurdish leaders were quick to mobilize in the chaotic circumstances that prevailed following the end of the war. In 1918, Kurdish political and intellectual elites residing in Istanbul founded the Society for the Betterment of Kurdistan (Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti or KTC) to lobby the victorious allies on behalf of the Kurdish community. The high point of these efforts, at least in terms of international recognition, came in 1920 with the inclusion of articles in the Treaty of Sèvres that provided a pathway to independence for the Kurdish provinces of the Ottoman Empire. While the Kurdistan envisioned in Sèvres was somewhat truncated—it excluded territories around Lake Van and west of the Euphrates as well as Iran's Kurdish inhabited districts—it did provide the Kurds with recognition as a nation with the right to form their own government.[6]

The hopes of Kurdish nationalists that the hour of statehood was nigh were, however, dashed by a confluence of events. The success of resistance by Mustafa Kemal (also known as Atatürk) to plans outlined in Sèvres for the partition of Anatolia resulted in the incorporation of much of Ottoman Kurdistan into the newly formed Republic of Turkey. In 1923, Britain and her allies signed the Treaty of Lausanne with Mustafa Kemal's new Ankara-based administration, which superseded Sèvres and jettisoned any reference to the Kurds.

Meanwhile, Britain and France moved to include the remaining portions of Ottoman Kurdistan in the newly formed Arab states of Iraq and Syria. Despite resistance in the British-occupied Mosul province, where Sheikh Mahmud Berzinji attempted to establish a Kurdish kingdom from his base in the city of Sulaymaniyah, by the mid-1920s the process of partition had been largely completed. As a result, the Kurdish community found itself divided among four countries—Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria—a state of affairs that remains unchanged to this day. Despite this new geopolitical reality, Kurdish unrest has remained a perennial feature of politics in all four of the countries in which the Kurds found themselves. In the interwar years, the nationalist regime in Turkey faced a series of Kurdish uprisings: the Sheikh Said revolt of 1925, the Xoybûn Revolt of the early 1930s and the 1937–1938 Dersim Revolt. In Iraq, Kurdish unrest also continued as Sheikh Mahmud fought to resist his homeland's integration into the British-backed kingdom until 1932.

The Kurdish uprisings of the interwar period were ultimately defeated and, in Turkey in particular, repressed with great ferocity. But the Kurdish movement has proved remarkably resilient, with new waves of political mobilization emerging across the region following the conclusion of World War II. As early as 1946, Kurdish activists in Iran took advantage of the power vacuum that emerged in the wake of the Anglo-Soviet occupation of the country to establish a short-lived republic centered in the town of Mahabad. Although crushed a year later, Kurdish activism in Iran reemerged following the 1979 Islamic Revolution as Kurdish groups waged war against the central government throughout the 1980s. In Iraq, the 1958 revolution that overthrew the British-backed monarchy heralded the beginning of a new phase of Kurdish militancy from 1961 until the 1991 uprising. Thanks to US intervention, the uprising resulted in the creation of the autonomous Kurdish administration in Iraq's northeast.

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In Turkey, the 1960s and 1970s also witnessed an upswing in Kurdish political activism, culminating in the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK) in 1978, which has led a bloody guerrilla insurgency against Ankara since 1984. Indeed, more recently, in Syria, long considered a relative backwater when it comes to Kurdish nationalism, the outbreak of civil war in 2011 provided a setting for the emergence of Kurdish groups, most notably the PKK's sister organization, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or PYD) as a major political force. Yet, despite more than a century of agitation, protest and armed struggle, Kurdish nationalists have been unable to overcome the impediments to statehood.

Reassessing the Kurdish Question

For many Kurdish nationalists, as well as their opponents in Ankara, Baghdad, Tehran and Damascus, the Kurdish question is at its core a question of statehood. Indeed, in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, government hostility to not only Kurdish political mobilization but also to any manifestation of Kurdish ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference has often been rooted in a fear that any form of concession to Kurdish opinion would inevitably threaten the territorial integrity of the state. Perhaps the central tragedy of the Kurdish question has been the fact that anti-democratic state policies of violent cultural and political repression driven by a fear of Kurdish separatism have often only served to reinforce Kurdish militancy.

A more detailed examination of the evolution of the Kurdish movement calls into question the notion that Kurdish political activism is inherently separatist. From its earliest iterations, the movement itself has been divided on the question of the ultimate objectives of political activism. In the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I, Istanbul-based groups, most notably the Society of Kurdish Mutual Aid and Progress (Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti, or KTTC), established in 1908, regarded the fate of the Kurds as lying within a cosmopolitan Ottoman polity governed by constitutional principles. In contrast, others, most notably the Kurdish aristocrat and former Ottoman official Abdürrezzak Bedirhan, sought to liberate Kurdistan from Ottoman rule with the support of the empire's old enemy, Tsarist Russia. In the crucial period immediately following the end of World War I, divisions between those advocating autonomy within a decentralized Ottoman Empire and independence resulted in a formal split in the KTTC and the creation of a rival organization, the Society for Kurdish Social Organizations (Kürt Teskilat-i İçtimaiye Cemiyeti, or KTİC) in 1920.

Such divisions have remained a feature of Kurdish politics in the post-Ottoman era. In fact, with the revival of the Kurdish movement in Turkey in the 1950s and 1960s, a new generation of Kurdish intellectuals and leaders focused on the amelioration of the social and economic condition of the country's Kurdish community rather than national independence. Thus, the primary divisions were between those advocating parliamentary action and those who sought an alliance with Turkey's revolutionary left. While during the 1980s the PKK's political goal was the creation of a "united, independent and socialist" Kurdistan, it has come in recent years to reject the nation-state as a political model outright. In its place, it advocates Democratic Confederalism, an anarchistic political philosophy based on the works of Brooklyn-born Murray Bookchin and adapted to the Kurdish context by the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.[7] In Syria, the PYD—which took control of much of the country's northeast in 2011—has adopted Democratic Confederalism as a governing ideology and seeks to export it to the predominately Arab populated regions. At the same time, under the leadership of Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, the parliamentary wing of the Kurdish movement in Turkey—the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, or HDP)—has endeavored to transform itself from a party representing Kurdish interests into a left-wing coalition more akin to Greece's Syriza or Britain's Labour Party during the Corbyn era.

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Even in Iraqi Kurdistan, the site of the most recent drive for Kurdish statehood, historically Kurdish political leaders tended to eschew overt separatism. Masoud Barzani's KDP and its supporters initially welcomed the 1958 revolution, expressing the hope that it might usher in a new era of Arab-Kurdish fraternity.[8] Even after relations with Baghdad soured, the Kurdish movement, led until his death in 1979 by Masoud Barzani's father, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, limited Kurdish demands, at least formally, to autonomy rather than secession.

Thus, the so-called Kurdish question is not simply a binary question of whether or not to pursue statehood but is a series of interrelated questions pertaining to the political implications of Kurdish claims to nationhood. If the Kurds constitute a nation, how might they best secure their collective interests? Indeed, what are those interests? What should the movement prioritize? In this respect, the separatist agenda has been and continues to be only one political avenue pursued by Kurdish activists. Yet, even when those seeking to represent the interests of the Kurds have limited their demands—whether out of pragmatism or a genuine commitment to political accommodation—to goals that fall short of independence, a resolution of the Kurdish question has still remained beyond reach.

While Kurdish nationalists might ask why the Kurds have yet to obtain statehood, a question certainly worthy of consideration, a broader question is why has more than a century of Kurdish agitation and activism failed to bring about a definitive resolution to the Kurdish issue, even one that falls short of Kurdish statehood?

Internal Divisions

The rapid collapse of Kurdish forces in Kirkuk, Iraq on October 15, 2017 can, in part, be accounted for by the unannounced last-minute withdrawal of fighters loyal to the KDP's main rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Nîştimanîya Kurdistanê, or PUK). This stark exposure of the divisions within Iraqi Kurdish ranks no doubt made the humiliation of defeat all the more painful. Disunity is nothing new to Kurdish politics. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the clashes between the KDP and PUK have a venerable history, with the two groups fighting a bitter civil war in the 1990s, resulting in the effective partition of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The PKK has also had a long history of conflict with rivals. In its early years, the organization waged war against not only tribal groups it regarded as having collaborated with the Turkish authorities, but also the Socialist Party of Kurdistan of Turkey (Partiya Sosyalista Kurdistana Tirkiyê). Later, during the 1990s, the PKK was drawn into Iraqi Kurdistan's internecine war, engaging in clashes with the KDP. The KDP itself received much criticism not only for its war (in cooperation with Turkey) against the PKK, but also its alliance with the Iranian government against the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê–Êran, or KDP–I) in the early 1980s. Moreover, partisans of the PUK are often quick to point out that in 1996—at the height of the Iraqi Kurdish civil war—the KDP briefly allied itself with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who less than a decade earlier had engaged in the Anfal campaign of genocide that left over 100,000 Kurds dead. Whether out of ideological differences or personal ambition, there is little doubt that the Kurdish movement, or perhaps more accurately movements, has been a fractious one.

Kurdish intellectuals and activists have often seen this disunity as the primary reason for the failure of the Kurds to achieve independence. For instance, one Kurdish scholar, referring to the critical period following the end of World War I, observed that the

> disunited, fragmented Kurdish leadership and personal rivalries among Kurdish leaders have been key factors in halting a Kurdish state from developing. These aspects were ultimately more responsible for this failure than the unwillingness of Paris and London to accommodate the Kurdish demand for a state in Kurdish majority areas. And 100 years later, it appears that the same factors today may continue to prevent the successful formation of an independent Kurdistan.[9]

Although political divisions have been a feature of Kurdish nationalist politics since its earliest days, it is perhaps necessary to emphasize that political divisions—ideological or personal—exist within all societies. Separatist movements around the world are often riven with internal rivalries and wars of national liberation can often seem more akin to civil wars than a unified struggle against an outside power. More concretely, were the South Sudanese, who won their independence in 2011, any more or less united than the Kurds?[10] Was the South Sudanese nationalist movement more coherent than that of the Catalans, who like the Kurds, also failed in a recent bid for independence?

The Limits Imposed by Geopolitics

At best, internal divisions can be viewed as an auxiliary factor in understanding the failure (or success) of any given struggle for independence. Of more significance are the geopolitical circumstances within which the struggle takes place. At times, secessionist movements have enjoyed success due to the unwillingness of the metropole to maintain its rule: for example, Norwegian independence from Sweden in 1905, or more recently, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and of Czechoslovakia two years later. In general, however, such cases have been the exception rather than the rule. The modern nation-state is a jealous entity, often striving with ruthless efficiency to forge unified nations out of culturally heterogeneous population. As Eric Hobsbawm once observed: "Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round."[11] He perhaps forgot to add that policies pursued in the name of national unification sometimes end up creating the "wrong" nation. There is little doubt that the history of violent repression and cultural assimilation faced by the Kurds has served to heighten a sense of Kurdish distinctiveness.

From the French intercession on the side of the American patriots in their war of independence in the late eighteenth century, to India's involvement in Bangladesh's war of liberation in the early 1970s, it is often foreign intervention that proves decisive for secessionist movements. The Kurdish movement too has benefited, at times, from external support. Despite often pursuing vigorous campaigns of repression against the Kurds within their own territories, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria have all, at certain moments in history, patronized Kurdish nationalists beyond their borders. During the 1960s and 1970s Iran backed Iraq's Kurdish movement but abandoned them following the signing of the 1975 Algiers Accord. Syria provided sanctuary to the PKK, until Turkey's threats to deploy military force made continued support untenable. Likewise, the abrupt withdrawal of aid has often resulted in defeat for the Kurds. The Algiers Accord precipitated the collapse of Kurdish resistance to Baghdad, while Syria's acquiescence to Turkish demands set the stage for the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999.

Ultimately, for the powers ruling over the Kurdish homeland, support for the Kurdish movement is one of political expediency, a tool deployed in order to keep a rival off balance. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have little desire to see their Kurdish clients succeed in the long term, given the potential implications for their own internal affairs. In short, the geopolitical realities of the Middle East, more specifically the existence of significant Kurdish populations within four different countries, ensures that there is little regional appetite for Kurdish independence. This state of affairs has implications for the disposition of the broader international community toward the Kurdish question, with Great Powers being unwilling to jeopardize their regional alliances for the sake of the Kurds.

Great Power Politics

Over the last three decades, many Kurds have looked to the United States as a potential international backer, and not without reason. US intervention in Iraq in 1991 and in Syria in 2014 was critical to the emergence of zones of Kurdish autonomy in both countries. Yet, US policy has always contained contradictions. At the same time as American cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds deepened in the 1990s and 2000s, the United States extended support to Turkey in its war against the PKK. The result was a dichotomy among American policy makers between "good" (Iraqi) Kurds and "bad" (Turkish) Kurds. In other words, the United States' disposition toward any given group of Kurds was a function of its relationship with the state within which those Kurds found themselves. Despite their close relations with the United States, it should have come as no surprise to the Iraqi Kurdish leadership in 2017 that the world's remaining superpower opposed Kurdish independence.

Apart from periodic bouts of state creation, most notably following the end of the twentieth century's two world wars, the Great Powers have proved generally quite conservative on the issue of secession. Even after decades of conflict, the United States was ambivalent to the dissolution of its old adversary, the USSR, out of fears that the breakup of the union might provoke political instability.[12] Similarly, the prospect of Kurdish separation from Iraq also ignited such fears, and threatened to alienate not only Baghdad, but also NATO ally Turkey. In short, the price of Kurdish independence was simply not worth the attendant risks.

There is a parallel between recent events in Iraqi Kurdistan and the period following the end of World War I, which Kurdish nationalists often describe as a missed golden opportunity to press their claims. In this case geopolitical realities again served as the primary impediment to Kurdish statehood. During the early years of World War I, Russian forces occupied the northern portions of Ottoman Kurdistan. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, however, led to the collapse of the Russian military and the Ottoman reoccupation of territories lost over the preceding years. Thus, by the time of the Ottoman capitulation in late 1918, Ottoman Kurdistan had already been partitioned. Britain, advancing through Mesopotamia, occupied the Kurdish districts within Mosul province and Ottoman troops remained in control of districts further north.

Subsequently, British policy prioritized securing its hold on Mesopotamia, with the integration of Mosul and its Kurdish districts into the newly formed Kingdom of Iraq. At the same time, Britain had little interest in intervening further north. With the rise of Mustafa Kemal's nationalists, any commitment to Kurdish independence was trumped by efforts to reach an agreement with Ankara and secure a strong Turkish buffer state against the newly formed Soviet Union. In short, while the Ottoman Empire's collapse might have encouraged the belief among Kurdish nationalists that the moment was ripe for a push for statehood, just as the collapse of the Iraqi state did in 2017, these supposedly favorable conditions proved to be merely an optical illusion.

In the final analysis, factors beyond the control of Kurdish political activists and leaders will continue to shape the fate of the Kurdish community in the Middle East. Geopolitical realities preclude the Kurds themselves from forcing a resolution to the issue, whether through statehood or some other form of political accommodation. The Kurdish community is not without leverage or agency, but it lacks the capacity to act unilaterally. While international support may materialize at times, given the inherent conservatism of the Great Powers when it comes to state creation, it will be temporary and limited. At best, such support will provide the Kurdish movement with short-term advantage.

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If there is to be a lasting solution to Kurdish aspirations, it is more likely to emerge from regional dynamics and, more precisely, a broader process of democratization, inclusion and a shift away from the policies of repression that have fueled Kurdish unrest. This shift will require a societal recognition on the part of Turks, Arabs and Persians of the legitimacy of the Kurds' aspirations and the reality of their grievances. In this regard, the Kurdish issue and its resolution (whatever form that takes) can and should be regarded as a litmus test for democracy in all the countries that rule over Kurdistan.

[Djene Rhys Bajalan is assistant professor of history at Missouri State University.]

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