



The Kurds as Proxies in Iraq and Syria A Problematic Relationship for Western Powers

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Scarred in recent years by questionable involvements in the likes of Afghanistan and Iraq – and by the casualties they wrought – risk-averse Western governments have begun to look to others to do the shedding of blood in their ‘wars of choice’. The risky boots-on-the-ground role that was once the proud preserve of NATO armies anxious to showcase their abilities is now politically unpalatable. Proxies appear to be the answer. Biddable local allies who are of a mind to work in collaboration with Western militaries are very much in demand: the former supply the troops, the latter the training and the technological support – if not, indeed, the weapons as well. A symbiosis based on the principle that my-enemy’s-enemy-is-my-friend is the goal. This simple formula, though, is one that is not always bound to produce positive results. Proxies should always carry a health warning; they tend not to be as biddable as hoped.

Take the Kurds. They are an ethnic group inhabiting a region – Iraq and Syria – where suitable proxies for Western powers are very much in demand for use against Islamic State (IS). The Kurds appear to be ideal candidates as proxy fighters: they are numerous; of a warrior-caste; are politically acceptable to Western audiences, and have a natural enemy in IS. As a militant group intent on territorial expansion, IS threatens Kurdish communities. The case for synergy is thus obvious: Western militaries and the Kurds can work together for mutual benefit. Not quite so obvious, however, are the various reasons why the relationship between Kurd and Western militaries is one that has the ready capacity to go awry. The chief driver of any breakdown is that Kurdish proxies can and will have their own priorities that clash with those of their sponsors.

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The first point to note here is that the Kurds are a people divided. A fractiousness has historically long been evident between the various clans, tribes and families that make up this nation. These differences may have now mellowed but they have never completely dissipated. And then there are the differences created by linguistic schisms – Sorani and Kurmanji – and sectarianism – Sunni and Shia. Differences also developed due to the politics of whichever state the Kurds found themselves in after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The Kurds within Syria developed under the tutelage firstly of French colonial rulers and then under a succession of socialist governments in Damascus. Both influences – or rather impositions – shaped a Kurdish community that was very much secular in make-up. It was the same in Turkey; Kemalist policies pushed secularism. In contrast, however, in Iraq, the laissez-faire approach of British colonial masters and then the inability of Iraqi governments to penetrate and shape attitudes in its northern Kurdish region left in place a largely tribal-based, conservative structure that is still today strong on religious (Sunni) influences.

Today, the Kurdish area of northern Iraq, known as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), is riven by a split between a Western region dominated by the party of President Masoud Barzani – the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) – and an eastern region where the party of former Iraqi president, Jalal Talabani – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – holds sway. The KDP, dominated by the Barzani tribe and with strong links north to its political patron, Turkey, maintains the strings of power in the KRG. It is based in the ‘capital’ of Erbil. The PUK, more left-of-centre, modernist and leaning towards Iran, holds sway around Suleimaniyeh. These two parties, indeed, and using their *peshmerga* forces, fought a civil war in the 1990s. And while there is currently what might be seen as a national KRG *peshmerga* force, these two

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parties still maintain their own *peshmerga* units and there is thus always the possibility that tensions may lead to some renewed clashes. Moreover, with future independence in mind, one eye is constantly being kept on the need to prepare for a possible future conflict with the Iraqi army and its associated Shia militia. Here is one particular problem for the Kurds of Iraq – who is the real enemy? Is it IS; is it fellow Kurds, or is it Baghdad? This then also becomes a problem for any power that seeks to use these Iraqi Kurds as proxies against IS – as the United States and others do. Can they be made to keep their eyes focused on IS and not elsewhere? And will the training and weapons they might be supplied with be directed at IS, or could they be used against other US proxies – such as other groups of Kurds and/or the Iraqi army?

In Iraq, for instance, any future push on IS-held Mosul will, the US military hopes, involve the KRG's *peshmerga* forces supported by US artillery and air power. Washington does not want the Shia-dominated Iraqi army to be seizing, on its own, the Sunni city of Mosul. Re-occupation of the city should be leavened, ideally from the US viewpoint, by the employment of Sunni Kurds. As things stand, however, there is a reluctance on the part of Erbil to push forward. The KRG has now, to a large degree, stabilised its own 'borders' (including the internal one within Iraq), which they see forming the basis of a future independent Kurdistan. Assaulting the Arab city of Mosul will doubtless involve a major loss of life and of treasure (in a cash-strapped KRG) that will produce little in the way of obvious gain for the Kurds while there is a bigger prize in mind.

Then there are the Kurds in Turkey. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) is a left-wing Kurdish militant group that has long been fighting for more autonomy for the Kurdish-majority region of south-

east Turkey. Ankara looks upon the PKK, not unnaturally, as a terrorist group. Recently, during the IS-generated chaos in northern Iraq, battle-hardened PKK units moved across the area and have proved to be some of the best fighters against IS; certainly better than the *peshmerga*. So here, logically, should be the ultimate proxy of choice for the US inside Iraq – the PKK. The idea, though, that US forces should assist the PKK in any way would bring paroxysms of protest from Turkey – a NATO ally. The KDP government in Erbil (with its own allies in Ankara in mind) is itself ardently agitating to prevent the PKK from setting up any zones within Iraq that it will come to control politically (such as around Sinjar). The PUK, on the other hand, has long supported the PKK, mostly because of the commonality of their left-wing politics.

There are also the Kurds in northern Syria to consider. There are dozens of bickering Kurdish political parties jockeying for control there. The only force there that is armed, though, is the militia – the People’s Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) – of the main party, the Democratic Union Party (Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD). The PYD – again, avowedly secular and actively left-wing – was formed mainly from PKK members who had fled from Turkey in the 1990s. The PYD is thus looked upon by Turkey as just an offshoot of the PKK and is, therefore, also a ‘terrorist’ group. But again, its YPG militia have proved very effective – certainly more effective than US-allied Arab groups in Syria – at confronting and besting IS. The YPG have also shown a penchant for actually taking the fight to IS by moving into Arab-majority areas of Syria (something the *peshmerga* in Iraq are reluctant to do). Here is another proxy that seems ideal. But how is the US to support the YPG effectively without incurring the wrath of Ankara? Moreover, there will probably come a time soon when Turkey will try and seize Kurdish areas of northern Syria in order to eliminate what it sees as the PYD’s terrorist

threat. The PYD's main enemy would then be Turkey, and not IS. What would the US do then?

And then there is the cross-border relationship between the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. It would seem natural for the Kurds in Iraq to support their 'compatriots' in Syria. Beyond natural kinship would also be the fact that both are fighting IS. But the KDP in the KRG, having allied itself with Turkey and being more tribal and religiously conservative, wants no truck with the 'communist' PYD. Indeed, it has even tried to prevent any assistance reaching the PYD across the Euphrates. To this end, a large trench system has been built by KDP *peshmerga* to act as a physical barrier designed to prevent any help from the PUK – who *do* support the PYD (mostly, again, for ideological reasons) – being sent across the border into Syria. Thus the US military is providing assistance to two armed Kurdish groups – the YPG and the KDP's *peshmerga* – who are highly likely to one day become engaged in combat with one another.

Thus when Western military organisations look to the Kurds to provide suitable proxies against IS, problems abound. The notion of a symbiosis created by a common enemy is tempered by the fact that the Kurds, of whatever ilk, tend to have more than just *one* enemy. This is not a good basis for the role of reliable proxy. But apart from the Kurds, who else is there?

Image of Peshmerga replacing the ISIS flag with the Kurdish flag by Kurdishstruggle via [Flickr](#).

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