



Volume 8, Number 18

October 7, 2014

The Islamic State: A Catalyst for Kurdish Nation-Building

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Following the lightning attack that "The Islamic State" (IS) (also known as ISIS, ISIL, and *Da'esh*) launched against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq on August 3, 2014, observers were quick to conclude that the steady progress towards attaining Kurdish independence would be shelved because of this war.¹ In fact, the Islamic State's offensive is serving as a catalyst for Kurdish nation-building and state-building, as well as transforming the Kurdish entity in northern Iraq into a vital and independent player in the eyes of many in the international community.

The Kurdish Entity and IS as a Mirror Image

In many ways, the developments in the Kurdish arena in Iraq (and Syria) are a mirror image, albeit a benign one, of those occurring in the vast swath of territory now dominated by the Islamic State. Both entities have swiftly occupied new territories, blurred the internationally recognized boundaries between existing states, built new administrations, attracted volunteer fighters from abroad, and mobilized members of the international community to fight the "bad guys" and support the "good" ones.

Both the Kurdish forces and the IS fighters seized the opportunity to fill the vacuum left by the collapsing Iraqi and Syrian states and build an autonomous political entity in a specific swath of territory. In Syria, Kurds initiated a self-governing administration in the summer of 2012, which led Islamist groups, primarily the IS, to immediately target them and compete to fill the same vacuum. In Iraq, as the IS occupied Mosul and Tikrit in June, KRG forces managed to take control of disputed oil rich areas, the most important of which was Kirkuk. The Kurds of Iraq enlarged the area under their control by 40 percent, which meant that they now had more than 1,000 kilometers of common border with the fledgling Islamic State, while being

¹ See, for example: Henri Barkey, "[Kurdish Independence: One day but certainly not now.](#)" *The American Interest*, September 8, 2014.

geographically severed from the Iraqi central government. Each side's territorial gains turned the Kurds and the Islamic State into primary enemies of one another. Indeed, recognizing the Kurds' fragile hold on the newly conquered oil rich areas, IS launched its offensive against the KRG in early August, taking Kurdish forces by surprise.

On another level, the blurring of borders between Syria and Iraq gave rise to a new territorial "no-man's land," which can be called "Suraqiyya," where Kurdish and Islamist entities are vying for influence. Thus, on June 30, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of the Islamic caliphate in this no-man's land. Furthermore, he declared that as far as the IS was concerned, the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, on the basis of which these states were carved out of the Ottoman Empire, was null and void, thus signaling that the internationally recognized borders were no longer valid in their eyes.

In fact, the erosion of borders between Iraq and Syria began long before this announcement and it proved advantageous not just to the IS, whose forces kept crossing back and forth between Iraq and Syria, but to the Kurds as well. In the summer of 2012 when Syria's Kurdish region (known to the Kurds as Rojava) initiated its autonomous project, it created new possibilities for cooperation between Syria's Kurds and the KRG, which share a common border. Indeed, shortly afterwards, the KRG built the Semalka bridge on the Khabur river to facilitate such trans-border cooperation. However, rivalry and competition precluded close cooperation between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, and it was only the war that IS launched against the KRG and Rojava that forced the two Kurdish entities together to fight the common enemy.

In terms of volunteer fighters from abroad, one can see a parallel phenomenon among the Kurds and supporters of IS. Just as young Sunni Muslims have rushed from the four corners of the earth to fill IS's ranks, so too have Kurds come from different parts of Europe to support the Kurdish forces in their struggle against the IS. However, in the Kurdish case these volunteers are not mainly young people but rather veteran Peshmerga fighters in their 50s and 60s, who had built their new lives in Europe but were keen to put their previous military experience to use in the service of the Kurdish national cause. According to one source, there were so many volunteers that people were being turned away, and those who were accepted were made to purchase their own weapons.

Within the KRG, there was immediate mobilization among different parts of society for fear that the IS offensive would jeopardize the Kurds' state-building achievements of the last twenty years. The Peshmerga suffered severe setbacks during the first few days of the fighting, the worst of which were the fall of Sinjar, the center of the Yezidi religious minority; the IS's takeover of the Mosul Dam; and the IS advance towards Erbil, the capital of the KRG region. Sensing that this was an existential threat, the Peshmergas of the two rival KRG parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party

(KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), temporarily set aside their rivalry and united their forces in order to push the IS out of areas which had only recently fallen into Kurdish hands, such as Kirkuk, Jalawla, and the Mosul Dam. Similarly, thousands of Kurdish volunteers from within the KRG have also been rushing to the frontlines to aid the embattled Peshmerga. Even the women's regiment, which was set up in 1996, reportedly sent female fighters to Jalawla to fight side by side with men.

The Wake-Up Call

The Peshmerga's initial setback was a wake-up call for the Kurds. A parliamentary committee that was set up to investigate the causes of the embarrassing defeats reached the conclusion that the main problem was that "there were different sources of decision making within the Peshmerga."² This prompted President Mas'ud Barzani to call for the formation of a unified regular army that would unite the Peshmergas, whose loyalty until then was to a party rather than the Kurdish nation. Barzani granted the Minister of Peshmerga six months to carry out the necessary reforms and put the force under a single unified command.

No less important, despite the animosity and rivalry among the leadership of all four parts of Greater Kurdistan— Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran— the IS threat worked wonders in arousing strong feelings of patriotism and solidarity among the Kurdish people as a whole, including in the diaspora. It also stimulated trans-border cooperation between the guerrilla forces of all four areas of Greater Kurdistan, with fighters coming from every region to fight in the KRG region and Rojava. For example, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran was deployed to the area of Makhmour, southwest of Erbil, under the KRG's defense ministry command. Similarly, the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) and its offshoot in Rojava, the *Yekineyen Parastina Gel* (YPG), which includes many female fighters, were also battling IS units in both Syria and Iraq. In a recent important development, the Peshmerga and YPG began coordinating their activities to stem IS attacks.³ The two parties have probably reached the conclusion that if they do not hang together they will be hanged together. Indeed, a kind of interdependency has developed between them: The PKK, which is still considered a terrorist organization by the US and the EU, needed the legitimation which the KRG could bring them in the international arena, while the KRG needed the PKK's military prowess that was demonstrated in Sinjar and other encounters with Islamic State forces.

The alarm created by the Islamic State's unprecedented gains and its terrible atrocities caused a drastic change in the international community's attitude towards the KRG and to a lesser extent towards Rojava. Realizing that with the Iraqi army's dramatic

² [Rudaw](#), 25 August 2014.

³ [Nefel](#), September 30, 2014.

collapse the KRG remained the only bulwark against the IS, many countries in the West began to actively support the KRG in various ways. The most dramatic but undeclared change came from the United States, which for a long time had insisted on preserving the integrity of Iraq. The change could even be observed in the public discourse of senior officials. For example, President Barack Obama began differentiating between Iraq and the Kurds in his speeches, when he was talking about the need to support them in confronting the Islamic State. On the ground, the Americans turned the KRG into a center of their military and diplomatic activities in the region, while high ranking Kurdish officials were suddenly welcomed in the corridors of power in Washington.⁴ This was a far cry from the 1970s and 1980s when Kurds were completely excluded from the American public eye. For their part, European leaders began visiting Erbil to show their moral support and coordinate activities against the IS. For example, France's president Francois Hollande traveled to Erbil on September 12, where he announced that the arms France provided to the Kurds were "decisive in reversing the balance of power" in the fight against IS militants.⁵ Arms and military hardware began pouring into the KRG from other states as well, which may prove crucial not just for fighting the IS but also for bolstering a Kurdish national army, a vital component for assuring the viability of a future independent state.

The most crucial support for the Kurds came in the form of airstrikes by the US and its coalition partners in Europe and the Arab countries of the region. It is intriguing that the air support was granted mainly to Kurds in the areas where they have been combating the IS and not to the Iraqi army, which has not proven it is capable of fighting the Islamic State. Forced to choose between leaving the Islamic State unchecked or directly aiding the KRG, the coalition appears to have elected to throw its weight behind the KRG. Secondly, if the US-led coalition is not going to put its own "boots on the ground," then they must enable the Kurds to do so. Indeed, with this vital support, the KRG managed to stop the IS onslaught in their region.

The IS's paradoxical effects

If wars are catalysts for nation building, then the war between the Islamic State and the Kurds is playing such a role for the Kurdish nation. Indeed, the IS has had paradoxical effects on the Kurds. On the one hand it wrought havoc on them, but on the other hand it stimulated unprecedented patriotism and solidarity among the leadership and population of all four Kurdish regions. It also enhanced the pace of state-building, especially with regard to a creating a unified army in the KRG. The external support granted to the KRG, together with the fact that the Iraqi government has been withholding money from it for almost a year, might push the Kurdish leadership to go the extra mile towards independence. On balance, while the latest

⁴ KRG.org. September 18, 2014.

⁵ [Middle East Eye](http://MiddleEastEye.com), September 12, 2014.

developments might have delayed the declaration of a *de jure* Kurdish state, they significantly bolstered the elements of a *de facto* state. Therefore, an official declaration of Kurdish independence seems to be merely a matter of timing.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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