

IV. The Kurds in the Middle East, 2015

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Introduction: the future of ‘Sykes–Picot’

The Middle East continued to be a major source of instability in 2015. The ability of the region to export its problems to other parts of the world was amply displayed by the attacks of the Islamic State (IS), most notably in Paris, and the introduction of Russia as a combatant in Syria.¹ Both the Russian intervention and the historic deal on Iran’s nuclear programme also had a bearing on developments in the region.² In this tumultuous environment the estimated 30 million Kurds (see figures 2.5 and 2.6) generally held their own both politically and militarily, proving that they would continue to be an inseparable and difficult to ignore part of the region’s politics. There were important developments in the political trajectory of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria. In Turkey, a so-called solution process to the country’s perennial ‘Kurdish problem’ came to a bloody halt, but in Iraq and Syria Kurds made progress in pursuit of their political aspirations—even if they remained short of their ultimate goals. These developments are described in more detail below.

Although the Kurds of these three countries, and those of Iran, are often written about separately, what happens in one Kurdish community is intimately related to what happens in another. This is true not just in terms of the growing sense of nationhood that ties the communities to one another, but also in terms of their strategic aims. It is therefore helpful to treat Kurdish politics as much in terms of the politics of Kurdistan as the politics of different communities in their respective states.

Events in 2015—both those played out in public and those that took place out of the spotlight—have shown how intertwined the political fates of the communities are. The Kurdish story has also become intimately linked with regional and global power struggles, most notably in Syria and the IS-controlled territories of Iraq. The new constellation of forces within the region allows the Kurds to take advantage of the interests and policies of different powers and use that advantage to widen their room for political manoeuvre. This is a reality that escaped Kurds when the shape of the Middle East political order was being determined 100 years ago.

It is almost obligatory approaching the centenary of the Sykes–Picot agreement, which divided up the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire between the

¹ On the activities of the Islamic State, see section II in this chapter; and on the conflict in Syria, see chapter 4, section II, in this volume.

² On Iran’s role in the Middle East, see section V in this chapter; on the sanction regime against Iran, see chapter 3 in this volume; and on the Iran nuclear deal see chapter 17, section I.

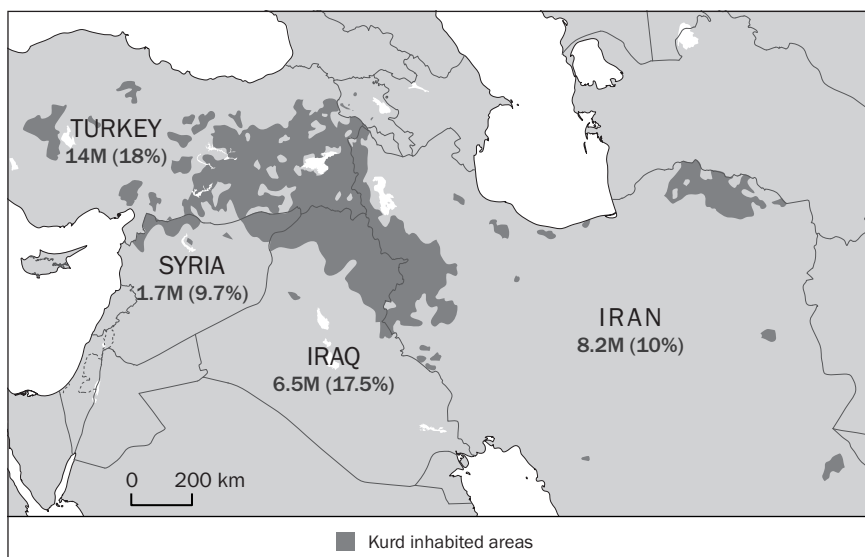


Figure 2.5. The Kurds: a people divided

Note: The figures are million Kurds and percentage of total population.

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

Source: 'The Time of the Kurds', Council on Foreign Relations, 29 July 2015.

United Kingdom and France, to refer to that text and wonder whether the geopolitical order it put together is crumbling.³ Sykes–Picot is less an accurate description of how the lands were divided up, and more shorthand for the impact of imperial rule on the newly minted states and their 'independent' future.

Territoriality and the borders of the Middle East are what are usually evoked by Sykes–Picot, but few realize that the borders that emerged were not the ones originally drafted. Moreover, it was not just the shifting power balance between the UK and France that determined those borders. It was also the resistance of tribes, peasants, denizens and others, as well as the logic of Ottoman administrative structures, that put their mark on the final shape of the region's political geography.⁴

The Sykes–Picot order also codified a political power structure in the region's newly created Arab states based mainly on the supremacy of Sunni Arabs over non-Sunnis and non-Arabs. In the latter category the Kurds, dispersed among four different countries, saw their budding national aspi-

³ Osman, T., 'Why border lines drawn with a ruler in WW1 still rock the Middle East', BBC News, 14 Dec. 2013.

⁴ 'Is Iraq an artificial state?', Interview with Princeton's Sara Pursley, Musings on Iraq (blog), 6 July 2015, <<http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.se/2015/07/is-iraq-artificial-state-interview-with.html>>.

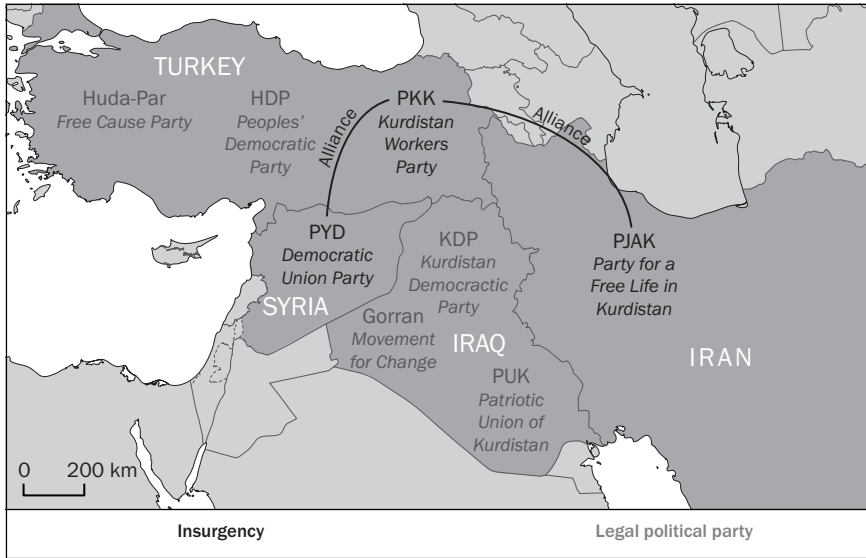


Figure 2.6. Major Kurdish political movements, 2015

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

Source: 'The Time of the Kurds', Council on Foreign Relations, 29 July 2015.

rations and their resistance to being included in the new states violently curtailed. The unravelling of the Arab state order in the Levant after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and in the wake of Arab revolts that commenced in 2010 has made it possible for these aspirations to re-emerge and allows them to find appropriate political trajectories for their fulfilment.

Iraq

In the wake of IS's attacks against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2014, and the push back by the Kurdish forces, a new 1000-kilometre front was formed by IS and the Kurdish Peshmerga in the disputed territories. One consequence of the IS offensive was a massive demographic shift as displaced Sunni Arabs, some 20 per cent (approximately 600 000) of the total Iraqi Sunni Arab population, escaped to the Kurdistan region.⁵

This certainly presented a major challenge for the nascent Kurdish 'statelet'. However, in 2015 the issue that most preoccupied the KRG administration was the severe economic crisis that hit the region even as security

⁵ Karasapan, O. and Kulaksiz, S., 'Iraq's internally displaced populations and external refugees: a soft landing is a requisite for us all', Brookings, 2 Apr. 2015; and 'Iraq: IDPs caught between a rock and a hard place as displacement crisis deepens' Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 30 June 2015.

remained precarious. The main reason for the economic crisis was the unresolved dispute between the KRG and the Iraqi Government over how oil sales should be managed and how the revenue from these sales should be shared.

The relationship with the Iraqi Government

The original oil agreement between the Iraqi Government and the KRG was brokered by the USA and included in the framework of the budgetary law of 2015.⁶ According to the agreement, the KRG was supposed to deliver an average of 250 000 barrels of crude oil to Baghdad and export 300 000 barrels of Kirkuk oil through the KRG-Turkish pipeline. Baghdad was supposed to pay the KRG both its 17 per cent share of total oil sales in 2015 and the \$12 billion that it owed the KRG from 2014. The agreement collapsed, however, because the Iraqi Government, in seeking full control over oil sales, claimed that the KRG was selling oil to other countries—mostly through Turkey—while the KRG insisted on its right to make direct oil sales.⁷

As a consequence, the Iraqi Government refused to transfer the money it owed the KRG, which then failed to pay even the salaries of the Peshmerga troops who were fighting IS. Negotiations scheduled to start between the KRG and the Iraqi Government early in 2016 might find a temporary solution so that at least Peshmerga salaries can be paid. The scarcity of funds available to the KRG increased the discontent among the general population with the KRG's mode of governance, which is based on patronage and mired in corruption.⁸ The inability of the KRG to keep the wheels of patronage greased resulted in mass protests in October 2015 and risks becoming a security challenge in the year ahead.⁹

External challenges and internal divisions

Externally, the KRG had to deal with Iran's military presence in Kurdistan, ostensibly to fight IS. When IS attacked Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran was the only neighbouring country to come to the defence of the Kurds. As the Iranians noted, 'If it were not for us, Erbil would have fallen'.¹⁰ Turkey's failure to provide assistance deeply disappointed the Kurds, who were thankful to Iran. However, Iran's intervention in Kurdistan intensified the ongoing political tension among the KRG's political factions.¹¹ Two of the

⁶ Momammad, S., 'Erbil-Baghdad oil relations swing between deal, no deal', *al-Monitor*, 27 July 2015.

⁷ Zaman, A., 'PM Barzani: Shiite militias should be regulated', *al-Monitor*, 24 Mar. 2015.

⁸ Hassan, K., *Kurdistan's Politicized Society Confronts Sultanistic System* (Carnegie Middle East Center: Beirut, Lebanon, 2015), p. 22.

⁹ Coles, I., 'Three killed in violent unrest in Iraq's Kurdistan region', *Reuters*, 10 Oct. 2015.

¹⁰ Zaman (note 7).

¹¹ Tanchum, M., 'Between Ankara and Tehran: how the scramble for Kurdistan can reshape regional relations', *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Oct. 2014).

KRG's major constituent political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Movement for Change (Gorran), which already enjoyed close economic and political relations with Iran, advanced their positions relative to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), led by the President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani.¹²

This new reality shifted the balance of power within the KRG, which had favoured the PDK for most of the previous decade, and strengthened the two contenders. The dispute over Barzani's presidency in August 2015, after the expiration of his 10-year term, was one outcome of the political instability in the KRG. However, with the support of the USA his presidency was extended for two further years. The PUK and Gorran opposed Barzani's intention to declare independence, and announced that they would coordinate their actions with the Iraqi Government—a move that stemmed as much from their closeness to and dependence on Iran, which opposes the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, as from domestic political expediency.

It is also worth noting that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey on this occasion joined forces with the PUK and Gorran.¹³ The PKK and the PDK have a history of difficult relations and tensions intensified over their divergence of approach to the fate of the Rojava Kurds.¹⁴ Despite a brief reconciliation with the PDK following their joint defence of the Makhmour refugee camp in 2014, the PKK eventually moved to the PUK and Gorran camp. The PKK demanded self-administration in Shingal and Kirkuk, a move supported by the PUK and Gorran which, in turn, began to discuss a self-determination option for Sulaymaniyah.¹⁵

The fight against the Islamic State

Another challenge for the KRG came from the Shiite militia group known as the Popular Mobilization Units (Hashid Shaabi/Hashd al-Shaabi). Hashid Shaabi was formed as an Iraqi military unit to fight IS after the Shiite leader Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa in 2014. On the ground, Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, emerged as the effective commander of Hashid Shaabi.¹⁶ It was evident that Hashid Shaabi substituted for the dysfunctional Iraqi army on the ground in 2015. In Tikrit, Baiji and Anbar, most Hashid Shaabi attacks against IS were also

¹² Tanchum (note 11).

¹³ Yılmaz, A., 'Bölgesel Gelişmelerin Çözüm Sürecine Etkileri' [The Impact of Regional Developments on the Solution Process], eds N. Alpay and H. Tahmaz, *BarışAçısını Savunmak* (Metis Yayınları: İstanbul, 2015), pp.163–64.

¹⁴ Rojava, also known as Syrian Kurdistan or western Kurdistan, has been a de facto autonomous region since Nov. 2013 made up of three self-governing cantons in northern Syria.

¹⁵ Natali, D., 'Irak Kürdistanı yeniden Bölünebilir mi?' [Can Iraqi Kurdistan partition again?], *al-Monitor*, 25 Sep. 2015.

¹⁶ Ortiz, E., 'Iran's Qasem Soleimani is guiding Iraqi Forces in fight against ISIS', *NBC News*, 13 Mar. 2015.

backed by airstrikes by the US-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (Coalition). However, Hashid Shaabi's intervention in the fight against IS in the disputed territories fuelled the tension between the KRG and Iraqi Government, and between the Kurdish parties.¹⁷

Whereas the PDK opposed Hashid Shaabi's presence in the disputed territories, mainly PUK-affiliated Peshmerga groups conducted joint operations with the militias in Saadiyah, Jawlawla and Amerli.¹⁸ On some occasions PKK forces also participated in these operations. For the PDK such developments constituted a threat to the KRG's de facto control of the disputed territories. Although the Iraqi Government was still providing the funds for the financial needs of the disputed territories, the area had been under the KRG's military control since 2014 and President Barzani claimed them as Kurdistan land.¹⁹

After Ramadi, the capital city of Anbar province, fell to IS on 17 May, the presence of the Coalition in the fight against the group was more forcefully felt. The new-found vigour of the Coalition air forces changed the situation on the ground and sidelined Hashid Shaabi.²⁰ On 10 June, US President Barack Obama authorized the deployment of 450 US advisers to Iraq to help train Iraqi forces.²¹ The Iraqi Government responded by forming a new Sunni militia unit, known as Hashid Watani, which began fighting IS, mostly in Sunni populated areas.²² The USA also more actively assumed a mediation role in Kurdistan politics. President Obama's Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Brett McGurk, personally initiated the meetings among Kurdish parties in September and brokered the agreement that extended Barzani's term as President of the KRG.²³

A separate negotiation mediated by McGurk also took place between the PDK and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. McGurk managed to soften the tense relations between the parties and brokered an agreement for 5000 Syrian Peshmerga to travel to Rojava from Iraq, although this troop transfer never took place.²⁴ In October, there was a remarkable event when, as a result of a joint operation between US and Peshmerga forces, the Sunni

¹⁷ Vatanka, A. and Shamsulddin, S., 'Forget ISIS: Shia militias are the real threat to Kurdistan', *National Interest*, 7 July 2015.

¹⁸ Al Arabiya, 'Iraqi forces break ISIS siege of Amerli', 31 Aug. 2014.

¹⁹ Mahmoud, N., 'Peshmerga control all Kurdish territories in Iraq', *Rudaw*, 17 June 2014.

²⁰ 'US defense secretary says fall of Ramadi shows Iraqi forces lack will to fight ISIS', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2015.

²¹ Martinez, L. and Phelps, J., 'President Obama sending 450 more troops to Iraq', *ABC News*, 10 June 2015.

²² Duman, B., *A New Controversial Actor in post-ISIS Iraq: Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi*, Orsam Report no. 198 (Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies: Ankara, 2015).

²³ Rudaw, 'US and UK diplomats attend meeting on extending Barzani presidency', 18 Aug. 2015.

²⁴ Sputnik, 'ABD ve İngiltere'den Barzani'ye destek' [USA and England support Barzani], 19 Aug. 2015.

leaders imprisoned in Hawija, in the Kirkuk province of Iraq, were set free.²⁵ More importantly, however, US support for the KRG was most effective in liberating the town of Shingal in northern Iraq. Plans to retake Shingal had been delayed for a year, primarily because of tensions between the PDK and the PKK. After Russia's forceful intervention in the Syrian theatre, however, the US-backed operation finally began in November 2015.²⁶

Ultimately, freeing Shingal was made possible partly due to coordination between the PDK and the PKK. However, Barzani claimed all the credit for his own Peshmerga forces.²⁷ The liberation of Shingal also caused a political crisis between the KRG and the Iraqi Government, as Barzani announced that Shingal was now part of Kurdistan.²⁸ Barzani also raised the issue of independence again and, unlike on previous occasions, the USA did not raise any objections this time.²⁹

A good year for the KRG

Regardless of the ongoing economic and political tensions, in 2015 the KRG managed to rebuild the power it held before the IS attacks. First, 95 per cent of Kurdistan land, including the disputed territories, was liberated from IS.³⁰ Second, under the auspices of the fight against IS, 62 countries supplied military support to the KRG and seven of those countries took a direct role in the 'equip-train' programme for the Peshmerga.³¹ KRG records also show that 130 diplomatic visits were made to the federated state in 2015.³²

Finally, President Barzani made critical trips to Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian nuclear deal. Barzani's visit to Turkey in December 2015 was a showcase for the amelioration of relations between the KRG and Turkey.³³ The KRG flag, for example, was displayed at official meetings in Turkey for the first time. A few days later Turkey, in a truly remarkable move, transferred military forces to the Bashika base near Mosul in coordination with the KRG without notifying the Iraqi Government and in defiance of Iraqi sovereignty.³⁴ Turkey later withdrew some of these forces after their presence was unanimously criticized by the Arab

²⁵ Rudaw, 'ISIS leaders captured in Hawice prison hold group's secrets, plans', 26 Oct. 2015.

²⁶ Rudaw, 'No escape: Peshmerga close in on ISIS in Shingal', 12 Nov. 2015.

²⁷ Rudaw, 'President Barzani: Only Kurdish flag will fly over Shingal, thanks US', 13 Nov. 2015.

²⁸ Fitzherbert, Y., 'Sinjar "part of Kurdistan" regardless of what Yazidis want', *The New Arab*, 28 Nov. 2015.

²⁹ Rudaw, 'Barzani tells party officials to work on independence referendum', 22 Dec. 2015.

³⁰ Nagl, K. and Moradi, A., 'Peshmerga minister talks Mosul morale and arming Kurds', Rudaw, 26 July 2015.

³¹ Knight, M., *The Long Haul: Rebooting US Security Cooperation in Iraq* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC, 2015).

³² See the website of the Kurdistan Regional Government, <<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/default.aspx?l=13&s=040000&t=455>>.

³³ Hürriyet, 'Barzani Ankara'da, ilk durak MİT' [Barzani in Turkey, first stop NIO], 9 Dec. 2015.

³⁴ Arslan, R., 'Türkiye Başika'da ne yapıyor?' [What does Turkey do in Bashika?], *BBC Türkçe*, 18 Dec. 2015.

League, mainly because of Baghdad's opposition, and US insistence that the sovereignty of the Iraqi Government should not be challenged.³⁵

In the light of these developments, Turkey-KRG relations seem likely to become more cooperative in the near future. In that context Barzani's visit to Saudi Arabia, which took place immediately before his arrival in Ankara, signalled an important alignment between the three parties. This diplomacy could indicate that the KRG is positioning itself for a military operation to free Mosul in 2016.

Syria

The PYD was formed in 2003 as an affiliate of the Turkey-based PKK. By the end of 2012 it had taken control of Kurdish majority areas in northern Syria and established three self-declared cantons: Afrin, Jazira and Kobane. At the time very few observers would have expected that the PYD would turn out to be an ally of the USA, but it has been the US military's most effective ally in the fight against IS.

Initially, Washington kept its distance from the PYD because of Turkish concerns. For example, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in August 2012 that 'Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists'.³⁶ However, when IS replaced the Bashar al-Assad regime as the primary threat for the West in Syria, the PYD's profile changed and its role became more significant.

The rise of the Democratic Union Party and the People's Protection Units

The battle against IS that began in Kobane in September 2014 was a crucial turning point for the PYD. Despite Turkey's opposition, the US Air Force began bombing IS positions in support of the PYD.³⁷ As a result of that support, on 27 January 2015, after 133 days of fierce fighting, the town of Kobane was liberated from IS.³⁸ This was the first recorded defeat of IS and a setback for its further territorial expansion in Syria. This success paved the way for closer US–PYD relations and turned into high-level cooperation against IS in Syria. In addition to airlifted weapons, the USA provided technological equipment for airstrike coordination and assistance to the PYD's military force, the People's Protection Units (YPG).³⁹

³⁵ Aljazeera Turk, 'Arap Birliği'nden Başika Kınaması' [Arab League denounces Turkey's Bashika move], 24 Dec. 2015.

³⁶ Hürriyet Daily News, 'Syria must not become a haven for PKK: Clinton', 11 Aug. 2012.

³⁷ Capelouta, S., 'ISIS pushed back with help of US airstrikes in Kobani', CNN.com, 17 Oct. 2014.

³⁸ Letsch, C. and Hawramy, F., 'Kurdish forces take control of Syrian town of Kobani', *The Guardian*, 26 Jan. 2015.

³⁹ İdiz, S., 'US support of Syrian Kurds ruffles Turkey's feathers', *al-Monitor*, 4 Aug. 2015.

The YPG had been a small military group of 3700 Kurdish fighters in 2012. Its numbers increased during the course of the Syrian Civil War and by the end of 2015, it was a militia of approximately 45 000 active fighters.⁴⁰ Many of its fighters came from Turkey, a fact that highlights the disappearance of borders between Syria and Turkey as far as Kurdish activists are concerned. It is also worth noting in this context that there are many Kurds in IS.⁴¹ What is unusual for the Middle East, however, is the significant presence of women among the PYD's armed units. Among the 45 000 troops fighting IS forces are 19 350 women who have their own YPG-connected units known as Women's Protection Units.⁴² The legitimacy and popularity of PYD/YPG forces across the world owes much to the images of young, emancipated women fighting alongside men against an organization whose philosophy and practice are built on the suppression of women and their nullification as human beings.

This somewhat idealized image of the PYD has been tarnished by reports published during 2015 by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.⁴³ The PYD was accused of ethnic cleansing in Tel Abyad after the fall of the province.⁴⁴ The Turkish Government has raised this issue a number of times, out of concern for the plight of the Turcomans—a Turkic ethnic group that resides mainly in northern Iraq—to which it offers protection, but also for Sunni Arabs.⁴⁵ Ankara argues that far from creating a participatory, democratic governance that represents all communities, the PYD is trying to ethnically purify the territory it controls. The reports also argued that other Kurdish groups were being suppressed and human rights violated, and warned against authoritarian and intolerant rule.⁴⁶ In spite of this negative coverage, the PYD maintains its popularity because it appears to offer a better system of governance than the alternatives, including more equal gender relations.

As the PYD's successes continued its recruitment drive went up a gear: 1500 troops from the Sanadid Forces, a militia made up of Arabs from the Shammar tribe, several hundred Syriac Christians from the Suturu brigade and 300 foreign fighters, including Westerners, joined the ranks of the YPG.⁴⁷ In addition to its fighters, the YPG has a military intelligence

⁴⁰ Barfi, B., 'Kurds now our best ally against ISIS in Syria', Washington Institute, 9 Oct. 2015.

⁴¹ Ahmed, H., 'Kurdish families paying ransoms to bring back sons who joined ISIS', Rudaw, 16 Sep. 2015.

⁴² Barfi (note 40).

⁴³ Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses Under PYD-run Enclaves of Syria* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 19 June 2014).

⁴⁴ Amnesty International, *'We Had Nowhere to Go': Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria* (Amnesty International: London, Oct. 2015).

⁴⁵ Kılıçarslan, I., 'Rusya Etnik Temizlik Yapıyor' [Russia engaged in ethnic cleansing], Yeni Şafak, 8 Feb. 2016.

⁴⁶ Amnesty International (note 44).

⁴⁷ Barfi (note 40).

branch that gathers information about IS, a 'special forces unit' tasked with operating behind enemy lines and an anti-terror unit, each of which is hundreds-strong.

Cooperation or rivalry with the Syrian opposition and Assad?

In Syria the wide variety of political groups and armed militants have not been able to agree on how best to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, after IS emerged as the major threat, overthrowing the Assad regime has remained the priority only for the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which acts on the ground mainly with the support of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In part, the increased profile of the YPG was due to this new phase of the crisis in Syria. The FSA failed to combat IS successfully and the 'train and equip' programme developed by the USA especially for the FSA stumbled when the first group sent to fight was captured by Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁸ After President Obama acknowledged the failure of the programme, the YPG emerged as the primary reliable and powerful ground force in the anti-IS coalition in Syria.⁴⁹ When countering IS became ever more urgent and vital for the West, especially in the wake of the November attacks in Paris, relations between the YPG and the West improved considerably.

Cooperation between the YPG and the FSA was never an easy matter. From the beginning of the Syrian Civil War the FSA refused to accept Kurdish aspirations in northern Syria. FSA leader Riyadh Asad noted in July 2012 that the 'FSA would not leave Qamishli to the agenda of any Kurdish faction'.⁵⁰

On the other hand, while the FSA is dedicated to the overthrow of the Assad regime, the YPG has cooperated with the regime on some occasions. For example, the control of Hasaka and Qamishli, part of the Jazira Canton, was divided between the Syrian military and the YPG. The Assad regime continues to appoint and pay the salaries of civil servants who work in the provinces under PYD governance. However, the two sides have also sporadically clashed in Hasaka, Qamishli and other areas.

It is worth noting that the Syrian Kurds' National Council (ENKS), an alliance of 13 Syrian Kurdish parties backed by the KRG, threw its support behind the FSA and not the YPG. In fact, ENKS and the PYD united under the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC) in July 2012 in an initiative by President Barzani. However, the KSC has complained that the PYD has not honoured the power-sharing agreement. The YPG has been accused of refusing to share security responsibility with ENKS fighters in most of the towns

⁴⁸ Shaheen, K., 'US-trained Syrian rebels killed and leaders captured by al-Qaida affiliate', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2015.

⁴⁹ Shear, M., Cooper, H. and Schmitt, E., 'Obama administration ends effort to train Syrians to combat ISIS', *New York Times*, 9 Oct. 2015.

⁵⁰ Barfi (note 40).

and villages in the Kurdish area. Some in ENKS also claim that the PYD has become a tool of the Assad regime. In turn, ENKS-affiliated Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga trained by the KRG were not accepted into Rojava in northern Syria, and the KRG Peshmerga units that joined the YPG during the fight against IS in Kobane returned to their bases after the liberation of the city.

The PYD's relations with the Assad regime reflect the logic of its so-called Third Way strategy. Since 2012, the PYD has set out its priorities as 'securing Kurdish majority areas, keeping the cantons alive and achieving recognition'.⁵¹ To this end, the PYD has cooperated with different groups in different areas and at different times without fully committing to any of them. In other words, the PYD has chosen to stand by neither the Syrian opposition nor the Assad regime. Instead, it prefers ad hoc cooperation with different actors that advance its own priorities.

The entry of Russia

Despite occasional clashes with the Assad regime, 2015 turned out to be a truly remarkable year for the PYD—particularly after the entry of Russia into the Syrian theatre. It is now clear that its Third Way tactics have secured the PYD unofficial alliances with both the USA and Russia. Since Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015, the PYD has cooperated with both Russia and the USA on different occasions. In this regard, following the liberation of Tel-Abyad in northern Syria from IS in July 2015, which enabled the PYD to connect the two cantons of Kobane and Jazira, the organization set its sights on the Jarablus zone as well, in order to connect the Kobane and Afrin cantons. In late December it even crossed to the west of the Euphrates river—previously a 'red line' for Turkey—along with Arab forces to take the Tishreen dam. As 2016 began, the PYD had set itself the goal of making the three cantons territorially contiguous.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that its exclusion from the next round of Geneva peace talks due to start in 2016, known as Geneva III, was a disappointment for the PYD. The absence from the negotiating table was a direct result of Turkey's objections since Geneva II. While the USA makes a convenient distinction between the PYD and the PKK, and recognizes only the latter as a terrorist organization, Turkey insists that the two organizations are one and the same, and that the PYD and the YPG should be treated as terrorist organizations by its Western partners. This demand is consistently ignored by the Obama Administration, which continues to make remarkable efforts to support the PYD. In this context, however, Russia's policy seems to be more inclusive, comprehensive and a step ahead of US policy. Russia has declared that the PKK is not a terrorist organization, and the PYD has

⁵¹ Yılmaz, A., 'Üçüncü Yol' [Third Way], *Birikim/Haftalık*, 23 Oct. 2015.

opened an official representative office in Moscow that will function like an embassy for the Rojava administration.⁵²

These developments have made it clear to the USA that abandoning the PYD could deliver the Syrian Kurds into Russia's hands. On the other hand, how to work with both the PYD and Turkey in Syria is a serious dilemma for the USA. The Turkish Government is fighting the PKK and the PYD in Turkey and Syria respectively. It appears that Russia's hand has been strengthened by the fact that Russian-Turkish relations deteriorated markedly after the Turkish Air Force downed a Russian SU-24 aircraft on 24 November 2015, and they continue to be tense.⁵³

In all likelihood, the autonomous cantons led by the PYD, which are seen as a model for a future decentralized system of federal governance in Syria, would remain part of Syria. However, it is impossible to predict whether the PYD will succeed in connecting the three cantons and building Kurdish governance in a fully Kurdish zone along the Syria-Turkey border. In this regard, keeping control of the approximately 30 000 square kilometres of territory it already controls in Syria—a 186 per cent increase on 2014—will be the initial priority for the PYD in 2016, rather than achieving its ultimate political goals.

Turkey

At the end of 2015 the hopes invested in Turkey's 30-month ceasefire and what appeared to be a genuine process to resolve the Kurdish problem quickly faded. The country's predominantly Kurdish south-eastern region now became the theatre for a relentless confrontation between Turkish security forces and PKK-affiliated youth organizations in the towns and cities.⁵⁴

Entire neighbourhoods and towns were besieged for months. Civilians became casualties either because they were caught in the crossfire or because, as some reports have suggested, they were deliberately targeted by snipers.⁵⁵ Acting as the enforcers of the PKK's self-declared rule, in several provinces these youth gangs dug ditches and erected barricades to block the entry of the security forces into their neighbourhoods. The fierce battles completely disrupted ordinary life in the region, much to the consternation

⁵² Saeed, Y., 'Russian ambassador in Turkey says PKK not a terrorist organization', Rudaw, 19 Oct. 2015.

⁵³ BBC News, 'Turkey shoots down Russian warplane on Syria border', 24 Nov. 2015.

⁵⁴ Cakan, S., 'Curfew widened in southeast Turkey: clashes kill 23', Reuters, 27 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı), *Fact Sheet on Declared Curfews on 11–25 December 2015 and Violations of Right to Life Against Civilians According to the Data of HRFT Documentation Center* (Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı: Ankara, 26 Dec. 2015).

and resentment of the suffering local population—directed against both the PKK and the government.

Curfews were imposed intermittently, in some cases for months with breaks of only a few days. This resulted in the self-exile and displacement of 100 000–200 000 citizens from their homes and neighbourhoods.⁵⁶ Those who were trapped in their homes had to go days or weeks without food, electricity and medicine. Media reporting was rare, the sources for many news stories unreliable, and much of what passed for news reporting reflective of official lines. Internet access was non-existent for most of the time.⁵⁷

In a way reminiscent of its heavily criticised approach in the 1990s, the Turkish security forces pursued a ‘scorched earth policy’. The level of destruction was documented by photographs published only after hostilities in a particular location had come to an end.⁵⁸ Unlike the 1990s, however, the battles were in urban areas. Many of the new fighters, some barely teenagers, were the children of those families that had either been expelled from or fled their villages 20 years before, seeking refuge in the major towns and cities of the region.

The optimism of the Dolmabahçe Declaration

Things had looked radically different on 28 February 2015. On that day, in the Dolmabahçe Palace, several ministers met with deputies from the pro-Kurdish People’s Democracy Party (HDP), which is affiliated to the PKK. A ten-point action plan for peace, the Dolmabahçe declaration, was launched. It had been drafted in consultation with the incarcerated leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who had met with HDP deputies and Turkish intelligence officers during the negotiations.⁵⁹ The announcement included a commitment to decommission the PKK’s arms if certain conditions were met.

Both the Turkish Prime Minister and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initially supported the agreement. Later accounts revealed that even the choreography of the ceremony, the seating arrangements and who would be present were coordinated with the President.⁶⁰ The ‘solution process’ had survived the violent riots of 6–8 October 2014, which had been triggered by Erdoğan’s comment that Kobane, just across the border in Syria, was about to fall to IS forces.⁶¹ These two days shook the country to its core as intense

⁵⁶ ‘Korkutan “Göç” Araştırması’ [Frightening ‘migration’ research], *Milliyet*, 11 Dec. 2015.

⁵⁷ ‘Cizre’de Kesilen telefon ve İnternet Hatları Açıldı’ [Internet and phone lines open again in Cizre], *IMC*, 12 Sep. 2015.

⁵⁸ Tekin, R., ‘Cizre Ablukası Fotoğrafları’ [Cizre blockade pictures], *IMC*, 30 Dec. 2015.

⁵⁹ ‘Kurdish peace call made amid row on Security bill’, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁰ Lıcalı, M., ‘Cemil’e Söyle Bana Meydan Okumasın’ [Tell Cemil not to challenge me], *Cumhuriyet*, 26 Jan. 2016.

⁶¹ ‘Şu an Kobane düştü düşüyor’ [Kobane is about to fall], *Cumhuriyet*, 7 Oct. 2014.

violence left 45 dead and as many wounded as well as serious damage to property.⁶²

The Kobane moment would also be an important turning point for Turkish foreign policy towards Syria. Arguably, the rise of the PYD described above owed much to the Turkish Government's decision to withhold support to Kobane when IS attacked the town. It did, however, open its borders to close to 200 000 refugees who were fleeing the assault and even gave medical assistance to Kurdish fighters from Kobane.⁶³ This strategic misjudgement in not helping the besieged town militarily led to the direct intervention of the USA and its provision of aerial support to the PYD. It was also the beginning of growing tension between the USA and Turkey, caused by their different approaches to and priorities for the resolution of the Syrian conflict.

In retrospect, it was evident that Kobane helped to break the trust of Turkey's Kurds in the government. More importantly, the riots and the general concern shown by Turkey's Kurds for the fate of Kobane demonstrated that the Kurdish political movement now had well established transnational links.

Just one week before the Dolmabahçe declaration, Turkish troops moved the tomb of Suleiman Shah, an Ottoman ancestor, from its location in Syria.⁶⁴ The land on which the tomb stood is sovereign Turkish territory and the move was necessitated by the growing threat of an IS assault against it and the soldiers guarding it. The convoy that transferred the tomb overnight to a new location in the north of Syria, closer to the Turkish border, had moved through PYD-controlled territory. Later accounts by Syrian Kurds indicated that there was significant coordination between the parties.⁶⁵ This was interpreted as a sign that Turkey was stepping back from the position on Kobane it held only a few months before.

The optimism generated by the Dolmabahçe agreement and the positive response of the Turkish Government was short-lived. The first objection registered by President Erdoğan expressed concern about a supervisory committee that was meant to monitor the progress of the agreement.⁶⁶ He then declared that he did not view the agreement positively, and the process was effectively suspended.⁶⁷ Between the initially supportive and the hard-

⁶² BBC Türkçe, 'Kobane Protestoları: En az 19 Kişi Öldü', [Kobane Protests: at least 19 died], 8 Oct. 2014.

⁶³ Ekinci, B., 'Kobani Yaralılarına Türkiye'de Tedavi' [Treatment in Turkey for the wounded in Kobane], *Al Jazeera*, 12 Oct. 2014.

⁶⁴ *Milliyet*, 'Süleyman Şah Operasyonunun Detayları' [The details of the Suleyman Shah operation], 22 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁵ Şenyüz, S., 'YPG: Şah Fırat Operasyonuna Destek Verdik' [YPG: we supported Suleyman Shah operation], *Hürriyet*, 23 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁶ 'Erdoğan: İzleme Heyetine olumlu bakmıyorum' [Erdoğan: I don't approve of the supervisory committee], *Agos*, 20 Mar. 2015.

⁶⁷ 'Erdoğan: Dolmabahçe'deki o kare yanlıştı' [Erdoğan: the picture at Dolmabahçe was wrong], *Sputnik*, 27 May 2015.

ened positions of the president, the Chair of the HDP had given the shortest weekly speech to his caucus ever registered in the annals of parliament. Selahattin Demirtaş simply repeated the same sentence three times: ‘We will not let you be president’.⁶⁸ This statement was made to reassure anti-Erdoğan Turks that the HDP would not support Erdoğan in his quest. It infuriated Erdoğan, however, and was possibly the straw that broke the camel’s back.

A referendum in 2010 had amended 26 articles of the Turkish Constitution, making Erdoğan the first directly elected President of the Republic. President Erdoğan now wanted to abolish Turkey’s parliamentary system and institute a presidential one with fewer checks and balances.⁶⁹ The elections scheduled for June 2015 would enable his former Party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), to change the constitution by itself if it obtained 330 seats or more. For that to happen, the HDP would have to remain below the 10 per cent electoral threshold. During the campaign, there were intense efforts by both the President and his former party to discredit and vilify Demirtaş, who proved to be an astute politician with an ability to make himself acceptable to wider Turkish constituencies. In addition, there were over 100 attacks against HDP branches, and a bomb exploded near its electoral headquarters in the city of Mersin.⁷⁰ The most serious incident was in Diyarbakir, when a bomb planted by an IS militant in a square where an HDP rally was being held claimed four lives and badly injured many others.⁷¹

Two elections: 7 June and 1 November

In the event, the HDP was the major winner of the 7 June elections because it crossed the 10 per cent threshold. In so doing, the Kurdish national movement also crossed the threshold of national legitimacy. Although it received a relatively significant percentage of votes from more liberally inclined ethnic Turks, the major reason for its success was the mass defection of devout Kurds, long the most loyal supporters of the AKP, from the ruling party. However, these results were only a temporary setback for President Erdoğan. The inability of the opposition to have a strategy for forming a functional government, Erdoğan’s determination to take the country to an early election and the return of violence brought a snap election on 1 November and a reversal of the 7 June verdict (see table 2.3.).

Immediately after the second election the government declared the solution process dead.⁷² This set the stage for a return to violence. The

⁶⁸ ‘Seni başkan yaptırmayacağız’ [We will not let you be President], *Cumhuriyet*, 17 Mar. 2015.

⁶⁹ Hacıoğlu, H. ‘Erdoğan başkanlık sisteminde ısrarcı’ [Erdoğan insistent on executive presidency], *VOA*, 1 Jan. 2016.

⁷⁰ Tekeş, K., ‘Unutmamak ve hatırlamak için: HDP’ye saldırılar’ [Not to forget and to recall: attacks against HDP], *Biamag*, 16 May 2015.

⁷¹ Balıkcı, F., ‘HDP diyarbakır mitinginde bomba’ [Bomb at HDP meeting], *Hürriyet*, 6 July 2015.

⁷² ‘Erdoğan çözüm sürecini buzdolabından çıkarıp gömdü: o iş birmiştir’ [Erdoğan took the solution process from the refrigerator and buried it: this is over], *Diken*, 20 Jan. 2016.

Table 2.3. Turkish general election results, 2015 (number of votes cast by millions and share by per cent)

	1 Nov. 2015		7 June 2015	
	Votes cast (millions)		Votes cast (millions)	
Voters	55.36		54.5	
Total votes cast	48.52		47.2	
Valid votes	47.83		45.9	
	Votes cast (millions)	Share of the vote (%)	Votes cast (millions)	Share of the vote (%)
AKP	23.66	49.5	18.7	40.9
CHP	12.10	25.3	11.4	25.0
MHP	5.69	11.9	7.5	16.3
HDP/BDP	5.14	10.8	6.0	13.1
Other	1.22	2.5	2.1	4.7

AKP = Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (The Justice and Development Party); CHP = Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (The Republican People's Party); MHP = Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party); HDP/BDP = Halkların Demokratik Partisi / Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (The Peoples' Democratic Party/The Peace and Democracy Party).

Source: November 2015 Barometer, Political and Social Survey Series, Analysis of the Results of the 1 November Election and the Electorate, KONDA, 23 Dec. 2015, <http://www.konda.com.tr/en/raporlar/KONDA_Nov1BallotandElectorateAnalysisReport.pdf>.

ceasefire—which had held since March 2013, making the solution process possible—broke down. The country witnessed escalating incidents of terrorism and counterterrorism measures.⁷³ Ostensibly, the reason for the breakdown was the murder by the PKK of two policemen on 22 July.⁷⁴ This was said to be in revenge for a terrorist attack in the town of Suruç that had claimed the lives of 34 activists who were preparing to travel to Kobane to deliver medical supplies and toys.⁷⁵

Similar incidents in the past two years had not invited a harsh response from the government or the Turkish armed forces. The difference this time suggests that the urge to go to war was simply waiting for an appropriate trigger. The PKK too had evidently used the past two years to build up its military supplies and strengthen its logistics and was eager to return to arms.⁷⁶

On the same day as the murder of the two policemen, IS forces fired on Turkish soldiers at the border. Just two days after having signed an agree-

⁷³ 'Turkey: mounting security operation deaths: scores of civilians among hundreds killed in southeast', Human Rights Watch, 22 Dec. 2015.

⁷⁴ 'Şanlıurfa'da 2 polis şehit' [Two police died in Şanlıurfa], Milliyet, 22 July 2015.

⁷⁵ 'Suruç'ta katliam, 31 ölü 104 yaralı' [Bloodshed in Suruç: 31 dead 104 wounded], BBC Türkçe, 21 July 2015.

⁷⁶ 'AKP'li Numan Kurtulmuş'tan itiraf: pkk uzun süre yığınak yaptı' [AKP PM Numan Kurtulmuş confessed: PKK stored up for long time], AktifHaber, 28 Aug. 2015.

ment with the USA to allow the use of the Incirlik base for operations against IS, the Turkish Air Force symbolically struck at IS positions and then started to attack PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains.⁷⁷

By the end of the year the fighting that had engulfed several provinces, most notably the central district of Sur in the largest Kurdish city of the region, Diyarbakır, had claimed the lives of over 150 police and military personnel and over 1000 Kurdish militants.⁷⁸ The civilian toll was also considerable. The PKK continued with its declarations of self-rule in many districts and escalated the scale and scope of its violence.⁷⁹ In return, the Turkish authorities declared curfews in more areas.⁸⁰

The town of Cizre, where PKK fighters controlled two neighbourhoods, was totally sealed off from the world for nine days. All communications with the outside were cut. Even HDP ministers from the transitional government between the two elections and deputies were not allowed to enter. In western parts of the country gangs attacked individual Kurds and Kurdish businesses, and set fire to the HDP headquarters in Ankara and about 400 local party offices.⁸¹

The Turkish Government's hard line response to the PKK and its decision to effectively bury the solution process can be primarily attributed to domestic concerns. In fact, the common thread that unites the government's policies and the violence of the PKK is the HDP's success in the elections of 7 June. The rekindling of the war and the alarming rise in violent incidents generated an atmosphere of fear and a need for protection among the general populace. A rally for peace in Ankara became the stage for the biggest terrorist incident in the country's history, claiming over 100 lives and seriously wounding many others.⁸² The Turkish Government suggested that this was a hybrid operation undertaken by the PKK and IS, even though at the time the two parties were in conflict in Syria. Moreover, most of the victims of the terrorist attack were either Kurdish or Kurd sympathizers. The culprits were later identified as IS militants on the watch-list of the Turkish security forces.⁸³

The PKK's determination to continue its project of self-rule in the provinces as well as its decision to escalate and retaliate further exacerbated the

⁷⁷ 'Turkey's air force hits IS and PKK in Syria and Iraq', BBC News, 26 July 2015.

⁷⁸ IHD Diyarbakır, *Sur Olayları İnceleme Raporu* [Sur Investigation Report] İnsan Hakları Derneği [IHD-Human Rights Association] Diyarbakır, 6 Sep. 2015.

⁷⁹ Toksobay, E., 'Turkey's Kurds call for self-rule amid violence in southeast', Reuters, 27 Dec. 2015.

⁸⁰ Cakan, S., 'Clashes in Southeast Turkey kill seven, new curfews declared', Reuters, 14 Dec. 2015.

⁸¹ 'HDP "saldırı bilançosu" çıkardı: 78 sivil öldü' [HDP declared: 78 civilians died], Cumhuriyet, 28 Aug. 2015.

⁸² Blend, B., 'Turkey bomb: almost 100 dead after attack in Ankara', BBC News, 11 Oct. 2015.

⁸³ 'Turkey terror attack: mourning after scores killed in Ankara blasts', *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2015.

crisis. Its attacks against the Turkish security forces caused uproar throughout the country, including among some Kurds, and generated a strong reaction against the HDP. It would seem that in relaunching and escalating its war against the security forces, the PKK was seeking to end the political path to a resolution of the Kurdish problem. Its leadership's reaction to the HDP's success betrayed their resentment at the strengthening of the parliamentary option and the genuine popularity of Demirtaş.⁸⁴

The AKP won the snap elections on 1 November with an overwhelming majority. Immediately after the elections, the old rhetoric concerning the Kurdish problem made a comeback. A conflictual position regarding the PYD in Syria was an integral part of the new stance. The fight with the PKK would continue relentlessly and the HDP would not be accepted as a legitimate partner in negotiations on a solution to the Kurdish problem. Instead, Kurdish partners other than the HDP and its affiliates would be chosen as valid interlocutors from then on.

Thus, a political solution to the Kurdish problem was buried by the two main protagonists: President Erdoğan and the PKK. Turkey and its Kurds found themselves back in the deadlock of the 1990s. Internationally, the rising profile of the PYD—and by extension the PKK—in the fight against IS, which made it the USA's most dependable ally on the ground, generated a lot of tension in Turkish-US relations.

Conclusions

Although events turned sour in Turkey, where a political path to the resolution of the Kurdish issue was blocked, 2015 was a good year for the political aspirations of Kurds. In Iraq and Syria, Kurdish forces won unequivocal victories against IS, which increased their legitimacy in the West and enabled them to expand the areas under their control. In Syria, the PYD came close to achieving the near impossible by bringing its eastern and western cantons together in a contiguous territory under its control. It is not a foregone conclusion, however, that the gains of the past year can be safeguarded if the Assad regime remains in place and is allowed to reassert its authority in a larger part of the country.

The Kurds' victories on the battlefield put them at odds with two regional powers. In Iraq, the Iranian Government actively interfered in intra-Kurdish affairs and added an element of instability to the increasingly shaky politics of the KRG. In Syria, Turkey all but declared the PYD its nemesis and attempted to block, thus far unsuccessfully, the surge of the organization. The option once entertained by the Turkish Government of acting as a mentor to the PYD was derailed by the intensifying military confronta-

⁸⁴ Mert, N., 'The Kurdish saga', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 7 Sep. 2015.

tion with the PKK in the south-east of Turkey. This rekindling of political violence reflected the PKK's interests as an organization rather than the interests of Turkey's Kurds. On the Turkish Government's side, the rising nationalist discourse and relentless military pressure are in part a function of political calculations related to aspirations to move to an executive presidency.

Paradoxically, the military victories of the Kurdish parties brought about a weakening of their ties with some of their constituencies. The losses of war and economic deprivation marked the year as much as the military victories. The political endpoint for the Kurds in Turkey, and whether there is life after IS for Syrian and Iraqi Kurds' aspirations to pursue their own political destiny, remain unclear.