

How Should the New U.S. President Play the "Kurdish Card" in the Middle East?

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Brief Analysis

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States administration divided the world conceptually into good and evil blocs, with most of the evil blocs located in the Middle East. Pushing al-Qaeda out, toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan, and overthrowing the Ba'ath regime in Iraq further inspired the White House to attempt to depose the Syrian and Iranian governments as well. Hence a "New Middle East" project was created, which involved dividing most of the regional states into several smaller ethnically- and religiously- determined states. This would have led to the establishment of a large Kurdish ethnic state for the first time in history, extending from west of Iran to north of Iraq, north of Syria, and east of Turkey.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran labelled the U.S. army presence on Iraqi and Afghan soil an invasion of Muslim lands by Christians through their official media or unofficial propaganda and called for armed jihad against it. Thus hundreds of armed groups were founded across the region to oppose American military presence. Meanwhile, the Islamic government of Iran accused the "green opposition" of posing a threat to the regime and detained the opposition leaders. The Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt drafted a new constitution for the state based on restricting public freedoms. The ruling party in Turkey used political Islam to suppress its own Islamic rivals, restrict the media, purge the military of secular personnel, and crack down on Kurdish nationalist movements in both Turkey and northern Syria under the pretext of fighting non-believers.

Sectarian conflicts arose in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria between al-Qaeda, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the Islamic State, Badr Organization, Hezbollah, Saraya al-Salam, the Taliban, and dozens of others.

But Muslim Kurds, who make up 95% of the Kurdish population, are a notable exception to this Islamic war against other religions. They also did not take part in Shiite-Sunni hostilities despite the presence of three Sunni Islamist parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, comprising 17% of the vote, and three terrorist groups. Kurdish leaders don't see themselves as part of the Islamic political system, so it is not a political or religious rallying point. Iraqi Kurdistan has the resources available to expand upon this peace and lead further development.

The Kurds have a large amount of human capital, one of the heftiest reserves of oil, gas, and freshwater, and a diverse geography across Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Throughout both World Wars, the Cold War, and War on Terror, Kurdish leaders couldn't seize the opportunities to achieve independence. Perhaps the main reason was a lack of a united Kurdish nation: Kurds were divided among more than 60 political parties, various ideologies, and demographic loyalties.

Despite having a single government and parliament, Iraqi Kurds are located in four main political regions: Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sinjar. Accordingly Iraqi Kurds have different objectives and external relations based on their locations. Yazidi Kurds in Sinjar are mostly close to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that protected them from ISIL in the Sinjar Mountains in late 2014. Erbil and Duhok authorities share economic and security interests more closely with Turkey than they do with Baghdad. Those in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, near the Iranian border, have stronger ties with Baghdad than Ankara and are willing to run both Kirkuk and Sinjar in agreement with Baghdad. The local Kirkuk governorate is de-facto devoted to Sulaymaniyah authority, although constitutionally it belongs to the Iraqi federal government – and both Turkey and Erbil aim to influence the governorate as well.

Kurds in Iran are spread between dozens of left and right wing nationalist political organizations. Some Iranian Kurds believe in obtaining political rights through dialogue with the Iranian government, while another part is willing to reach their goals through armed struggle against the state. At the same time, the Iranian government accuses Iranian Kurds of cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

Kurds in Turkey are divided into four groups with different interests: a group loyal to the ruling AK Party; an extremist group belonging to Kurdistan Hezbollah; a group supporting the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and aiming to achieve rights through political processes; and a fourth group that considers armed insurgence through the PKK as the only solution.

Kurds in Syria are divided between two unbalanced blocs: a small group named the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti), which is affiliated with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), close to Turkey's AK Party and has a Rojava Peshmerga force inside Iraqi Kurdistan; and a stronger bloc of Kurds in Syria supporting the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its federalism project for northern Syria. This bloc forms the main armed force in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and People's Protection Units (YPG), which are defending and liberating northern Syrian areas from the terrorist groups and currently leading the campaign to retake ISIL Capital of Raqqa.

Playing the "Kurdish Card" in Islamic Middle East by the New U.S. President

The new U.S. President could have a unique policy for Kurds by looking at the whole Kurdistan in Middle East as a specific strategic policy package. During the next four years, the new U.S. administration's policy toward Iraqi Kurds should focus on securing a confederate system based on the historical, geographic, and administrative aspects of Kurdistan. It is very important that the U.S. insist on international protection of the Kurdish areas liberated by the Peshmerga from ISIL (comprising 49% of Kurdistan) until Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution is implemented and the boundaries of Kurdistan are marked; this will resolve the argument over the fate of disputed territories outside the KRG's control.

Although President-elect Donald Trump campaigned on isolationist policies, it would nevertheless better serve American interests to engage a forward policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan. An initiative similar to the Marshall Plan to build a strategic infrastructure could lead to the establishment of a secular, civil society in the Muslim Middle East that would be supportive to the U.S.

The U.S. administration's policy toward Rojava should focus on completing the outgoing administration's project for northern Syria. Assisting the SDF in retaking Raqqa would reduce the possibility of Russia and the Syrian regime dominating Syria's Kurdish region. Additionally, it would prevent the deterioration of YPG-Turkish relations after

the advance of the Turkish army and its allied Islamist groups in the Kurdish areas in Afrin and Kobane. The presence of 60,000 SDF soldiers composed of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, Christians, and Muslims can help to secure a federal system in northern Syria. A non-religious federal system friendly to America would prevent post-war Syria from becoming a threat to the international community. Engaging Syrian Kurds in running their local government will lead to the development of common interests between Turkey and the PYD which can, with American mediation and support, lead to the replacement of armed conflicts and continuous instability with formal political processes in Turkey.

Considering America and its allies' strategic interests, the new U.S. president needs to deal with the Middle East accurately and effectively. For the first time since World War II, the U.S. administration has the opportunity to use the "Kurdish card" in Iraq and Syria at the same time, and can strengthen its influence on four important countries in the Middle East at once. ❖

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