



Kurdish Questions: An Interview with Yaniv Voller

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Dr. Voller discusses the history of, and recent developments in, the Kurdish struggle for a homeland.

Q. Numbering approximately 35 million worldwide, the Kurds are often referred to as the largest group of stateless people in the world. Today, the Kurdish nationalist movement is often seen as one of the largest worldwide campaigns for self-determination. Who are the Kurds and what are the origins of their struggle for a homeland?

The Kurdish people are a distinct ethnic group, concentrated mostly in a broad region which is often referred to as Kurdistan. Most of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but there are large Shi'i, Yezidi and other Kurdish-speaking communities.

Already during the time of the Ottoman and the different Iranian empires there existed semi-autonomous Kurdish kingdoms that served as a buffer between the two empires.

Modern Kurdish nationalism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, along with other nationalist movements, such as Arab and Turkish nationalism. After the end of the First World War, Kurdish leaders were promised an independent state as part of the [Paris Peace Conference](#). However, following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, this promise was overturned. By the mid-1920s, Kurdistan ended up divided between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

The Kurds protested this decision and there were some uprisings in different parts of Kurdistan. In [1945](#) there was even an autonomous Kurdish republic, known as the Mahabad Republic, which survived for a year.

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The first major Kurdish uprising erupted in Iraq in [1961](#). This uprising lasted until [1991](#) when, after years of brutal, even genocidal, Iraqi counter-insurgency campaign, the Kurds in Iraq gained complete autonomy over their territory.

In Turkey, Kurdish insurgency emerged primarily during the late [1970s](#), with the formation of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) by Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK is still active today, though it formally renounced its aspiration for independence and is now calling for an autonomy for the Kurds within a democratic Turkey.

In Iran, too, there has been a long conflict taking place. The Islamic Republic has not been less brutal than the Turkish Republic or Saddam Hussein's Iraq in suppressing Kurdish demands for self-determination.

The Kurdish struggle in Syria has been the least organised, although sporadic uprisings had occurred. The Assad regimes, both father and son, not only oppressed Kurdish nationalism, but denied the Kurds in Syria their most basic rights, including citizenship. The Syrian civil war provided the Kurds in Syria with an unprecedented opportunity to fight for their rights, although they too officially demand autonomy rather than independence.

Q. Looking at the Kurds in Iraq, did Saddam Hussein's counterinsurgency campaign actually help create a strong sense of Kurdish nationalism?

Yes, it did. Particularly the Anfal Campaign, which took place between [1986](#) and [1989](#), served to foster Kurdish national identity and desire for self-determination. The Iraqi army's use of chemical weapons made it clear to most Kurds that living under Baghdad's rule is impossible in the long term. Even Kurds who openly collaborated with the regime, the so-called National

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Defence Battalions, seemed to have come to this conclusion after their own towns and villages came under attack. National tragedies often serve to foster national identities, and even though the Ba'th regime's genocidal campaign devastated Kurdish society, it did strengthen Kurdish national identity.

Q. In Turkey, there has been much systematic discrimination against Kurds and historic attempts to eradicate Kurdish identity. Did these repressive measures in Turkey also help Kurdish nationalism gain momentum?

Yes, to some extent. Government repression and discrimination often foster a national identity among persecuted groups. But this is only one factor among others. Other factors that have contributed to the strengthening of Kurdish identity include Kurdish activism, whether in Turkey or in the diaspora; urbanisation; modernisation; greater access to education. And the experience of Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan, and especially in Iraq.

Q. Western powers over the past century have used Kurdish fighters when it suited their purposes, and then arguably abandoned them. There have been promises from Western leaders of establishing a Kurdish homeland only for those promises go unfulfilled. Why do you feel Western powers have treated the Kurds this way? Is it simply a matter of realist interests and Western leaders wanting to appease regional powers?

The only time that Western powers made a clear promise about a Kurdish homeland was at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The US supported the KDP in the early 1970s as proxies in Iran's conflict against Iraq, but they didn't make an explicit promise about a Kurdish homeland. The Americans also implicitly encouraged the Kurds and Shi'is to rise against Saddam after the First Gulf War – but again, without promising them independence.

Undoubtedly, the West has abandoned the Kurds many times in the past. But we have to remember that the International community has traditionally been suspicious of separatist movements, because changes in state boundaries are considered a source of regional and global instability. And of course, there has also been the realist aspect of keeping good relations with Turkey. Turkey is a key ally of the West in the region and a NATO member. And it has traditionally objected to Kurdish independence.

Q. The Kurds have been a vital part of the war against the Islamic State (IS). Through a combined effort of Peshmerga, PKK, YPG, and Yazidi militias, the Kurds became the most effective fighters by far on the ISIS frontier. Why do you feel the Kurds have proven to be such an effective force against IS?

There are several factors that have turned the Kurdish militias into the most effective fighting force in the war against the Islamic State. The first is familiarity with the area and the terrain. The Kurds, and especially the Peshmerga and the YPG, are natives of the region. They know it well and are aware of the challenges they are facing. The second factor is experience. The Peshmerga has years of experience fighting against the Iraqi army, Islamist militias and even each other. The PKK has been leading a guerrilla warfare against the Turkish security forces for decades. The third factor is motivation. The Kurds are fighting in and for their homeland. The Islamic State has attacked the Kurds in their own lands. The Yazidis are particularly motivated, not just by vengeance, but also because many Yazidis are still in captivity. But there is also an ideological motivation. Especially for the Peshmerga, fighting along the West has meant greater legitimacy for their autonomy and sovereignty. The KRG is a de facto state. And states establish alliances. The KRG has considered itself an ally of the West for many years now. For the PKK,

fighting IS has meant challenging its status as a terrorist organisation. In short, these are highly trained, disciplined and motivated fighters, who are fighting for their home and for recognition. They outweigh most other forces involved in the fighting in these parameters.

Q. How far do you feel that the fight against IS will help the cause for a Kurdish homeland?

This is a difficult question to answer, because we need to define what we mean when we say a Kurdish homeland. If we mean a scenario in which a Kurdish state is established in Iraqi Kurdistan then the answer is probably positive. The KRG's fight against IS has once again proved to the West, but also to Turkey and other regional states the viability of the KRG and its ability to function as a sovereign actor. The Peshmerga has been one of the most reliable forces in the conflict, and in essence functions as the West's "boots on the ground." But if we talk about a Kurdish homeland that spreads over other parts of Kurdistan then I am in doubt. Ankara, which is still the most important veto actor when it comes to the idea of a Kurdish state, will not allow the formation of a Kurdish state in Rojava and even more so in Turkey. Even the PKK's contribution to the fighting would not change Turkey's mind – if anything, it will make Ankara even more intransigent about it.

Q. Looking at the Iraqi case, Massoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has recently called for a referendum on a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Would the fight against ISIS at least help strengthen the case for a referendum?

Yes I believe so. The Peshmerga's participation in the war against ISIS has demonstrated once again to the International community, and especially

Washington and Ankara, that the KRG is indispensable for regional security and that the Kurdish leadership could contribute to regional stability. The Peshmerga has proven able not only to protect the KRG's domestic sovereignty, but also to participate as an equal partner in regional counterterrorism campaigns. This could play in the KRG's favour when time comes.

Q. Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet last year resulted in dramatic swifts in relations between those two states. The Kurdish question has also entered into this complicated relationship as Russia has shown some support for Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. How do you feel the Kurdish question will effect relations between the two in the future?

This is more challenging for me to respond to, because I am not an expert on Russian foreign policy, and am not sure on how much Russia is committed to the Kurds. From a Turkish perspective, the question of Syrian Kurds has been something of a red line. Any support perceived as helping the Syrian Kurds toward independence is bound to make Ankara extremely nervous. And while Moscow has its own interests in Syria, which may clash with Ankara's, I don't believe that Moscow would cross this particular line. After all, Russia also prefers a unified Syria.

Q. In regards to Turkey, would simply a change in leadership to a more liberal position help the case for a Kurdish state or is the issue of what has been described as anti-Kurdism or 'Kurdophobia' far more deep seated in Turkey?

A change of leadership wouldn't have much impact on Ankara's approach to the Kurdish question. I am afraid that there is no liberal opposition in Turkey – certainly not toward the Kurdish question. The People's Republican Party (CHP)

may be more secular than the AKP. However, its agenda has been based for many years on Turkish nationalism and objection to any hint of Kurdish nationalism and separatist desires. The other, much smaller, Turkish opposition party is the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). This is an ultra-nationalist party with a neo-fascist ideology. Militias associated with the party were involved in attacking and assassinating Kurdish activists in previous decades. Ironically, in its early days, the AKP had been considered more liberal than most other parties with relation to the Kurdish question, and therefore gained many Kurdish votes. The most liberal party in Turkey nowadays is the predominantly Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). But not only that I don't see the party ever elected for power in Turkey, its actual existence is under threat nowadays, with the arrest of its leaders in the last few weeks.

Undoubtedly, anti-Kurdish sentiments are entrenched in the Turkish public and political discourse. But even if a change takes place, I don't see it affecting party politics, amid the absence of genuine opposition on the subject among the main Turkish parties.

Q. What impact do you think Trump's presidency will have on the Kurdish question, if any?

Based strictly on Trump's statements, I don't think the Kurds should be overly optimistic. Trump has hinted that he is after an isolationist foreign policy. This means, in my opinion, that Trump, at best, will not intervene against Turkish repression of the opposition, including the Kurdish opposition. As for other parts of the Middle East, such an isolationist approach may also result in a regional chaos. Such chaos could have disastrous implications for regional stability, but also opportunities for a change in the status quo.

Image by Mustafa Khayat/Flickr (cropped).

About the interviewee



Yaniv Voller is a Lecturer in the Politics of the Middle East at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent. Prior to that he was a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. He gained his PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, his MSc in Middle East Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and his undergraduate degree at Tel Aviv University. His current research examines the impact of colonial-era legacies and practices on the strategies of the liberation movements and the governments involved in these wars, focusing on the liberation wars in Iraqi Kurdistan and Southern Sudan. His previous book, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood*, was published in 2014 as part of Routledge's *Studies in Middle East Politics* series. His articles have been published in *International Affairs*, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and *Democratization*, among other journals.

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