Arab Spring heats up Kurdish issue

Middle Eastern states have shifted alliances over the Kurdish question in the wake of the Arab Spring and the withdrawal of United States military forces from Iraq in 2011, writes **Soner Cagaptay**.

▶ KEY POINTS

■ The Arab Spring and the United States' withdrawal from Iraq have transformed the dynamic of the Kurdish issue and the regional security environment in the Middle East.

■ Before the Arab uprisings began in 2011, Syria, Turkey and Iran co-operated in acting against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK). Now, Iran may once again be encouraging the PKK to attack Turkey in retaliation for its support of the Syrian uprising.

■ With the emerging Sunni-Shia split in Iraq, the country's Kurds are moving closer to Turkey for protection as they did in the 1990s. They are also aligning with Turkish and Iraqi Sunnis against Shia and Iranian influence in Iraq.

The four Middle Eastern states with significant Kurdish communities, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, before the 1990s had a unique security relationship in which the Kurdish issue served as a key catalyst.

Syria and Iran both supported the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK) against the pro-Western government in the Turkish capital, Ankara. Syria hoped to use the PKK as a lever to bring the Ankara government to the negotiating table over its claims on Turkey's Hatay province and to extract a better agreement on sharing the waters of the Euphrates River. Meanwhile, Iran supported the PKK to undermine Turkey's secular democratic political system, the regional antithesis to the Islamic republic's authoritarian style of religious governance. Iran also built influence over the Iraqi Kurds, especially in the parts of northeastern Iraq controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yeketî Niştîmanî Kurdistan: YNK, widely known as the PUK),

as leverage against the regime of Iraq's then president, Saddam Hussein.

The Iraqi Kurds, protected from Saddam's forces inside a Western-led no-fly zone enforced from Turkish air bases, helped the Ankara government against the PKK. Fighters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan: PDK, widely known as the KDP), which controlled the northwestern corner of Iraq bordering Turkey, joined Turkish forces to fight the PKK. In return, Ankara established good ties with the Iraqi Kurds,

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especially the KDP. Both KDP leader Massoud Barzani and PUK founder Jalal Talabani received Turkish diplomatic passports, facilitating their ability to travel around the world. Turkey also allowed the PUK and the KDP to open representative offices in Ankara.

Syria supported the PKK but denied its own Kurdish community basic rights, including citizenship. The KDP in Iraq not only maintained close ties with the Syrian Kurds across the border but also recruited Saddam's backing against its rival, the PUK.

Accordingly, the alignment of the states and their Kurdish nationalist movements fell into fairly defined axes: Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds (specifically the KDP) on one side; Syria, Iran, and the PKK on the other. In a secondary Iraq-

based alignment, Saddam and the KDP often united against the PUK and Iran, although this axis was more fluid than the other.

Iraq wars change Kurdish dynamic

However, these two regional axes shaped by the Kurdish issue started to collapse around the beginning of the 1991 Gulf War. The first relationship to crumble was Syria's support for the PKK. In the 1990s, Ankara scored military victories against the group in Turkey; however, it was clear that Turkey could not defeat the PKK as long as the group's main regional sponsor, Syria, continued to shelter it. The PKK received training in Syria and Syrian-occupied Lebanon, and Abdullah Ocalan, the leader, key strategist and ideologue of the organisation, lived in Damascus, the Syrian capital. Ocalan was so comfortable in his Damascus home that he gave an interview from there to a Washington-based journal in early 1998. Even so, Syria repeatedly denied Ocalan's presence on its soil.

However, after a diplomatic campaign against Syria in 1998, the Ankara government massed troops on the Syrian border and the then Turkish chief-of-staff General Ismail Hakki Karadayi threatened the country with war. Turkish newspapers featured headlines such as, "We will soon say shalom to the Israelis in the Golan Heights", insinuating Turkish occupation of Damascus and referring to the Turkish-Israeli alliance of the 1990s against Syria's then president, Hafez al-Assad. Deterred, Syria finally evicted Ocalan.

The PKK leader left Syria in 1998 but in 1999 he was captured by Turkey, with the assistance of the United States, while in hiding in Kenya. Such US help against the PKK, as well as the Washington government's inclusion of the party on its list of foreign terrorist organisations in 1999, improved Washington's standing in Turkey.

Meanwhile, Damascus, moved by Turkish pressure, began to co-operate with Ankara against the PKK. In October 1998, Syria and Turkey signed the Adana protocol to jointly combat the PKK. Syrian assistance to Turkey

against the PKK then increased to such an extent that one Turkish intelligence analyst suggested to *IHS Jane's* in 2007 that if Ankara wanted Syria to extradite a suspected PKK member, "Assad would extradite not only that person, but all his cousins, as well".

Iran also began to help Turkey against the PKK, although for different reasons. The Iranian government in Tehran stopped supporting the group at the outset of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In this development, Iran had two motives. First, alarmed by the US military presence on two sides of it, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Tehran concluded that it needed to win over its neighbour Turkey to break the perceived US-led encirclement. Iran severed its ties with the PKK the day US troops landed in Iraq.

Second, Iran wanted to take advantage of a crisis in US-Turkish relations. After Turkey refused to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US military declined to take action against the PKK in northern Iraq. Tehran then reoriented its policy and began to combat the PKK, winning Turkish support at the expense of Washington. As a consequence, Iran bombed the very PKK camps it had allowed to operate during the 1990s. It then cracked down on the PKK presence within its borders, arresting and executing party members.

Furthermore, Iran set up a joint border commission with Turkey to exchange intelligence on the PKK and its movements. In retaliation, the group established an Iranian franchise, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê: PJAK). The PJAK, based in the PKK enclave in northeastern Iraq, began attacking Iran in 2003. In part to tackle the PJAK and in part to win Turkish hearts and minds, Iran suggested to Turkey that they take joint action against the PKK in Iraq. The two countries then carried out simultaneous, if not co-ordinated, operations against the PKK. Hence, with the start of the Iraq war in 2003, Turkey and Iran became tentative allies, united against the PKK.

With the end of Saddam's rule in 2003, the Iraqi Kurds, too, changed their policy towards the PKK. No longer dependent on Turkey's protection and relieved of the threat of Saddam's forces, the KDP and the PUK stopped aiding Ankara against the PKK.

The PKK used this opportunity to establish itself firmly in the Qandil Mountains spanning the Iraqi-Iranian border. This led to a deterioration of Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish ties, as well as a downward spiral in US-Turkish relations because many Turks blamed Washington for the PKK attacks now emanating from Iraq.

Detecting these trends, in 2007 the US began providing Turkey with intelligence on PKK activity in Iraq in an effort to win back Turkish favour. Iraqi Kurds did not restore co-operation with Turkey against the PKK, although they became more willing to co-operate with Turkey on economic affairs.

After 2003, therefore, the axes of the Middle East changed in relation to the Kurdish issue. Syria, Iran and Turkey joined forces in opposition to the Iraq war and the PKK; in return, the PKK targeted Iran through the PJAK. Iraqi Kurds, relieved of attacks from Saddam's forces, allied with the US and distanced themselves from Turkey, at least at the beginning of the war. Iran continued to wield some influence over the PUK, while the KDP reached across the border to build political networks among the Syrian Kurds. Following the 2005 Iraqi legislative elections, Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish ties improved when the Kurds found themselves a small minority in Iraq's newly elected legislature. Nevertheless, such rapprochement did not lead to joint action against the PKK.

Arab Spring alters dynamic again

Since 2011, the Arab Spring has realigned the political balance among Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq, as well as the region's Kurdish nationalist movements, in many ways recreating some

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of the axes of the 1990s. The uprising in Syria has positioned Ankara and Tehran at opposite ends of the regional political spectrum: Turkey has sided with the protesters, while Iran has supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. At this point, the Syrian situation is a zero-sum game: either Assad or the opposition will win.
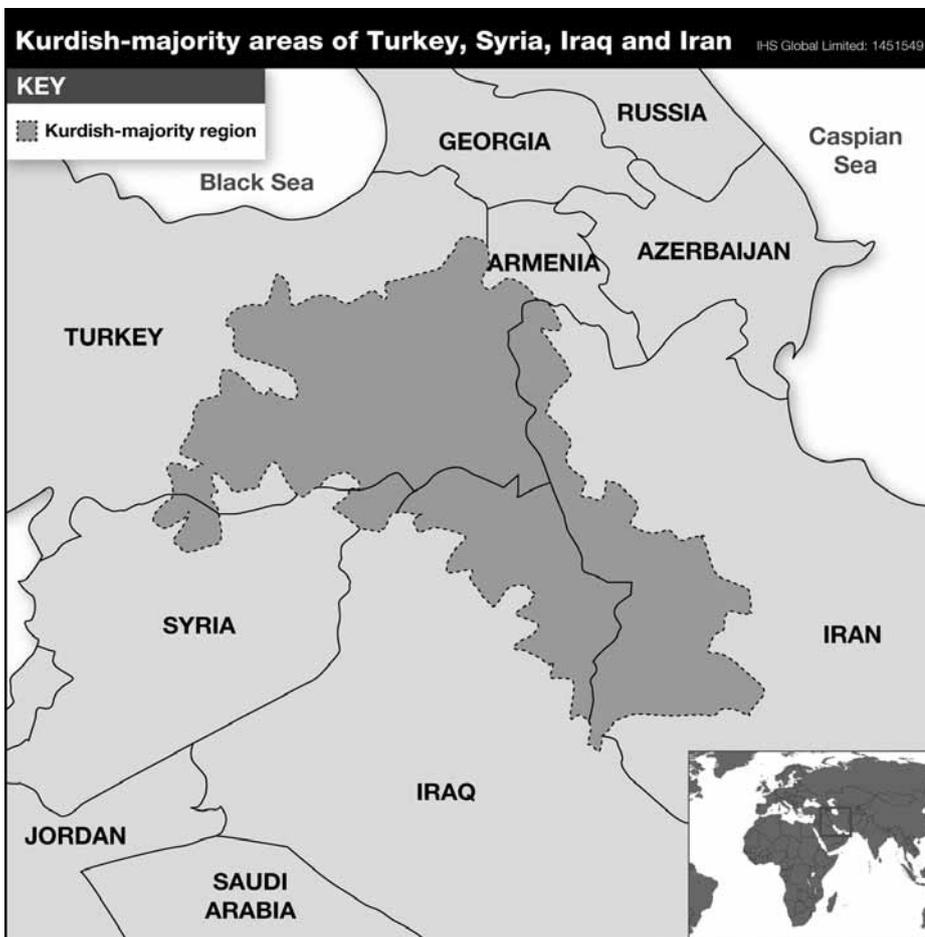
Likewise, in the proxy war between Tehran and Ankara, one or the other will emerge victorious. Encouraged by Iran, Assad has ignored Turkish advice to carry out reforms. In response, Turkey has begun to support, host and, according to unsubstantiated media reports, arm the Syrian opposition. Iran's response has been, once again, to encourage the PKK to strike at Turkey. Buoyed by Tehran's apparent carte blanche, the PKK has launched dozens of attacks in Turkey, killing more than 150 Turks since the summer of 2011.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the US withdrawal has put Turkey and Iran at odds by redrawing the sectarian fault lines. Since Iraq's first elections in 2005 following the removal of Saddam, Iran has supported the Shia Dawa party of Nouri al-Maliki, while Turkey has supported the secular pan-Iraqi movement of Ayad Allawi. Following months of contention in the aftermath of the 2010 elections, Maliki formed a government in Baghdad, scoring a victory against Ankara.

More recently, Maliki has cracked down on Turkey-backed factions in Iraq. In December 2011, he issued an arrest warrant on terrorism charges against Tariq al-Hashemi, Iraq's vice-president and the leader of the country's Sunni community. Hashemi denies the accusations and has taken refuge in the area of northern Iraq under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The Kurds, who until recently were hostile to the Sunni Arabs for persecuting them under Saddam, now appear to be reconciling with them. They are also closely aligning with Turkey to balance Iranian influence inside Iraq and to protect themselves from the government in Baghdad. This situation means that Iraqi Kurds are likely to provide concrete assistance to Turkey against the PKK for the first time since 2003.

On the other hand, Turkey's relations with Iraq's Shia-majority government appear to be worsening, while Iranian-Turkish competition in Iraq is increasing. On 16 January 2012, the Iraqi foreign ministry summoned the

Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran IHS Global Limited: 1451549

KEY
▨ Kurdish-majority region

'In northwestern Syria, where the PKK has traditionally had a strong base, the breakdown of law and order could provide the group with a theatre'

150

The number of Turkish nationals killed by the PKK since 2011.

Turkish ambassador to issue a protest at Turkey's policy on Iraq. The Turkish foreign ministry retaliated the same day by calling in the Iraqi ambassador. Meanwhile, some analysts suggest that Iran might be taking an even more aggressive stance against Turkey in Iraq, with CNN-Turk reporting on 17 January that the Iranian Qods Force, the special-operations unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that Tehran uses to carry out covert military operations overseas, might be linking up with the PKK in northern Iraq to target Turkey. On 18 January, Turkish media also reported that the IRGC's Qods Force could be planning to attack US missions in Turkey.

Meanwhile, in northwestern Syria around Aleppo, where the PKK has traditionally had a strong base, the breakdown of law and order could provide the group with a theatre from which to operate. At the same time, the majority of Syrian Kurds who live in northeastern Syria around al-Qamishli are apparently awaiting signs of the Assad regime's collapse before they take part in anti-regime demonstrations, heeding advice from the KDP in Iraq.

Conclusion

As a result of the Arab Spring and US withdrawal from Iraq, a new security environment, as well as a realignment of Kurdish politics, is suggested in the Middle East: Turkey, the Syrian opposition, the Iraqi Kurds and the Syrian Kurds on one side, with Assad, Iran and the PKK on the other. A secondary, still-nascent axis is based in Iraq, with Turkey, Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds opposing the Shia, Iran and the PKK.

The Kurdish issue, the chief driver of foreign policy and security issues in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria over the past few decades, is once again reconfiguring ties between these four countries. The issue is driving a wedge between Turkey and Iran, the two hegemony-seeking powers of the Middle East, bringing Ankara closer to Washington. This new dynamic helps, at least in part, to explain Ankara's recent decision to join NATO's missile defence project. As a consequence, Washington should study closely the instability caused by the Arab Spring because it provides the US with a regional security picture similar to that of the 1990s. ∎

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