

The Kurdish Role in Russia's Middle East Power Play

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As Moscow continues to intervene in regional conflicts, politics, and energy affairs, Washington should not underestimate its deep-rooted relationships with Kurdish groups in various countries.

Earlier this month, Russia renewed its push to include Kurds from north and east Syria in negotiations with Bashar al-Assad's government, even as it simultaneously bolstered the regime by [diluting a UN resolution](#) on cross-border humanitarian assistance to those parts of the country. Likewise, Moscow's relationship with the Iraqi Kurds has remained strong even as the Kremlin green-lights Turkish military operations against Syrian Kurds next door—operations that are increasingly expanding into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and [making KRI officials more nervous and fractious](#) by the day.

Back home, senior Russian officials and analysts regularly talk about the importance of the Kurds and the “Kurdish problem” in the region. Whatever the true interests behind such sentiments, Moscow will continue leveraging its deep, multifaceted relationship with different Kurdish groups so long as the relevant conflicts persist—not only to bolster its position in the region, but also to peel the Kurds further away from the United States.

LONGSTANDING TIES

No country has provided patronage to the Kurds as long as Russia has. These ties can be traced at least as far back as Catherine the Great's reign, when imperial Russia clashed with the Ottoman and Persian Empires, encountered nomadic Kurdish tribes, and turned Yazidi Kurds into subjects during conquests in the Caucasus. Russian leaders increasingly saw the Kurds as leverage against these rivals, while the Kurds came to see the empire as their chief patron, especially by the early 1900s.

After the Bolshevik revolution, Moscow regularly exploited ethnic identity issues by using so-called “liberation” movements to foment rebellion in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, working closely with local Kurds in each case. And in 1923, Soviet authorities created Kurdistansky Uyezd, a short-lived autonomous Kurdish region in Azerbaijan.

The Kurds did not escape Joseph Stalin's Great Terror, yet they continued to feature prominently in the Soviet leadership's thinking. Thus, in 1946, Moscow supported a group of Kurds who declared the independent Republic of Mahabad in northern Iran. After it collapsed by year's end, Iraqi Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani, a general in the Mahabad army and founder of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), took refuge in the Soviet Union with his compatriots for over a decade. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Kremlin supported Kurdish autonomy in Iraq as a check on Baghdad, and its pressure contributed to an autonomy agreement in 1970.

In the late 1970s, when Syria was a top Soviet client state, Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers Party began a long insurgency against Turkey that sometimes operated out of Lebanon's Syrian-occupied Beqa Valley, among other locations. The PKK planted itself firmly in Moscow's orbit over the years, and its militant opposition to the Turkish government gave Russian leaders useful leverage over Ankara and, by extension, NATO. The Kremlin continued using this Kurdish trump card after the Soviet Union fell, allowing the PKK to open a representative office in Moscow and giving Ocalan refuge after Syria expelled him in 1998. According to the *Moscow Times*, as many as 200,000 Kurds were living in the Moscow area by 1999, and around a million were spread throughout the former Soviet Union.

RUSSIA'S CURRENT POLICY TOWARD THE KURDS

President Vladimir Putin and other senior officials often emphasize Russia's special historical relationship with the Kurdish people, hailing their bravery in confronting a “difficult destiny” and their effectiveness in fighting terrorism. Some Kurds have even taken an official role in Russia's Middle East policy—according to *Forbes*, Yazidi Kurdish Duma member Zelimkhan Mutsoev “accompanied humanitarian convoys in Baghdad and Kurdistan before the start of the military operation in Syria.”

In reality, however, peeling the Kurds away from Washington is the main motivation for Russia's supportive policies toward them. Late last year, for example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that U.S. officials were preventing dialogue between Syrian Kurds and Damascus. He also warned the Kurds not to bet on the United States because its forces were in Syria “illegally,” unlike Russia's forces. Putin offered similar sentiments in November: “What has now been achieved on the border of Syria and Turkey is also being done with the support of

the Kurds and in their interests...People see and understand that the Russian army has come to protect them.”

Aside from using the issue as a cudgel against Washington, Moscow is largely ambivalent on Kurdish self-determination. When responding to a question about Iraqi Kurdish autonomy in December 2016, Putin claimed “we don’t interfere in [Iraqi] internal processes.” Of course, Moscow has no qualms about interfering when it suits its interests; in this case, it simply preferred to stay out.

Yet even an ambivalent policy has borne fruit with the Kurds. When the KRI held a referendum on independence in September 2017, [Russia took a neutral position](#) on the move while the United States and virtually every other foreign actor formally opposed it. Amid the international backlash that preceded and followed the referendum, Moscow gained greater flexibility by launching additional energy projects in the cash-starved KRI, ultimately positioning itself as a top oil and natural gas player in the area.

In February 2017, for example, Russian energy giant Rosneft lent the KRI around \$3.5 billion, signed contracts to develop five oil production blocks, and invested in local oil/gas export infrastructure. In doing so, Moscow essentially saved the KRI at a crucial juncture and gave the Kurds more leverage over Baghdad (though Russia was careful not to endanger Gazprom’s substantial energy deals with the Iraqi federal government). In May 2018, the KRI signed a deal with Rosneft on gas infrastructure and agreed to construct a pipeline to Turkey, thus enabling Moscow to interject itself into Iraqi Kurdish energy relations with Ankara. More recently, Turkey’s ongoing military operations in the KRI have [deepened intra-Kurdish rifts](#), and Russia could stand to benefit from the unrest with further deals or other outreach to individual factions.

In Syria, Russia has played the Kurds as a useful card throughout the war, both to keep Assad in power and convince Turkey to change its posture toward him. Unlike Washington, the Kremlin never designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, and the group’s Syrian offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has maintained an office in Moscow since February 2016—Putin’s apparent retaliation for Turkey shooting down a Russian military jet that entered its airspace in November 2015. Afterward, Erdogan sought rapprochement with Moscow in order to stifle the establishment of an independent PYD-controlled statelet in north Syria.

Speaking on the Syrian Kurds in December 2019, Lavrov asserted that Assad should be given control of all Syrian territory “with the understanding that Kurds should be provided for in their traditional places of residence.” Indeed, Moscow presents itself as a mediator and insists on including Kurdish legal rights in the Syrian constitution, yet its main goal is to prop up Assad—a leader who likens Kurdish autonomy to partitioning the country and says he cannot agree to it.

For their part, the Syrian Kurds continue to hold higher expectations of the United States than they do of Russia, in large part because U.S.-Kurdish military cooperation has been their best way of angering Turkey. Yet once Washington announced it would be withdrawing from Syria, the Kurds had little choice but to pivot closer to Moscow and Assad, giving Putin an opportunity to deepen ties with them and establish a new military force in the northeast.

CONCLUSION

Besides temporary tactical gains, the Syrian Kurds have not benefitted from Russian support. Quite the contrary—in early 2018, hundreds of Kurdish civilians died as a result of Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch in Afrin, an offensive that could not have progressed without Moscow’s approval and coordination. At the time, PYD military commander Sipan Hamo accused Russia of betraying the Kurds, while Moscow indirectly blamed the United States for the deaths.

Similarly, Moscow has done nothing to curtail the current Turkish offensive in northern Iraq. So long as Russia stands to benefit from Turkey’s conflicts with the Kurds, self-interest rather than humanitarian concerns will continue to drive its decisionmaking.

Even so, Kurdish cooperation with Russia is understandable because most any community in their position would seek whatever external support they could get. As Mustafa Barzani once quipped, “I am like the blind beggar...I don’t care about who places the money into my hand.” And while Kurdish groups should not be viewed monolithically, many of their leaders tend to feel comfortable dealing with Russia given their long history together—and the fact that Moscow does not push them on sensitive internal issues such as human rights and corruption. Most important, though, experience has proven that they simply cannot count on Western support. The Trump administration’s abrupt decision to withdraw from north Syria last December reinforced this perception—Kurdish forces were left at the mercy of invading Turkish troops and proxies, and they eventually moved closer to Putin and Assad in order to end the slaughter.

Given these dynamics, Western officials should not underestimate Moscow’s influence with the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. As the Kremlin continues pursuing its Middle East interests in a cynical, brutal, and often destabilizing manner, the West will need to establish more leverage of its own with these Kurdish communities.

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