



The Kurds After the ‘Caliphate’: How the Decline of ISIS has Impacted the Kurds of Iraq and Syria

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List of Key Acronyms

ISF – Iraqi Security Forces

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD – Democratic Union Party

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG – People's Protection Units

Executive Summary

About this Report

- While the so-called Islamic State's 'caliphate' was in ruins by the summer of 2017, Kurdish fortunes appeared to be on the ascent. Nevertheless, little over a year after the supposed 'fall of the caliphate', both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish aspirations have been severely tested.
- Rather than delivering the desired popular mandate needed to negotiate independence, the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum of 25 September 2017 backfired. The military and political power that the Syrian Kurds had gained while fighting ISIS has been endangered, whether due to Turkish armed intervention or the possibility that they could lose the U.S.-led coalition's backing.
- This report seeks to highlight some of the key developments for the Kurds of Iraq and Syria as ISIS has declined over the past year, as well as hypothesise what may lie ahead.

The Iraqi Kurds and the Kurdish Referendum

- The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, having garnered substantial political goodwill through their contributions to the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and acquired possession of many of the territories disputed by Erbil and Baghdad, held an independence referendum on 25 September 2017.
- The fallout was swift. Blockaded and diplomatically besieged, the Iraqi Kurds lost control of many of the 'disputed territories', including the key city of Kirkuk, at the hands of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).
- The aftermath of the vote exposed the deep divisions between the KRG's two principle political parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – as well as the region's economic fragility and the limits of international support.

The Syrian Kurds and the Battle for Northern Syria

- Despite the terrorist designation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the PKK's Syrian offshoot party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as well as their affiliated armed forces – the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – have formed the tip of the spear of the anti-ISIS coalition over the past year, capturing Raqqa and much of the Deir ez-Zor governorate.

- Nevertheless, the most recent Turkish offensive in the Syrian north-western region of Afrin, otherwise known as Operation Olive Branch, revealed how vulnerable the Syrian Kurds are absent the backing of the international community.
- Without continued military and political support from the U.S.-led coalition, the Syrian Kurds' project in northern Syria would likely be far more susceptible to territorial reversals in the future, whether at the hands of pro-regime forces, Turkish-backed forces, or a resurgent ISIS.

Epilogue: The Kurds After the 'Caliphate'

- For the time being it appears that the Iraqi Kurdish referendum has squandered away much of the political capital and territory, as well as the enhanced prospects for achieving further autonomy within Iraq in the future, that the Iraqi Kurds had gained during the fight against ISIS. Nevertheless, history may look more favourably on their independence gamble in the years and decades to come.
- The Syrian Kurds, with the cooperation of the anti-ISIS coalition, have pushed the 'Islamic State' to the brink. The Syrian Kurds' proven fighting metal, their ability to function alongside the U.S.-led coalition, and the political control they exert over much of the northern and eastern parts of Syria are all noteworthy.
- Washington and their allies' support of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds has decisively shaped the fight against ISIS. Bolstering the Syrian Kurds in particular has given the U.S. a strategic foothold amidst the chaos of the Syrian Civil War, providing precious leverage to help shape how the Syrian catastrophe is unfolding. While Turkey, as a fellow NATO ally, demands Washington's cooperation against their adversaries, the Syrian Kurds are too vital an ally to lose for the U.S.-led coalition.
- Western policymakers should recognise that withdrawing political and military support from our Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish partners now, despite the seeming decline of ISIS, would be a historic blunder.

1 Introduction

On 29 June 2017, Iraqi armed forces finally recaptured the 12th-century Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul from ISIS hands. The international media and a triumphant Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi hailed it as a pivotal moment in the armed campaign, spelling the end of the so-called 'Islamic Caliphate' that was announced to the world from that very spot a mere three years before.¹ Indeed, in the summer of 2014, the rapidly expanding and powerful jihadist group appeared unstoppable. Their black banners spread chaos and terror across the globe. The subsequent years tore Iraq and Syria at the seams, whether it was the fight against ISIS in Iraq or combating ISIS in the midst of an escalating Syrian Civil War. Nevertheless, by June 2017, Iraqi security forces and the international coalition's recapture of Mosul had dealt the organisation a critical blow. ISIS's presence lingered on in Syria, principally stretching between the besieged city of Raqqa and the south-eastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor. Over the following year, Raqqa had been recaptured and most of Deir ez-Zor governorate had been retaken whether at the hands of the anti-ISIS coalition² or Syrian government forces and their allies.³ By April 2018, it was estimated that ISIS controlled a mere three percent of the territory they once held.⁴ While today ISIS retains the ability to inspire or direct terrorist attacks abroad,⁵ has the allegiance of affiliates around the world,⁶ and could foreseeably mount a resurgence in the future like their predecessor Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)⁷, the movement is a shadow of its former self.

Whereas ISIS's dreams of a caliphate were in tatters in the summer of 2017, Kurdish fortunes appeared to be on the ascent. Relatively understudied, the Kurds are the largest stateless minority in the world today. Despite spanning a key geostrategic crossroads in the Middle East, with roughly 14.5 million in Turkey (19 percent of the population)⁸, 6 million in Iran (10 percent)⁹, 5-6 million in Iraq (15-20 percent)¹⁰, and less than 2 million in Syria (9.7 percent)¹¹ according to the CIA Factbook, the Kurds have often resided along the margins of history.¹² Nevertheless, the Kurds, particularly the Kurds of Iraq and Syria, launched themselves onto the international stage with their direct involvement in the fight against ISIS. Amidst the chaos of the Syrian Civil War and the Iraqi crisis, the avowedly secular, democratic, and American-friendly Kurds seemed the ideal ground forces for the anti-ISIS coalition.¹³ Indeed, the Kurds were the principle beneficiaries of the Obama administration's policy of empowering local actors with coalition airstrikes, weapons, intelligence, and special forces to

1 'Iraqi PM declares "end of IS caliphate" after recapture of al Nuri mosque.' *Sky News*, 29 June 2017.

2 'Raqqa Recaptured From ISIS by U.S.-Backed Militias.' *NBC News*, 17 October 2017.

3 'Syria regime recaptures Deir Ezzor from ISIS.' *Financial Times*, 3 November 2017.

4 'The ISIS Files: When Terrorists Run City Hall.' *The New York Times*, 4 April 2018.

5 'ISIS goes global: 143 attacks in 29 countries have killed 2,043.' *CNN*, 12 February 2018.

6 P.C. Colin. 'Where Will ISIS Seek to Establish Its Next Safe Haven.' *RAND Cooperation*, 2018.

7 T. Tonnessen. 'Destroying the Islamic State Hydra: Lessons Learned from the Fall of Its Predecessor'. *CTC Sentinel*, 9/8 (2016): 1-6.

8 'Turkey.' *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency. Continually updated.

9 'Iran.' *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency. Continually updated.

10 'Iraq.' *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency. Continually updated.

11 'Syria.' *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency. Continually updated.

12 Ibid.

13 'What the Syrian Kurds Have Wrought.' *The Atlantic*, 25 October 2016.

defeat ISIS rather than having to resort to Western ground forces,¹⁴ an approach the Trump administration has largely continued.¹⁵ Consequently, the Iraqi Kurdish forces, otherwise known as the 'peshmerga', but particularly the PKK linked, predominately Syrian Kurdish forces, whether the YPG or the YPG-led SDF, have collectively constituted some of the chief allies for the coalition since mid-2014.¹⁶

By mid-2017, it appeared that the Kurds had successfully captured the historical moment, having reached new heights of publicity and renown as their territory expanded and their political capital increased during their three-year fight against ISIS.¹⁷ The Iraqi Kurds, bolstered by international support following their halting of ISIS's advances in much of northern Iraq and their control of many of the 'disputed territories' over which both Baghdad and Erbil claim jurisdiction, had an independence referendum on the horizon. The Syrian Kurds had never been stronger with the PKK affiliated PYD acting as the dominant player in the de facto autonomous Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, while the YPG and SDF continued to recapture ISIS territory with the aid of the anti-ISIS coalition.

Nevertheless, little over a year after the supposed 'fall of the caliphate', both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish aspirations have been severely tested. The Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum of 25 September 2017, rather than delivering the desired popular mandate necessary to negotiate independence, backfired. Having subsequently lost most of the disputed territories they had seized since 2014, squandered much of international goodwill they had gained in the fight against ISIS, and suffering severe internal political and economic problems, the Iraqi Kurds are on the back foot. On the other side of the border, the Syrian Kurds' continued military success against ISIS triggered an even more aggressive response from their Turkish adversaries with their armed intervention in north-western Syria. Washington's active debate over whether or not, and for how long, to support their controversial partners further underscores the fragility of the Syrian Kurds position.¹⁸

This report aims to summarise some of key developments for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria as ISIS has declined since the recapture of Mosul, as well as to hypothesise what lies ahead for the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. The first chapter will discuss the Iraqi Kurds, centred on the referendum as well as its bitter aftermath. The second chapter will detail the Syrian Kurds' major successes, as well as the political challenges they have faced since the summer of 2017, ranging from retaking Raqqā and the push for Deir ez-Zor, Operation Olive Branch, to the threat of losing vital international support.¹⁹ The epilogue will summarise some of the main findings while also gauging what the future might hold for both the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds. Ultimately, this report concludes that the Kurds will likely have a large part to play in how the Middle East opens the next chapter in its troubled history after the 'caliphate'.

14 'Obama's trying to train Syrians and Iraqis to fight ISIS. Easier said than done.' *Foreign Policy*, 2 October 2014.

15 'Obama's ISIS policy is working for Trump.' *The Washington Post*, 25 January 2018.

16 J. Holland-McCowan. 'War of Shadows: How Turkey's Conflict with the PKK Shapes the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan.' *ICSR*, August 2017.

17 'America's Kurdish problem: today's allies against ISIS are tomorrow's headache.' *Vox*, 8 April 2016.

18 'Syrian SDF says not informed of any U.S. withdrawal plan.' *Reuters*, 30 March 2018.

19 'After taking Afrin, Turkey looks for new targets in Syria.' *The Economist*, 22 March 2018.

2 The Iraqi Kurds and the Kurdish Referendum

The Iraqi Kurds have been a key partner of the anti-ISIS coalition since its inception. The US's first airstrikes against ISIS were launched in support of the peshmerga in August 2014,²⁰ when ISIS was a mere 20 miles away from the KRG's capital of Erbil.²¹ Prior to Washington's decision to increase aid to the YPG following their victory at Kobane in January 2015,²² and while the ISF was rebuilding after their disastrous rout from northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, the Iraqi Kurds were the coalition's primary allies against ISIS.

The Iraqi Kurds capitalised on this opportunity. Their peshmerga rapidly occupied 90 percent of the 'disputed territories' in the wake of the ISF retreat, simultaneously defending them from ISIS advances while also bringing them under their effective control. Soon, swathes of Nineveh, Diyala and Kirkuk governorates, whose status decades of diplomatic negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad had failed to resolve, were taken over by the Kurds. While the central government declared that Kurdish control over much of these disputed territories was unilateral, temporary, and was to be reversed once ISIS was defeated, Baghdad nevertheless feared that Kurdish leaders would seek to incorporate them within a potentially independent Kurdish state in the future.²³ Masoud Barzani, president of the KRG, did little to assuage their concerns, provocatively labelling the newly occupied areas 'Kurdistani',²⁴ and telling the BBC in July 2014 that he was preparing for an independence referendum.²⁵

In response, Baghdad would spend many of the following years seeking to weaken and isolate the KRG. The government slowed the delivery of weapons and financial assistance to Erbil (provided by Western countries intended to buttress the KRG), deliberately hampering the peshmerga's ability to fight ISIS and rival the ISF.²⁶ The central government's payments of salaries to the KRG's government officials and peshmerga ceased in 2014, only to be partially resumed in March 2018.²⁷ Deprived of their share of the country's revenues, Erbil defied Baghdad by signing agreements with international oil companies. Opening the Ceyhan pipeline with Turkey enhanced their ability to export oil independently of the central government.²⁸ Emma Sky regarded these measures as evidence of the KRG's ultimate goal of not being dependent on the central government in Baghdad for their vital oil revenue and power.²⁹

20 'Obama Authorizes Air Strikes, Humanitarian Aid mission in Iraq,' *ABC News*, 7 August 2014.

21 M. Gunter. 'Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the US and Turkey,' *Middle East Policy Council*, 23/1 (2015)

22 'Battle for Kobane: Key Events,' *BBC News*, 25 June 2015.

23 G. Stansfield. 'Iraq,' In J. Eyal and E. Quintana (ed.) *Inherently Unresolved: Regional Politics and Counter-ISIS Campaign*. London: RUSI, 2015: 18.

24 'Oil and borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis,' *International Crisis Group*, October 2017: 2.

25 S. Aldouri and R. Mansour. 'Gamble by the Kurds,' *Chatham House*, December & January 2017/2018.

26 'With Referendum Approaching, Kurds Wait for More U.S. Military Aid,' *Foreign Policy*, 28 August 2017.

27 'Iraq sends money to pay Kurdish salaries for first time since 2014,' *Reuters*, 19 March 2018.

28 Stansfield. 'Iraq': 18.

29 Emma Sky. *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*. New York, Public Affairs, 2015: 357.

This chapter seeks to highlight some of the main developments of the Iraqi Kurds since the recapture of Mosul in the summer of 2017. It will examine the degree of autonomy the Kurds enjoyed prior to the referendum, the vote itself and its immediate blowback, as well as how the repercussions of the referendum continue to have an impact on the Iraqi Kurds.

Kurdish Autonomy Prior to the Referendum

Before discussing the September 2017 referendum, it is worth briefly acknowledging that the Iraqi Kurds possessed a significant degree of autonomy prior to the rise of ISIS. Perhaps the most important development in the struggle for Kurdish autonomy within Iraq in the 20th century occurred after the First Gulf War (1990-1991). Lawrence Freedman described how, following the war, Saddam Hussein’s regime tried to punish the Kurds for rebelling against him. However, as Saddam’s forces drove many of Kurds away from their villages and towns into their mountain sanctuaries, the U.S., France and the United Kingdom decided to enforce a ‘no-fly zone’ in northern Iraq. This no-fly zone essentially cemented a de facto state for the Kurds, allowing their rival political parties, the KDP and the PUK, and their respective peshmerga to consolidate their control in northern Iraq in the years to come.³⁰

Kurdish autonomy was further entrenched following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Josh Hiltermann highlighted that, particularly when the war in Iraq turned against the Bush administration, Washington increasingly found the Iraqi Kurds ‘friendly, dependable, and a useful counterweight against the perpetually bickering Shia leaders, with their loyalties divided between Washington and Tehran’.³¹ The internal security of the Kurdish region, as well as their economic potential, only lent greater allure to the Kurdish cause. Kurdish autonomy was enshrined in the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, which recognised the federal autonomous Kurdistan region run by the KRG.³²

Article 140 provided a particularly tantalising opportunity for Iraqi Kurdish leaders: the possibility of incorporating ‘disputed territories’, areas that Saddam’s regime had ‘Arabized’ over decades by displacing hundreds of thousands of Kurds and replacing them with Arab populations, into Kurdistan.³³ The ‘Arabization’ measures were largely designed in order to better secure the oil-rich terrain in ethnically mixed areas in the hands of the Arab-led central government.³⁴ Article 140 legalised ‘normalization, returning internally displaced Kurds to the disputed territories, followed by a census and referendum on whether those areas should join the autonomous region’.³⁵ By far the biggest potential prize was the city and governorate of Kirkuk. Often regarded as the Iraqi Kurds’ ‘Jerusalem’, the status of this ethnically and religiously mixed city within this oil-rich region has been a source of acute tension between Baghdad and Erbil for decades.³⁶ The *Financial Times* reported that the governorate

30 Lawrence Freedman. *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008: 253.

31 ‘The Kurds Are Right Back Where They Started.’ *The Atlantic*, 31 October 2017.

32 The Republic of Iraq. ‘Iraq’s Constitution of 2005.’ Translated by *constituteproject.org*. 2015: 43.

33 David McDowall. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998: 340.

34 ‘The Kurds Are Right Back Where They Started.’

35 R. S. Anderson. ‘The constitutional context for Iraq’s latest crisis.’ *Brookings Institution*, 7 November 2017.

36 ‘Kurds on high alert as Iraqi forces mass near Kirkuk.’ *Al-Jazeera*, 13 October 2017.

alone produced close to 400,000 barrels a day, almost ten percent of Iraq's total production.³⁷ Article 140 was meant to take effect, at the latest, two years after the creation of the 2005 constitution. It has yet to be implemented.³⁸

The KRG continued to consolidate their own power in northern Iraq while maintaining links to Baghdad in the years that followed the signing of the constitution. In fact, the Kurdish participation in the Iraqi central government, comprising nearly one fifth of the members of the Council of Representatives, and retaining the presidency in accordance with the country's informal sectarian quota system, effectively made the Iraqi Kurds king makers of the fledgling Iraqi Republic.³⁹

The Iraqi Kurds felt so assured of their position that they even held an independence referendum in 2005 based on the same question they would pose in September 2017. It received nearly unanimous support. However, while the 2005 independence vote was more of a civil-society initiative, the 2017 referendum would be principally driven by the KRG.⁴⁰ By the time of the rise of ISIS and the accompanying near dismantlement of the Iraqi state, the prospect of the Iraqi Kurds achieving greater autonomy, or even independence, appeared more feasible than ever.⁴¹ For three years, the international community consistently trumpeted them due to their purportedly secular, democratic values as well as their valiant 'freedom fighters',⁴² including their 'women at war'.⁴³ However, as ISIS declined and the Iraqi Kurds played an ever-decreasing role in the anti-ISIS campaign, the KRG could have been reasonably concerned that a drop in visibility, and consequent international support, would endanger their hopes of greater autonomy.

T.E Lawrence, popularly known as 'Lawrence of Arabia', famously wrote that the Arab Revolt during World War I, in comparison to the mechanized killing on the Western Front, was a 'sideshow of a sideshow'.⁴⁴ It is likely that the Iraqi Kurds did not feel that differently after praise was heaped on the ISF's recapture of Mosul in June 2017, and the fight to capture the remnants of the 'caliphate' in Iraq largely turned away from their borders. While they still remained along the frontlines with pockets of ISIS-held territory in Tal Afar and Hawija,⁴⁵ the world's attention had turned west, following the river bed of the Euphrates River to the plains of Syria still under ISIS control, casting the media's spotlight ever further away from the Iraqi Kurds and their problems. It was during this historical moment that the KRG's president, Massoud Barzani, announced in June 2017 that the date of a new independence referendum would be set for 25 September 2017.⁴⁶ The die had been cast.

37 'Why oil markets are taking Kurdish referendum in their stride.' *Financial Times*, 25 September 2017.

38 Anderson. 'The constitutional context for Iraq's latest crisis.'

39 R. Anagnostos. 'Kurdish Objectives in Iraq's Political Crisis.' *ISW*, 21 March 2016.

40 Gap Dalay. 'After the Kurdish Independence Referendum.' *Foreign Affairs*, 2 October 2017.

41 'Ever closer to independence – Kurdistan.' *The Economist*, 19 February 2015.

42 'Why we should support Kurdistan's Peshmerga army for a safer Middle East.' *The Telegraph*, 21 September 2017.

43 'Women at War: Meet the Female Peshmerga Fighters Taking on ISIS.' *ABC News*, 16 March 2016.

44 'Will the tide ever turn on Lawrence of Arabia.' *The Spectator*, 18 March 2017.

45 'Revived After Mosul, Iraqi Forces Prepare to Battle ISIS in Tal Afar.' *The New York Times*, 18 August 2017.

46 'Iraqi Kurds plan independence referendum on September 25.' *Reuters*, 7 June 2017.

The Referendum

As the date of the referendum approached, it became apparent that it would encounter substantial international opposition. The U.K. Foreign Secretary at the time, Boris Johnson, stated that 'unilateral moves towards independence would not be in the interests of the people of Kurdistan, Iraq, or of wider regional stability'.⁴⁷ U.S. Defence Secretary Jim Mattis personally visited Massoud Barzani and urged him to postpone the referendum, highlighting the need to exclusively focus on winning the fight against ISIS for the time being.⁴⁸ Brett H. McGurk, presidential envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, went even further stating that 'every member of our coalition believes that now is not the time to hold this referendum'.⁴⁹ Yet despite escalating pressure from the international powers, let alone the regional powers of Iran, Turkey, and the central government in Baghdad to postpone or cancel it, the independence referendum occurred on schedule.⁵⁰

The referendum posed a single question: 'Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?'⁵¹ Significantly, the vote was not exclusively held in the three Iraqi governorates that legally make up the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Dohuk. It was also conducted in many of the 'disputed territories' the KRG controlled, including Kirkuk, which were labelled as 'areas of Kurdistan outside of the region's administration'.⁵²

After counting the votes, the electoral commission reported that following a 72.61 percent turnout, 92 percent of the 3.3 million Kurds and non-Kurds who voted supported secession.⁵³ Kurdish leaders quickly framed the resounding 'yes' vote as a popular mandate with which to start independence negotiations with Baghdad and neighbouring states. Kurdish crowds celebrated that night in Erbil, setting off fireworks, wearing Kurdish clothes, and parading in cars draped with Kurdish flags.⁵⁴ Euphoric, many Iraqi Kurds believed that their dreams of obtaining a state of their own appeared near at hand. Yet beyond the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan, the celebrations were rarely echoed.

Blowback

The diplomatic fallout was swift. The day after the referendum, Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi declared that 'we are not ready to discuss or have a dialogue about the results of the referendum because it is unconstitutional'.⁵⁵ Even the influential Iraqi Shia spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a rare political statement against the referendum in his Friday sermon in Karbala following the vote.⁵⁶

47 'Foreign Secretary statement on Kurdistan Regional Government's intention to hold a referendum on independence from Iraq.' *UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office*, 12 June 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-the-kurdistan-regional-governments-intention-to-hold-a-referendum-on-independence-from-iraq>

48 'Mattis Asks Iraqi Kurds to Put Off Vote on Independence.' *The New York Times*, 22 August 2017.

49 Ibid.

50 Dalay 'After the Kurdish Independence Referendum.'

51 'KRG reveals Kurdistan's referendum wording; overseas voting on Sep 23.' *Rudaw*, 25 August 2017.

52 'As Kurds Celebrate Independence Vote Neighbors Threaten Military Action.' *The New York Times*, 25 September 2017.

53 'Iraqi Kurds decisively back independence in referendum.' *BBC News*, 27 September 2017.

54 'As Kurds Celebrate Independence.'

55 'Iraq refuses talks with Kurds about referendum results.' *Al-Jazeera*, 26 September 2017.

56 'As Kurdish Borders Close, War of Words Heats Up.' *The New York Times*, 29 September 2017.

Regional powers like Turkey and Iran, with their own Kurdish populations and interests in Iraq, were incensed. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and with the recognition that Baghdad would likely be dominated by Tehran going forward, Ankara had calculated that the best way to serve its interests in the country was to economically and politically support the KRG. This eventually led to the development of an economic dependency on Turkey, particularly within the KDP controlled areas in northern Iraq, where the Turks gained access to the Iraqi market and job opportunities. Ankara also regarded the development of good relations with the KDP-dominated KRG as a useful counterweight to their PKK adversary's presence in Iraq.⁵⁷ However, this Turkish policy towards the KRG was underpinned by the assumption that Iraqi Kurdistan would remain an autonomous region of Iraq and not seek outright independence, a development that could risk stoking Turkey's own Kurdish separatist problem. As a result, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned his former allies in the wake of the referendum, calling the vote null and void while threatening to respond on the 'political, economic, trade, and security front'.⁵⁸ He even threatened to close the Ceyhan pipeline.⁵⁹ In a meeting with President Erdogan, Iran's Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei on 4 October declared the independence referendum treasonous and a threat to the broader region.⁶⁰ Both leaders threatened to close their borders with the Kurdish region or help Baghdad to do so.⁶¹

The United Nations' Secretary-General, António Guterres, warned of the 'potentially destabilizing effects' of the referendum and stressed the necessity of preserving the 'sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity of Iraq'.⁶² The U.S. declared the referendum unconstitutional on 29 September. The U.S. Secretary of State at the time, Rex Tillerson, said, 'The United States does not recognise the...unilateral referendum'. Encouraging dialogue and cautioning against violence between Baghdad and Erbil, Tillerson maintained 'we continue to support a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq'. He expressed Washington's desire that both sides should peacefully resolve their differences and focus on the uncompleted task of defeating ISIS.⁶³

Baghdad, undoubtedly emboldened by this regional and international condemnation, went on the offensive. On 26 September, Baghdad closed the airspace over Iraqi Kurdistan to international flights after Kurdish officials refused to hand over control of their airports to federal authorities.⁶⁴ Joint military manoeuvres by Iraqi, Turkish, and Iranian forces along their respective borders led to further sabre rattling. Yet, while violence was in the air, Baghdad's initial response primarily consisted of harsh rhetoric and threats rather than open conflict.⁶⁵

The storm broke on 16 October. That morning, Iraqi federal forces launched a military operation al-Abadi claimed was intended to restore Iraqi sovereignty over the 'disputed territories', including Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields that the central government had

57 'Oil and borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis': 13.

58 'Erdogan warns of armed action over Kurdish referendum', *Al-Jazeera*, 25 September 2017.

59 'Oil and borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis': 13.

60 'Khamenei condemns Kurdistan's referendum as "treason"', *Rudaw*, 4 October 2017.

61 'Oil and borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis': 7.

62 'UN chief voices concern over 'potentially destabilizing effects' of Kurdish referendum,' *UN News*, 25 September 2017.

63 'Tillerson says Kurdish independence referendum is illegitimate,' *The Washington Post*, 29 September 2017.

64 'Iraq closes Kurdish airspace as it raises pressure on KRG,' *Financial Times*, 29 September 2017.

65 'Oil and borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis': 4.

lost in June 2014. The opportunity presented itself with the quick defeat of ISIS in Hawija, a district town within Kirkuk governorate. Hawija's recapture had placed battle-ready Iraqi troops close to Kirkuk.⁶⁶ Peshmerga fighters in Kirkuk either withdrew or put up minimal resistance against the advance of the U.S. trained, elite counter-terrorism unit and the army's ninth armoured brigade.⁶⁷ When fighting did occur, the KRG representative to the U.K. claimed that 'over 100 peshmerga were killed and injured' in the clashes.⁶⁸ Further details on what led to the fall of Kirkuk ranging from the bitter internal divisions within KRG to the involvement of Iran will be expanded upon in the subsequent section.

Over the following days, facing partial or no resistance from Kurdish forces, Iraqi federal troops re-gained control of Kirkuk and most of the disputed territories.⁶⁹ One illustrative example of what some of these conquests entailed was the recapture of Tuz Khurmatu. The town, located south of Kirkuk, was recaptured by primarily Shia Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) and ethnic Turkmen fighters. Amnesty International reported how members of the PMUs and Turkmen fighters had burned, looted, and demolished hundreds of homes in predominately Kurdish areas. Displaced residents described indiscriminate attacks with rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns, and mortars that killed at least 11 civilians.⁷⁰

After more than 12 years in office, Masoud Barzani resigned as president of the KRG on 1 November 2017, asking parliament not to extend his mandate.⁷¹ Defiant in defeat, Barzani claimed that 'three million votes for Kurdistan independence created history and cannot be erased...Nobody stood up with us other than our mountains'.⁷² In a televised address, he announced that he would remain a peshmerga, would continue to be the leader of the KDP, as well as continue to sit on the High Political Council.⁷³ The KRG's parliament voted to divide his presidential powers among parliament, the judiciary and the cabinet until the next parliamentary and presidential elections were held.

On 14 November, the KRG announced that it would honour the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court's ruling on 6 November that the referendum was unconstitutional. The same statement also argued that the only way to maintain a united Iraq was for talks to begin with Baghdad to resolve the disputes over the region's constitutional status, 'through implementation of all constitutional articles and in a way that guarantees all rights, authorities and status mentioned in the Constitution'.⁷⁴ Saad Aldouri and Renad Mansour underscored that within three weeks of the vote, the KRG 'lost a fifth of the territory under their control'.⁷⁵ In one fell swoop, the Iraqi Kurds had lost control of the disputed territories they had gained since the rise of

66 Ibid: 2.

67 Aldouri and Mansour. 'Gamble by the Kurds.'

68 KRG Representation in the U.K.. 'Written evidence from KRG Representation (KUR0003).' In *Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK*. London, 2018. <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Foreign%20Affairs/Kurdish%20aspirations%20and%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20UK/written/73513.html>

69 Foreign Affairs Committee. *Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK*. London, 2018. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cm/aff/518/518.pdf>

70 'Iraq: Fresh evidence that tens of thousands forced to flee Tuz Khurmatu amid indiscriminate attacks, lootings and arson.' *Amnesty International*, 24 October 2017.

71 'Iraqi Kurdish President Steps Down After Independence Push Backfires.' *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 October 2017.

72 Ibid.

73 'Kurdish leader departs, leaving nephew faced with reconciliation.' *Reuters*, 1 November 2017.

74 'Iraqi Kurds back away from independence bid.' *CNN*, 14 November 2017.

75 Aldouri and Mansour. 'Gamble by the Kurds.'

ISIS as well as access to the financial lynchpin of their would-be petrol state in Kirkuk. Losing Kirkuk cost the oil dependent economy of Iraqi Kurdistan half of its production as well as restricting their ability to export oil and gas independently.⁷⁶ The approximately 9 billion barrels of oil at stake in these often ethnically and religiously mixed disputed territories will continue to make them a politicised issue for Erbil-Baghdad relations going forward as long as the borders of the autonomous region remain contested.⁷⁷

Iraqi Kurdistan After the Referendum

The months after 25 September appeared disastrous for the Iraqi Kurds. While Bill Park rightly argues that history may regard this event in a different light decades from now, it seems clear that the Iraqi Kurds have been put on the back foot for the time being.⁷⁸ The diminishing external threat of ISIS, combined with the resulting blowback after the referendum, has particularly exposed the internal divisions among the Iraqi Kurds and their dire economic situation, as well as the limits of U.S. support for the Iraqi Kurds.

The quick territorial reversals of the Kurdish armed forces in the face of the ISF's October offensive brought into focus the deep divisions that persist among Iraqi Kurdistan's dominant political parties: the KDP and the PUK. The KDP was founded in 1946 by Mulla Mustafa Barzani, a Kurdish tribal leader who would eventually become synonymous with the Kurdish struggle in Iraq. Perhaps his greatest achievement came when he negotiated the March Manifesto with Baghdad in 1970, which 'theoretically provided Kurdish autonomy under his rule'.⁷⁹ Mustafa was eventually defeated by a combination of the armed forces of Ibrahim Ahmed and his son Jalal Talabani, the central government's opposition, in addition to the withdrawal of Iranian and American support. Massoud Barzani, son of Mulla Mustafa, eventually took his place as leader of the KDP. Jalal Talabani would go on to establish the PUK in 1975. Alternating between rivalry and cooperation, these two parties have grappled for power in Iraqi Kurdistan ever since.⁸⁰

Tensions between the KDP and PUK erupted during a civil war they fought against one another from May 1994 to November 1997 over control of customs revenues and territory within the region. Due to each party's demanding patronage structures, government power within the KRG was seen as vital in order to provide for their constituents.⁸¹ The power sharing agreement that eventually ended the conflict effectively created two rival governments within the KRG: the PUK's headquartered in Sulaymaniyah, and the KDP's in Erbil. The KDP's 'yellow zone' of influence within Iraqi Kurdistan comprises of Erbil and Dohuk governorates, while the PUK's 'green zone' consists of Sulaymaniyah governorate. Both the PUK and KDP traditionally respect each other's authority in their separate zones. To this day, despite attempts to unite them, peshmerga brigades are largely split between those aligned with the KDP and those aligned with PUK. The respective peshmerga of the PUK and KDP have different

76 'Why oil markets are taking Kurdish referendum in their stride.'

77 'A Squabble at Iraq's Oldest Oil Field Could Rock Global Supplies.' *Bloomberg*, 2 April 2017.

78 Bill Park. 'Causes and Consequences: Kurdistan Independence Referendum.' Lecture, House of Commons, London, 1 May 2018.

79 Gutner. *The Kurds ascending*: 12.

80 Ibid: 13.

81 McDowall. *A Modern History of the Kurds*: 344.

operating procedures and rules of engagement. For instance, the PUK have a better relationship with Tehran and have often enlisted the help of PKK fighters, while the KDP’s forces have a stronger history of cooperating with Turkish armed forces.⁸² Their division was further highlighted with the rise of ISIS in the summer of 2014. The KDP did not come to the aid of their PUK counterparts when ISIS invaded PUK-controlled territory in Jalawla in June 2014. According to a journalist who has worked for *Rudaw*, the KDP leadership reasoned that even though their Kurdish brethren were being attacked, ‘as there was no fighting in KDP territory between KDP forces and ISIS they thought...it was not their problem’. It was only after ISIS attacked their ‘yellow zone’ positions around Erbil in August that the KDP dropped their narrative that the ‘ISIS problem was an “Iraqi problem”’.⁸³

Baghdad and Tehran decisively exploited these internal divisions prior to the recapture of Kirkuk. Iran, utilising their history of cooperation with the PUK, negotiated for the PUK’s forces to withdraw from their positions in Kirkuk prior to the ISF’s advance.⁸⁴ Aldouri and Mansour point to a faction of the PUK’s leaders, including Bafel Talabani (son of the late Jalal Talabani), as the ones responsible for making the deal.⁸⁵ On the eve of his resignation as president, Masoud Barzani accused his PUK rivals of ‘high treason’ for withdrawing from their positions in Kirkuk prior to the October offensive.⁸⁶ The PUK have strongly denied these accusations, blaming the loss of Kirkuk on the KDP’s premature push for independence as well as their failure to reach an agreement over the status of a military base in Kirkuk that Iraqi government forces had demanded to take back.⁸⁷ Regardless of who is principally to blame, the KDP and PUK rivalry severely hamstrung the Iraqi Kurds’ unity when it mattered most.

While Iraqi Kurdistan, with its massive oil resources and comparative political stability in the region, was once heralded as the ‘new Dubai’, by 2014 it resembled more of a failing state. By then the KRG was unable to pay government salaries, convene its parliament, or legally extend the presidency.⁸⁸ Corruption continues to restrict its economic progress while simultaneously endangering its ability to attract foreign investors.⁸⁹ Aggravating the situation is the vast public sector the PUK and KDP has built over time, consisting of ‘an extensive patronage network that rewards people for their loyalty more than their skills... one of whose main features has been a bloated public sector headed by party loyalists’.⁹⁰ The costs of the fight against ISIS, hosting approximately 2 million internally displaced Iraqis alone, and a coinciding drop in oil prices have also severely weakened the economy.⁹¹ No longer able to rally the Kurds in the struggle against a crumbling ‘caliphate’ or with dreams of independence, KRG officials could be hard pressed moving forward to dampen popular unrest given the region’s dire economic straits.

82 U.S. State Department. ‘Northern Iraq: KDP and PUK to Unify Administrations and Peshmerga, Turkmen Participate in Irbil Protest, PUK Complains of ITF Incitement.’ 4 March 2003. <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2003/03/03ANKARA1391.html>

83 Osamah Golpy, telephone interview with author, 1 August 2016.

84 ‘Iranian commander issued stark warning to Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk.’ *Reuters*, 20 October 2017.

85 Aldouri and Mansour. ‘Gamble by the Kurds.’

86 ‘Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani to step down.’ *BBC News*, 29 October 2017.

87 ‘Iranian commander issued stark warning to Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk.’

88 Aldouri and Mansour. ‘Gamble by the Kurds.’

89 J. Kocsol. ‘Fighting Corruption is Essential to Kurdish Independence.’ *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 2017.

90 ‘The Kurds Are Right Back Where They Started.’

91 Ibid.

The limits of U.S. support to the Iraqi Kurds was also on full display following the referendum. Ranj Alaaldin wrote that U.S. relations with the KRG had taken a significant blow following 'Washington's acquiescence to the Kirkuk offensive, which was aimed at bolstering Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's position and side-lining Iran-aligned factions ahead of next year's elections'.⁹² Although acquiescence may be a strong word, the U.S. certainly seemed ill-prepared to manage the crisis. While Washington had declared their opposition prior to the referendum, their insistence on maintaining a united front against ISIS, as well as their growing military and political investments in Iraqi Kurdistan, made it appear that they would either not permit an armed Iraqi offensive being launched against the peshmerga or they would at least better mediate disputes between Erbil and Baghdad before they reached such an escalation point.⁹³ What did appear consistent with U.S. foreign policy was that when there was a choice between supporting a unitary Iraq, a fledgling republic that the United States had spent precious blood and treasure to build, or supporting an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, Washington would choose the former.

A Brighter Future?

A degree of normalcy has begun to return to Iraqi Kurdistan in recent months. Iraqi Kurdistan's Sulaymaniyah and Erbil international airports reopened on 15 March 2018.⁹⁴ In May 2018, the Iraqi central government sent money to pay the salaries of state employees in the Kurdish region for the first time since 2014.⁹⁵

Signs indicate that the U.S., as well as much of the international community, continues to want to foster relations with Iraqi Kurdistan. On 23 April 2018, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Douglass Silliman, announced the construction of the largest U.S. consulate complex in the world in Erbil. Perhaps referencing the fallout after the referendum, he remarked that 'the new consulate building demonstrates that the United States will stand with the people of Iraqi Kurdistan Region, as they build a future that will be brighter than the past'.⁹⁶ Senior French, German, and British officials continue to have meetings with KRG representatives after the referendum.⁹⁷ Russia, outside of its own political ties with the KRG,⁹⁸ also retains a large economic stake in the region. A reported \$1 billion natural gas pipeline was signed between the KRG and Rosneft, an oil and gas company that is majority-owned by the Russian state.⁹⁹ In addition, Ankara's unceasing designs to weaken the PKK's presence in Iraq, whether in the border region of Sinjar or the Qandil mountains, could bring the Iraqi Kurds into the international spotlight once again.¹⁰⁰ While the Iraqi Kurds will long remember the West's failure to prevent Baghdad's October offensive, this landlocked, economically vulnerable region will likely remain dependent on international backing in order to economically sustain itself for some time.

92 R. Alaaldin. 'The U.S. and Kurdistan: Revise and rebuild after Kirkuk.' *Brookings Institute*, November 2017.

93 Ibid.

94 'Kurdish airports for international flights, Iraqi PM says.' *Reuters*, 15 March 2018.

95 'Iraq sends money to pay Kurdish salaries for first time since 2014.' *Reuters*, 19 March 2018.

96 'In Erbil, US Ambassador announces construction of largest consulate complex.' *Rudaw*, 23 April 2018.

97 'President Barzani Receives the French and German Ambassadors to Iraq.' *Kurdistan Region Presidency*, 30 November 2017; 'Prime Minister Barzani receives British ambassador to Iraq.' *Kurdistan Regional Government*, 6 May 2018.

98 'Prime Minister Barzani meets Russian President Putin.' *Kurdistan Regional Government*, 2 June 2017.

99 'Russia's Rosneft clinches gas pipeline deal with Iraq's Kurdistan.' *Reuters*, 18 September 2017.

100 'Iraq deploys troops to Sinjar following Turkey's push against PKK.' *The National*, 6 April 2018.

The recent leadership change in the KRG could also prove a source of optimism going forward. Since Massoud Barzani’s resignation of the presidency on 1 November 2017, his nephew Nechirvan Barzani, who served alongside his uncle as prime minister, has become the main executive authority figure in the region.¹⁰¹ Nechirvan, 51, has served as prime minister for all but two and a half years since 2006. Some analysts are hopeful that his reputation of being a less polarising figure than his uncle, along with his better relations with rival Kurdish parties and regional powers, will better equip him to deal with this transitional period than Massoud. The burden of dealing with the reconciliation with Baghdad and guiding Iraqi Kurdistan is largely Nechirvan’s to bear for the foreseeable future.¹⁰² Ultimately the KRG’s general reliability and their continued, though now more limited role in the fight against ISIS, ensures that they will likely maintain ‘a residue of goodwill’ on the international stage even after the referendum.¹⁰³

The Iraqi parliamentary elections, held on 12 May 2018, came at a critical juncture. The country had barely begun to recover from the devastation wrought by ISIS and the struggle continued against their remnants in Kirkuk and Diyala governorates. During the fight against ISIS, al-Abadi had emerged as a palatable partner for the U.S. and allies. Washington’s understandable concerns that more hard-line, sectarian figures could have gained support in the run up to the election, if Abadi had appeared weak against his separatist countrymen following the referendum, could have factored heavily into their political decision not to interfere with Baghdad’s October offensive.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of the U.S.’s motivation, Iraqi Kurds will likely bitterly remember this seeming abandonment from their alleged allies in the international community for a long time to come. The role the Iraqi Kurds might play in the formation of a new coalition government in Baghdad in the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum will be worthy of further study going forward.¹⁰⁵

101 ‘Kurdish leader departs, leaving nephew faced with reconciliation.’

102 Ibid.

103 ‘Oil and borders: How to Fix Iraq’s Kurdish Crisis’: 9.

104 I. Rudolf. ‘From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Units.’ *ICSR*, May 2018.

105 ‘Iraq to tackle vast vote recount amid claims of extensive fraud.’ *Al-Monitor*, 7 June 2018.

3 The Syrian Kurds and the Battle for Northern Syria

Whereas the U.S. had a longstanding relationship with the KRG and had labelled the PKK a foreign terrorist organisation since 1997, the Syrian Kurds, consisting of a mere 9 to 10 percent of the country's pre-war population of 23 million, were comparatively 'off the radar' at the start of the Syrian Civil War.¹⁰⁶ Yet, following their decisive victory over ISIS in Kobane with the help of the U.S.-led coalition in January 2015,¹⁰⁷ they quickly occupied centre stage. Almost overnight, the PKK's Syrian affiliates, the PYD, as well as the PYD's affiliated armed forces, the YPG and eventually the YPG-led SDF, would be regarded as indispensable allies for the anti-ISIS coalition.

Prior to January 2015, the Syrian Kurds' power stemmed from the embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's decision not to contest Kurdish control in the north-east of the country, so he could focus on fighting the largely Sunni resistance along Syria's populous western spine. His recognition of a chance to cooperate rather than combat the Kurds gave space for the PYD, after side-lining rival Kurdish political parties,¹⁰⁸ to become the dominant political party in the region while also exercising effective control over the predominately Kurdish areas in Syria. Consequently, the PYD's reluctance to fight the Assad regime enabled them to direct their military resources almost exclusively on the fight on ISIS by mid 2014. These were exactly the kind of allies the U.S. desired. Washington wished to defeat ISIS but was unwilling to further entangle themselves in the broader Syrian Civil War.¹⁰⁹ By the summer of 2017, while acting as the core ground forces for the anti-ISIS coalition in Syria, the Syrian Kurds had become the dominant political and military actors in northern Syria.

However, their rise to power was met with more military resistance than just the Islamic State. Turkey, in particular, views the YPG and SDF as largely PKK fronts, lending the prospect of a robust PKK safe haven or semi-autonomous Kurdish zone under PYD control developing in Syria as an existential threat to their country. Yet, despite Turkey's vehement objections, Washington has continued to provide arms, supplies and special force advisors to the YPG and SDF forces as they have served as the tip of the spear in the fight against ISIS. The U.S. continually justifies their support by asserting that the YPG and the PKK are distinct entities and that the SDF has a major Arab component.¹¹⁰

Ankara tried to take the problem into their own hands by launching an offensive dubbed 'Operation Euphrates Shield' in August 2016. In cooperation with Turkish-backed rebels, Turkey effectively captured the remaining ISIS-held territory along their border while

¹⁰⁶ Gunter, 'Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds.'

¹⁰⁷ 'The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria.' *International Crisis Group*, May 2017: 12.

¹⁰⁸ 'After quiet revolt, power struggle looms for Syria's Kurds.' *Reuters*, 7 November 2012.

¹⁰⁹ 'The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria': 1-8.

¹¹⁰ 'Who Exactly are "the Kurds"?' *The Atlantic*, 25 February 2016.

simultaneously driving a roughly 2,000 sq. kilometre wedge between the Kurdish-controlled enclaves of Afrin and their territory east of SDF-controlled Manbij. Hundreds of Syrian Kurdish fighters and Turkish troops have died in the cross fire. Further information on the PKK, the PKK's relationship with the PYD and Operation Euphrates Shield, in addition to the YPG and SDF's contributions to the fight against ISIS up to the summer of 2017 can be viewed in ICSR's report 'War of Shadows: How Turkey's Conflict with the PKK Shapes the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan'.¹¹¹

The decline of ISIS has posed fundamental questions for the Syrian Kurds. How will Turkey or the Assad regime respond to this powerful Kurdish presence in northern and eastern Syria going forward? Will the U.S. continue to support their controversial Kurdish partners if the ISIS threat continues to wane? In order to begin to address these crucial questions, this chapter will examine the developments concerning the Syrian Kurds since the summer of 2017, ranging from the progress of the anti-ISIS coalition to the latest Turkish intervention, as well as highlight some of the greatest political challenges they have faced 'after the caliphate'.

Retaking Raqqa

By the time ISIS's de facto Iraqi capital of Mosul was recaptured, their de facto Syrian capital was under siege. Backed by airstrikes and special forces from the U.S.-led coalition, the SDF had completely encircled Raqqa north and south of the Euphrates, cutting it off from the rest of ISIS-held territory.¹¹² In July 2017, SDF fighters entered Raqqa itself, beginning what would be a fierce, months-long block-by-block battle for the city.

The SDF finally ousted ISIS from Raqqa on 17 October 2017. It was a costly victory. While the Pentagon has not publicised specific figures, evidence indicates that the SDF suffered heavy casualties.¹¹³ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a U.K.-based monitoring group, estimated that more than 3,000 people were killed during the battle, including 1,130 civilians.¹¹⁴ Raqqa was nearly flattened in the process, with close to 80 percent of the city being destroyed, leaving hundreds of thousands of people homeless.¹¹⁵ The offensive was considered the most intense American bombing campaign since Vietnam.¹¹⁶

The spectre of the PKK's presence within the SDF loomed once again after Raqqa was retaken. Two days after the capture of the city, members of the YPG's all-female affiliate, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), unveiled a huge banner of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, in the centre of the city. Coalition officials hastily sought to distance themselves from the display, stressing that the flag was not sanctioned by the SDF's leadership. *Reuters* quoted Colonel Ryan Dillion, spokesman for the anti-ISIS coalition, stating that 'furthermore,

¹¹¹ Holland-McCowan. 'War of Shadows: How Turkey's Conflict with the PKK Shapes the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan.'

¹¹² 'U.S.-backed forces seize town with IS military base near Raqqa: SDF official.' *Reuters*, 11 July 2017.

¹¹³ 'Battle for Raqqa: Kurd forces admit setbacks but deny retreat.' *Middle East Eye*, 19 July 2017.

¹¹⁴ "'Come out and Surrender": Inside Raqqa, With the Fighters Who Drove Off ISIS.' *The New York Times*, 17 October 2017.

¹¹⁵ 'Al-Raqqa...between the declaration of starting the "liberation battle" and the official declaration of the "liberation" shocking figures.' *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 20 October 2017.

¹¹⁶ 'Battle to retake Raqqa inches toward conclusion.' *PBS News Hour*, 5 October 2017.

the Coalition does not approve of the display of divisive symbols and imagery at a time in which we remain focused on the defeat of Daesh (IS) in Syria'.¹¹⁷ This public display only exacerbated Ankara's anger over Washington's continued support for their Kurdish adversaries.

The question of who should govern Raqqa after the 'caliphate' fell has remained a lingering issue. Prior to the SDF's capture of the city, many analysts, including the author, doubted whether a Kurdish-dominated SDF could or desired to recapture, let alone hold, the Arab majority governorate due to Arab-Kurdish hostility.¹¹⁸ An activist group in Raqqa called 'Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently' wrote, prior to the city's recapture, that the prospect of the Kurdish-dominated SDF taking the Arab majority city would drive much of the Arab population to support ISIS.¹¹⁹

Today, Raqqa is ostensibly run by the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC). The majority of the RCC consists of Arabs but it also includes Kurds and other minority groups. Before the capture of the city, the RCC had gradually been given control over the reconquered areas of the Raqqa governorate after they were taken by the SDF.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, concerns remain that this organisation will just serve as a rubber stamp for the PYD's directives.

The U.S.'s reluctance to contribute to the reconstruction efforts in Raqqa, let alone the rest of Syria, beyond re-establishing essential services and basic security is notable. On 21 December 2017, Brett McGurk asserted that 'we are not engaged in nation-building exercises and long-term reconstruction'. Rather, McGurk said, 'we are in the business...of stabilising these areas, clearing landmines' or providing humanitarian aid such as 'water, basic health' and electricity.¹²¹ Washington's averseness to shoulder the immense reconstruction costs required has also dampened international willingness to provide sufficient international aid to rebuild the city.¹²² The challenge of how to stabilise Raqqa and its surrounding areas, beyond providing sufficient security and basic services to the local population, will likely remain a thorny issue for the coalition for the foreseeable future.¹²³

The Race for Deir ez-Zor

While Raqqa was being retaken, ISIS's eastern stronghold of Deir ez-Zor still stood. The oil rich governorate's strategic location near the Iraqi border had served as a major logistical centre and transit hub through which ISIS could send reinforcements either side of the border. The city of the same name had been contested between regime and opposition forces since the beginning of the uprising.¹²⁴ Once Raqqa was secured, Deir ez-Zor was the last major prize to be taken.

117 'YPG fighters credit Ocalan with Syria victory.' *Reuters*, 23 October 2017.

118 B. Barfi. 'Ascent of the PYD and the SDF.' *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 2018: 3 and 9.

119 'ISIS or the Kurds? Some Arabs wonder which is worse.' *CNN*, 25 May 2016.

120 H. Haid. 'Is the Raqqa Civilian Council Fit for Purpose.' *Chatham House*, October 2017.

121 U.S. Department of State. 'Update on the D-ISIS Campaign.' 21 December 2017. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/12/276746.htm>

122 B. Reeves and C. T. Wittes. 'No easy way out of reconstructing Raqqa.' *Brookings Institute*, November 2017.

123 N. Bonsey. 'What are the challenges stabilizing Syria's post-ISIS areas?' *International Crisis Group*, October 2017.

124 Colin P. Clarke. 'How ISIS is Transforming.' *Foreign Affairs*, 25 September 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-09-25/how-isis-transforming>

Nevertheless, the Assad regime had their own cards to play as the SDF and the U.S.-led coalition eyed the city. While the SDF's noose was tightening around Raqqa, Syrian troops launched a lightning offensive towards Deir ez-Zor through the central and eastern deserts from late August to early September 2017.¹²⁵ At stake was not only leverage in the closing stages of the fight against ISIS, but also the governorate's bountiful oil resources. On 4 September, Syrian government forces and their allies lifted the more than three-year long siege of two Syrian government enclaves in the city centre.¹²⁶ They fully recaptured the city two months later.¹²⁷

The SDF and anti-ISIS coalition promptly responded, mirroring the Syrian regime's advances west of the Euphrates River with their own offensive along its eastern bank. Allied warplanes worked in concert with SDF fighters to flush ISIS out 'of their hide-outs and fortified fighting positions, or to pinpoint their locations'.¹²⁸ In conjunction with approximately 2,000 U.S. troops deployed in north-eastern Syria, special operations forces trained to advise and provide artillery support,¹²⁹ and the SDF pursued ISIS's fighters down the Euphrates.

The rival advances soon captured the other key ISIS-held towns downstream of Deir ez-Zor, such as al-Mayadin.¹³⁰ By November, regime forces had recaptured the key Syrian border town of Abu Kamal.¹³¹ ISIS has largely been relegated to a few villages and desert towns along the Euphrates River, the remote expanses of the Iraq-Syria border, and the central and southern Syrian desert ever since.¹³² However, ISIS's decline has not prevented the U.S.-led coalition's and the Assad regime's competition for control of the rest of Deir ez-Zor governorate from occasionally erupting into violence. On 7 February 2018, the U.S.-led coalition killed between 200-300 pro-Syrian government forces, many of whom were private Russian military contractors, as they assaulted SDF positions.¹³³ The Pentagon described the firefight as an act of self-defence as approximately 40 Americans were at the besieged outpost at the time. What made this battle particularly exceptional was that the rival militaries had previously been quite effective at avoiding clashes with one another by communicating through 'often-used deconfliction telephone lines'.¹³⁴ While Moscow denied that it had any control over the fighters, they were likely part of the Wagner Group, a company believed to be used by the Kremlin to conduct military operations while not being officially linked to the Russian government. This event raised longstanding fears that Russian and American forces would collide, risking opening an even bloodier chapter in the civil war.¹³⁵ While neither party has shown a willingness to escalate the conflict since, potential battles between their proxy and partner forces going forward could feasibly trigger future clashes between them.

125 'Syrian army, allies thrust east to break siege of Deir al-Zor city.' *Reuters*, 4 September 2017.

126 'Deir Ezzor: Relief in parts of Syrian city after 3-year ISIS siege is broken.' *CNN*, 16 September 2017.

127 'ISIS dealt twin blows with loss of Deir ez-Zor and key Iraq border post.' *The Guardian*, 3 November 2017.

128 'Battle to Stamp Out ISIS in Syria Gains New Momentum, but Threats Remain.' *The New York Times*, 30 May 2018.

129 'Pentagon likely to acknowledge 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria: U.S. officials.' *Reuters*, 24 November 2017.

130 'Syrian forces capture ISIS border stronghold as pressure shifts to last enclaves.' *The Washington Post*, 9 November 2017.

131 'Syrian, Iranian-Led Forces Capture Abu Kamal, Threaten to Confront U.S and S.D.F.' *Middle East Institute*, 8 November 2017.

132 'Syria war: Army retakes last IS urban stronghold.' *BBC News*, 9 November 2017.

133 'Scores of Russian fighters killed by US strikes in Syria.' *The National*, 13 February 2018.

134 'How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria.' *The New York Times*, 24 May 2018.

135 *Ibid.*

The SDF and pro-Syrian regime forces continue to jockey for position either side of the Euphrates, whether they are seeking to eliminate the remaining pockets of ISIS territory to secure oil and gas resources or in order to better position themselves in relation to one another. The SDF likely regards the mop-up operations in eastern Syria as an opportunity to gain political leverage with which they could seek to negotiate for greater autonomy within a de-centralised future Syria.¹³⁶ Whether and to what extent Damascus will stomach the status quo or seek to reverse the SDF's territorial gains in the short, medium, and long term remains an open question.

Operation Olive Branch

While the SDF was consolidating their control in eastern Syria, Turkey was becoming increasingly restless. Their concerns spiked on 15 January 2018 when the U.S.-led coalition announced it was working with the SDF to create a 30,000-strong border force in north-eastern Syria. President Erdogan promptly claimed he would 'suffocate' it out of fruition, denouncing the plan as tantamount to creating a 'terror army'.¹³⁷

On 20 January, only five days after the announcement of the proposed border force, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch, their second armed intervention in Syria primarily directed against the YPG and SDF. The Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, declared its purpose was to create a 30-kilometer (20-mile) deep 'secure zone' in the north-western region of Afrin.¹³⁸ Its ultimate goal, however, was to eject the PKK-linked YPG from the region. President Erdogan described the operation as essential in order to preserve both Syria and Turkey's territorial integrity.¹³⁹

On 18 March, Turkish-backed forces captured the region's central town of the same name.¹⁴⁰ In early March the UN announced that it had received 'alarming reports' of hundreds of civilian casualties due to air strikes and the ground offensive.¹⁴¹ On 11 May, the SOHR estimated that, since the operation began, at least 1,523 members of the YPG and SDF had been killed in addition to 578 members of the Turkish-backed forces, including 83 members of the Turkish armed forces. A desperate deal between the YPG and Damascus to have Syrian regime-affiliated forces help defend the city was ultimately futile,¹⁴² leaving an estimated 91 Syrian regime-backed forces dead.¹⁴³

Washington's unwillingness to provide air support to the YPG in Afrin during Operation Olive Branch was significant. While the YPG was indeed the primary component of the SDF, a force that the U.S. had showed a willingness to defend in clashes with Russian and Syrian forces on 7 February (albeit with an embedded U.S. presence amongst the defending forces), Washington did not come to the aid of the YPG in Afrin. The U.S.'s limited reaction was exemplified by the former

¹³⁶ 'Middle Euphrates River Valley, Syria.' *International Crisis Group*, 4 June 2018.

¹³⁷ 'Erdogan says Turkey will crush "terror army" in northern Syria.' *Reuters*, 15 January 2018.

¹³⁸ 'AP explains: Turkey's 'Operation Olive Branch' in Afrin.' *Associated Press*, 22 January 2018.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ 'Turkey-backed forces and Free Syrian Army capture Afrin city.' *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2018.

¹⁴¹ 'UN "deeply alarmed" about civilian deaths in besieged Afrin.' *Al-Jazeera*, 17 March 2018.

¹⁴² 'Syria: Kurdish YPG makes deal with Assad regime to defend Afrin.' *The Sunday Times*, 23 February 2018.

¹⁴³ 'After 54 Days of Controlling the Area, Turkish Warplanes Bomb North of Afrin, In Conjunction with Ground Shelling Accompanies A Direct Confrontation Between the Kurdish And Turkish Forces.' *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 11 May 2018.

U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson's public acknowledgement of Turkey's 'legitimate concerns' for its security to fight terrorists while calling for restraint on 'both sides' on 22 January 2018.¹⁴⁴ A Pentagon official echoed him, stating that 'we encourage all parties to avoid escalation and to focus on the most important task of defeating ISIS'.¹⁴⁵

David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* reasoned that the U.S. did not come to the YPG's aid in Afrin because U.S. officials had made clear for months that they did not coordinate with the YPG in the region, that Afrin was in a Russian-controlled zone, and that the Americans would not interfere if Turkey went on the offensive there.¹⁴⁶ As U.S. Department of State's spokeswoman Heather Nauert made clear on 19 March: 'The United States does not operate in the area of north-west Syria, where Afrin is located... we also remain committed to the Defeat ISIS campaign and our Syrian Democratic Forces partners in eastern Syria'.¹⁴⁷ It appears that U.S. security guarantees for the SDF remain limited to SDF-controlled areas east of the Euphrates River, as well as Manbij, while pro-regime forces dominate the western bank.¹⁴⁸ Both powers are often limiting their activities to their respective sides of the Euphrates River, developing increasingly clear spheres of influence. By this logic, it was the Russian troop pull-out days before, and their subsequent ceding of Afrin's airspace to Turkey, that ultimately betrayed the Kurds.¹⁴⁹

Understandably the YPG, the same force that the U.S.-led coalition had defended in Kobane and the principle player in the SDF, felt abandoned by the West in the face of the advancing Turkish army. The SDF itself has issued repeated statements condemning Operation Olive Branch. Their appeals for the international community to come to the defence of Afrin ranged from appealing to the operation's counterproductive effect on the fight against ISIS,¹⁵⁰ condemning 'Turkey's brutal aggression',¹⁵¹ to repeated calls for Turkey to leave Afrin.¹⁵² Indeed, Olive Branch effectively halted the coalition's push in Deir ez-Zor governorate for months as many SDF commanders and fighters were re-deployed to Afrin to combat the Turkish offensive.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, while most of Afrin is currently occupied by Turkish-backed forces, the battle for Afrin may be far from over. Both the region's longstanding Kurdish population as well as its mountainous terrain could provide the ideal ground for a Kurdish insurgency in the future.¹⁵⁴

144 'Tillerson "concerned" at Turkey's expanding Syrian offensive.' *CNN*, 23 January 2018.

145 'Airstrikes pound Syria's Afrin as Turkey launches "Operation Olive Branch".' *Reuters*, 20 January 2018.

146 'The Turks have taken Afrin. Let's not let Manbij fall next.' *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2018.

147 U.S. Department of State. 'Concern Over the Situation in Afrin, Syria.' 19 March 2018. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/03/279365.htm>

148 'Middle Euphrates River Valley, Syria.' *International Crisis Group*, 4 June 2018.

149 'The Turks have taken Afrin. Let's not let Manbij fall next.' *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2018.

150 'Statement to Public Opinion.' *SDF*, 20 January 2018. <https://sdf-press.com/en/2018/01/statement-to-public-opinion-8/>

151 'Avesta Khabour is the symbol of resistance of the times against Turkish terrorism.' *SDF*, 29 January 2018. <https://sdf-press.com/en/2018/01/avesta-khabour-is-the-symbol-of-resistance-of-the-times-against-turkish-terrorism/>

152 'Statement of Civil Administration in Tabqa in Solidarity Day with Afrin.' *SDF*, 26 May 2018. <https://sdf-press.com/en/2018/05/statement-of-civil-administration-in-tabqa-in-solidarity-day-with-afrin/>

153 'SDF fighters redeploy from battle against ISIS to defend Efrin.' *The Defense Post*, 6 March 2018.

154 McDowall. *A Modern History of the Kurds*: 466.

Under Pressure

The pace of the SDF's eastern offensive has quickened in recent months, as many SDF fighters and senior Kurdish commanders have returned to the eastern front after the capture of Afrin. The launch of Operation Roundup on 1 May 2018 marked a new stage in the anti-ISIS campaign.¹⁵⁵

The most recent offensive has increased concerns in Damascus that U.S. troops may stay in Syria for the foreseeable future, while continuing to support their increasingly powerful SDF allies. In an interview with *RT* on 31 May, President Assad called for the Americans to leave the country while simultaneously threatening to defeat the SDF by force if they refused to come to the negotiating table.¹⁵⁶ Director of Joint Staff at the Pentagon, Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie, promptly responded, warning against any attack against the SDF, stating that 'any interested party in Syria should understand that attacking U.S. forces or our coalition partners will be bad policy'.¹⁵⁷ The progress of the talks between the political arm of the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), and the Assad regime should be monitored closely.¹⁵⁸

Irrespective of Assad's sabre-rattling, recapturing and holding all of the remaining ISIS-held territory in Syria east of the Euphrates will be challenging for the SDF and their coalition partners. ISIS remnants are principally situated along the Euphrates River, the Iraq-Syria border, as well as small enclaves in central and southern Syria.¹⁵⁹ The Spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, Colonel Sean Ryan, told *The Defense Post* on 10 September that the final stage of the assault to capture the remaining ISIS territory in eastern Syria had begun near Hajin.¹⁶⁰ Yet driving ISIS out of and securing these relatively remote areas is particularly complicated due to the intersecting operational lines of Washington, Baghdad, and Damascus's affiliated forces. Various attempts to establish separate spheres of influence either side of the Euphrates River or across the Iraq-Syria border, in order to encourage a unified offensive against ISIS, have proven impractical. Hassan described how ISIS has aggressively exploited their adversaries' lack of coherence to move fighters and supplies across the frontlines in past. Although ad hoc measures have sought to address this issue, like Baghdad's utilisation of their friendly ties with Damascus to occasionally target ISIS within Syrian regime-held areas, the lack of a unified approach between the three powers provides the movement a chance to hide and recuperate going forward.¹⁶¹

Further Turkish involvement in northern Syria against the Syrian Kurds should not be ruled out. President Erdogan has repeatedly stated his desire to expel and defeat YPG forces throughout the region, starting with Manbij.¹⁶² Nevertheless, a recent agreement brokered between the U.S. and Turkey over the status of the city may better shield the SDF from future Turkish offensives while simultaneously

155 'Military Strikes Continue Against Daesh Terrorists in Iraq and Syria.' *CENTCOM*, 11 May 2018. <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1518421/military-strikes-continue-against-daesh-terrorists-in-iraq-and-syria/>

156 'Assad tells US to leave Syria.' *CNN*, 31 May 2018.

157 'Pentagon responds to Assad: Any attack on our partners will be "a bad policy".' *The National*, 1 June 2018.

158 'Kurdish-Backed SDC Hold Talks With Syrian Government'. *VOA*, 27 July 2018.

159 'Isil still has up to 30,000 members in Syria and Iraq, UN report finds'. *The Telegraph*, 14 August 2018.

160 'Syria: SDF launches assault on ISIS remnants in Hajin'. *The Defense Post*, 10 September 2018.

161 'The ISIS triangle which allows militants to disappear calls for a joint operation between Iraq, Syria and the US.' *The National*, 25 April 2018.

162 'Erdogan says Turkey "won't stop" military campaign against YPG.' *The New Arab*, 5 April 2018.

improving relations between the NATO allies. The deal reportedly established a road map by which the Kurdish forces would be withdrawn from the city and a new security arrangement in the city would be created. It was reported that the Manbij Military Council, who had been in charge of the security of the city since the SDF captured it in August 2016, would be replaced by more local, primarily Arab forces.¹⁶³ In addition, plans were put in place for American and Turkish troops to conduct joint patrols along the demarcation line between SDF and Turkish-controlled areas.¹⁶⁴ Regardless of whether or not the deal is eventually put into effect, policymakers should anticipate that Ankara will continue to look for further opportunities to weaken the Syrian Kurds' grip in northern Syria going forward.

Nonetheless, the possibility that the U.S. could withdraw their support is the most pressing concern for the Syrian Kurds. As the fight against ISIS has wound down, the YPG and SDF's utility in the anti-ISIS coalition has correspondingly decreased. How long Washington will continue to politically and military support the SDF given the changing threat environment is unclear. The Trump administration has vacillated over if, when, and how they will remove the U.S. troops from Syria.¹⁶⁵ On 3 April, the U.S. Central Command Chief, General Joseph Votel, unequivocally stated that the 'mission wasn't over', stressing the necessity of stabilising Syria in an effort to return millions of people back to their homes.¹⁶⁶ On 20 May, the *New York Times* reported that Defence Secretary Jim Mattis and top American commanders had been given at least six months to defeat ISIS in eastern Syria.¹⁶⁷ The prospect of the SDF losing U.S. backing as a result is troubling. The YPG's loss of Afrin demonstrated how vital having air support is to influencing operations on the ground. Helping the U.S. advance their objective to consolidate the military gains they have made against ISIS could be another way that the SDF could remain in the picture. Without U.S. military and political support, the Syrian Kurdish project in northern Syria would likely be much more vulnerable to territorial reversals, whether at the hands of the Syrian regime, ISIS, or Turkish-backed forces.

163 'U.S. and Turkey almost came to blows over this Syrian town. A new deal may avert that.' *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2018.

164 U.S. Department of State. 'Senior State Department Officials on the U.S.-Turkish Working Group on Syria.' 5 June 2018. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/282967.htm>.

165 'President Trump agrees to keep troops in Syria for now: Reports.' *CNBC*, 4 April 2018.

166 'Tilting Iraq and Syria Towards Stability – and Away From ISIS.' *United States Institute of Peace*, 4 April 2018.

167 'Battle to Stamp Out ISIS in Syria Gains New Momentum, but Threats Remain.' *The New York Times*, 30 May 2018.

4 Epilogue: The Kurds After the 'Caliphate'

The rise of ISIS brought the Kurds of Iraq and Syria onto the world stage like never before. The Iraqi Kurds were involved in the U.S.-led coalition since its inception in the summer and fall of 2014, helping to halt ISIS's advance in northern Iraq. The Syrian Kurds emerged from even greater obscurity to constitute the tip of the spear of the U.S.-led coalition's struggle against the so-called Islamic State in Syria. They would subsequently become the dominant political and military force in northern Syria. Indeed, the re-emergence of ISIS in Iraq, as well as their rise to power amidst the Syrian Civil War, has compelled scholars and policymakers to regard the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds in a new light. Nevertheless, after the 'fall of the caliphate' was proclaimed with the recapture of Mosul, Kurdish fortunes either side of the border have encountered significant challenges and opportunities.

For the moment, the Iraqi Kurds appear to have squandered much of the political capital, territory, and the greater opportunity of achieving further autonomy they had gained in the fight against ISIS with the September 2017 independence referendum. With the benefit of hindsight, it can be difficult to appreciate why the KRG decided to risk what autonomy they had already achieved with an independence vote. Perhaps Massoud Barzani, at age 71 and seeing the end of his tenure as acting president approaching as ISIS declined, regarded holding the referendum as a chance to make his mark on history. Nevertheless, years or decades from now history may look more favourably on the Iraqi Kurds' independence gamble.

Baghdad and Erbil now publicly recognise that their dispute must be resolved through dialogue on the basis of the Iraqi constitution. Both sides acknowledge that the constitution has only been selectively applied, whether it is Article 140 or other articles related to the powers of the federal government, to maintain national unity. Even with international mediation, it will likely be a tall task to come to viable solutions based on a history of failing to implement the constitution's various articles.

Indeed, the Iraqi Kurds have some significant challenges moving forward. Largely relegated to their 1991 borders and still landlocked, Erbil is increasingly aware of their political and economic vulnerabilities after the referendum. It will remain an interesting question whether if the vote had not taken place in the disputed territories, such as Kirkuk, would Baghdad have responded so muscularly? For now, it seems clear that the question of whether the Iraqi Kurds will ever achieve independence has been substantially postponed for the time being.

Nevertheless, the Iraqi Kurds can still serve Washington's national security interests. ISIS, much like its predecessors following the hasty withdrawal of the U.S. from Iraq in December 2011, could conceivably re-emerge if the U.S.-led coalition leaves too quickly.

Having a dependable, albeit currently enfeebled regional partner friendly to the U.S. is a valuable strategic asset in a troubled region.

The Syrian Kurds, with the help of the anti-ISIS coalition, have pushed the 'Islamic State' to the brink. The Syrian Kurds' proven fighting metal, their ability to coordinate and work with the U.S.-led coalition, and the political control they exert over much of the northern and eastern parts of Syria are all significant. While their utility has waned in the fight against ISIS as the 'caliphate' has crumbled, the Syrian Kurds have gone further than many could have imagined amidst the ruins of Kobane in January 2015. However, Operation Olive Branch also exposed how susceptible to reversals the Syrian Kurds' power might be if they lose the backing of the international community in the future.

Nonetheless, as the Syrian conflict continues and the ISIS menace wanes for the foreseeable future, Washington should not rashly withdraw their support from their only effective proxies in the country. It should be stressed that the Syrian Civil War, stretching into its seventh year, has created few allies for the West. For years, Washington struggled in vain searching for a palatable and combat-effective Arab ground force that would exclusively focus on defeating ISIS. It is only through the Syrian Kurds, despite their alleged links to the PKK, that the U.S.-led coalition was able to take the fight to the 'caliphate' in Syria. The U.S.'s support of the Syrian Kurds over the years has granted them a significant foothold in the war-torn country, providing Washington with precious leverage to help shape how the Syrian catastrophe unfolds.

Indeed, the struggle in Syria may worsen before it gets better. The brutal reign of the Assad regime could continue for the foreseeable future. The U.S., as well as the U.K. and France, have showed their willingness to punish the Assad regime for using chemical weapons, with airstrikes. Yet, their restraint in killing members of the regime, unless they are attacking SDF troops that Western special forces are embedded within, is exemplified by how targeted their airstrikes were on Syrian air bases. The few Syrian opposition forces that continue to oppose the regime are increasingly dominated and intermingled with jihadists, many of them linked to al Qaeda. Turkey could either seek to further expand its territory in Syria or even potentially come to blows with Damascus over Syria's territorial integrity in the future. Russia and Iran's malign influence in the region will likely continue to deepen, a threat that Israel has showed a willingness to unilaterally take up arms against. As a result, this report argues that it is in the U.S.'s national security interests to stay politically and military engaged with its only effective local partners within the country. Abandoning the Syrian Kurds will forfeit much of the limited clout Washington has gained in Syria since January 2015.

The greatest hurdle for the U.S.-led coalition's continued support to the Syrian Kurds is Turkey's fierce opposition. Turkey's involvement in northern Syria remains fundamentally guided by their desire to prevent the PKK and their affiliates from establishing a Syrian sanctuary from which they could potentially launch attacks against Turkey in the future. While Turkey, as a fellow NATO ally, expects America's cooperation, the Syrian Kurds are simply too vital an ally to lose. As a result, the U.S. should seek to ameliorate both sides concerns: simultaneously assuring Turkey that weapons, fighters, and material provided to the SDF will not be used against their forces, while also insulating Syrian Kurdish proxies from further Turkish advances. This has been, and

will continue to be, a difficult balance to strike. The recent deal over the status of Manbij, if executed satisfactorily, has the potential to substantially ease, if not eliminate, Turkey's concerns.

In closing, politically and military disengaging from the anti-ISIS coalition's Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish partners, despite the supposed fall of the 'caliphate', would be a strategic mistake. Buttressing both of them could help secure U.S. national security interests in a turbulent region for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the fight against ISIS may be far from over. The example of their predecessor's resurgence should prove instructive. Their survival, having endured the Surge and the Sunni Awakening in Iraq, and their subsequent re-emergence in the chaos of the Syrian Civil War is a testament to the staying power of this virulent insurgency. Western policymakers should recognise that, if a future iteration of ISIS rears its head once again, how effective the international community's renewed calls for local allies to stem the tide might be, will hinge to a large degree on the fate of the Kurds. Withdrawing political and military support from the U.S.-led coalition's Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish partners now would be a historic blunder.



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