

A Kurdish Century

By

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Introduction

Until the 1800s Kurds lived in autonomous principalities on the fringes of the Ottoman and Safavid empires, the contiguous region providing a buffer between the two fierce rivals. After the spread of nationalism and World War I, in 1920, the defeated Ottoman Empire and victorious allies signed the Treaty of Sevres, which outlined a nation state called Kurdistan in eastern Anatolia. Three years later, Sevres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, which took seven months to negotiate. By the time the treaty was finalised, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had come to power and convinced Kurdish leaders to support the formation of a modern state called Turkey, promising autonomy in return. Kurdish leaders believed his promise (a similar promise being made by the British to Iraqi Kurds) and lost the opportunity of establishing an independent Kurdistan. In 1923, Kurdistan was divided between the new states of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, and the remnant of the Safavid empire, Iran. Kurds responded by organizing politically and militarily, growing into sharp thorns in the body politic of four regimes. Nevertheless, Kurds remained in the shadows of world consciousness until 1991.

1991 was when more than one million Kurds in Bashur (Southern Kurdistan, Iraq) escaped Saddam Hussein's tanks and airstrikes by walking over the mountains into Bakur (Northern Kurdistan, Turkey) and Rojhelat (Eastern Kurdistan, Iran). In the three decades since, Kurds have moved out of the shadows to become international actors. This new status is seen in the US-led coalition against ISIS relying on Kurdish ground forces to defeat ISIS in Syria and northern Iraq, and guard ISIS prisoners and their families in Syria. It is also seen in the Kurdish chant 'Jin, Jiyan, Azadi', ('Women, Life, Freedom') being echoed around the world since October 2022, in support of Iranians calling for an end to the Islamic Republic. Examples of the international implications of Kurds' homelessness and oppression are Turkey becoming increasingly aggressive towards Kurds and refusing to allow Sweden to join NATO because the Kurds in Sweden are allowed a voice. The rise of Kurds is a result of a century of persecution because it has forced Kurds into forming diasporas around the world where they are now being elected to European and north American parliaments. Thus, the plight of an estimated 50 to 60 million people can no longer be ignored.

Kurds have always played a central, albeit unacknowledged, role in history. There is evidence that the ancestors of Kurds living in the Fertile Crescent were the first monotheists, agriculturalists, temple builders, town dwellers, speakers of a proto-Indo-European language, and independently developed writing (in Elam). Ancestors of Kurds known as the Medes co-ruled the world's first empire, the Achaemenid confederation, founded by Cyrus the Great, who had a Mede-Persian heritage. He was renowned for employing Mede military commanders, administrative officials, and Zoroastrian priests from Medea. Seventeen hundred years after Cyrus' death, a Kurd from Tikrit, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, founded an Islamic empire (1171 – 1260 AD). Saladin was known for his wisdom, humanity, battle skills and reliance on Kurdish military commanders. It was Saladin who defeated the Crusaders and captured Jerusalem in 1187.

Kurds' reputation for being tolerant stems from being indigenous to a region rich in ethnic and religious diversity – the Anatolian plateau and Northern Mesopotamia. Their historical

reputation for being fierce fighters has been reinforced in the last 100 years. Not a decade has gone by without at least one Kurdish rebellion against their Arab, Persian, and Turkish overlords. Not a rebellion has gone by without the rulers responding by way of massacre, destruction of villages, displacement, torture, imprisonment, and discrimination. Only in Iraq, was there an attempt at negotiating some form of autonomy in 1970. By 1974, Iraq went back on the agreement and another 18-year war broke out between the regime and Mustafa Barzani's Peshmerga.

Every Kurdish leader and organisation have built on their predecessors' achievements. The non-partisan Xoybûn or Khoyboun was an organisation of intellectuals from all parts of Kurdistan involved in the establishment of the Republic of Ararat in the 1920s. In 1946, Xoybûn petitioned the UN to establish an independent Kurdistan. Great Kurdish leaders before and after Xoybûn's efforts include Sheikh Said Piran, General Ihsan Nuri Pasha, Seyid Riza, Abdullah Öcalan, Leyla Zana and Selahattin Demirtaş from Bakur (northern Kurdistan, Turkey); Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, Mustafa Barzani, Masoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani, and Nawshirwan Mustafa from Bashur (Southern Kurdistan, Iraq); Simko Agha Shikak, Qazi Muhammad and Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou from Rohjelat (eastern Kurdistan, Iran); and Mishal Tammo, Salih Muslim Muhammad, Mazloun Abdi (Kobani) and Ilham Ahmad from Rojava (western Kurdistan, Syria). General Ihsan Nuri Pasha helped establish the Republic of Ararat (1927 – 1931) and Qazi Muhammad established the Republic of Mahabad (1946). These and other leaders inspired a multitude of people to devote their lives to Kurdish political, cultural, and military organisations, often at the expense of family, livelihood, and freedom.

Rojhelat (Eastern Kurdistan / western Iran)

Because Kurds developed such strong political-military structures, they were well placed to take advantage of sudden upheavals in the late twentieth century - for better or worse. For worse was the outcome of Iranian Kurds' demand for autonomy in a democratic federation of Iran after the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. In response, Ayatollah Khomeini launched a four year 'Holy War' that killed between 10,000 to 25,000 Kurds. In July 1989, a month after Ayatollah Khomeini's death, the most prominent Kurdish leader calling for autonomy, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, was assassinated by Iranian agents in Vienna. To this day, Kurds in Iran remain disproportionately represented in the prison population and on death row. This has not stopped Iranian Kurds demanding self-determination, and fearlessly standing up to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as recently demonstrated in the protests beginning in October 2022. The protests started when a Kurdish woman called Jina (Mahsa) Amini died whilst in custody for allegedly not complying with Islamic dress code. The protests spread nationwide. Other ethnic groups in Iran, like the Baluch, Arabs and Azeri, have also started to speak up for their right to self-determination within a federal Iran. Combined, these non-Persian groups are estimated to comprise more than 50 percent of Iran's population. Their political success will depend on their capacity to co-ordinate with each other and open-minded Persians, for they face a regime and a segment of the population that is as fascist and ultranationalist as Turkey's. Thus, several Iranian Kurdish organisations left an alliance of opposition groups because they felt the alliance was being dominated by people wanting to reinstate the Pahlavi dynasty. Instead, Kurdish political-military organisations (except for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) affiliated [Kurdistan Free Life Party](#)), have agreed to coordinate in advocating and working for a federal democratic Iran.

If there was to be a political opening, action on four basic demands could make a difference: that mullahs no longer have veto power over laws and candidates standing for election;

provincial governors be elected rather than appointed; people be allowed education in their mother tongue; and different ethnicities be given a voice, including by way of political representation.

Bashur (Southern Kurdistan / northern Iraq)

In contrast to the terrible plight of Kurds in Rojhelet, in 2005, the people of Bashur succeeded in establishing an internationally recognised regional government after seven decades of fighting consecutive Iraqi regimes. Unlike Kurds elsewhere, historically Kurds in Iraq were allowed to speak and learn in Kurdish. However, from time to time they were subject to mass slaughter, such as during Al-Anfal in 1988, when 180,000 people were killed, including by multiple chemical attacks, and thousands of villages were destroyed. This did not stop Kurds from being forcibly conscripted into Saddam Hussein's wars against Iran and Kuwait. What changed the fortunes of Bashuris was that an internationally supported no-fly zone was declared over northern and southern Iraq in 1991, after Iraq lost its war with Kuwait. Kurds immediately established an unrecognised parliament, and after Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, the leaders of the two main parties, Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), overcame four years of civil war to work together in providing significant input into the 2005 federal constitution of Iraq.

Barzani and Talabani's efforts resulted in an internationally and constitutionally recognized semi-autonomous region with its own parliament, and government – the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which oversaw provincial and district administrations, and its own security forces (Peshmerga and Asayish/police). The 2005 Constitution also allowed the currently contested right to export oil and gas from fields discovered after 2005. Between 2005 and 2014 the KRG provided a peaceful secure environment, and free healthcare, education, and other social services, dramatically improving peoples' employment, salaries and living conditions. This was too much for Baghdad, whose politicians were mired in corruption, political infighting, and civil war. Then Prime Minister, Nouri Al-Maliki, and his Iran-backed Shia supporters decided to undermine Bashur's gains, and from February 2014, Baghdad cut all allocated revenue to the region. this revenue cut continuing throughout the war against ISIS. Baghdad also refused to pay or arm the Peshmerga or allocate revenue for the 1.5 million Sunni Arabs who found refuge in Bashur. Baghdad's refusal to support the Peshmerga was nothing short of criminal, given the Peshmerga were the only forces confronting ISIS in the north, including the disputed territories, having suddenly been tasked to defend a 1,000-kilometre front line in 2014. Baghdad justified its stance by saying it was in retaliation for the KRG independently exporting oil through Turkey.

The region has always been a haven. Since the time of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi opposition found refuge in Bashur, as have other Kurds, Arabs and Christians from Southern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. After defending Bashur and the disputed territories from ISIS for three years at a cost of 13,000 Peshmerga deaths and injuries, in September 2017 Masoud Barzani held a referendum on independence for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and disputed territories. A reported 93 percent voted in support of independence. For daring to exercise this international right, Bashur was brutally punished by Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. One month later, following ISIS' defeat in Iraq in October 2017, the Iranian QUDS force commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, led a mixed Iraqi and Iranian force, equipped with US-state-of-the-art Abrams tanks and other weaponry, to militarily take Kirkuk and other disputed territories. These forces then advanced on Erbil. If it was not for American airstrikes, ISIS would have taken Erbil in August

2014. If it was not for American negotiations, Iraqi and Iranian forces would have taken Erbil in 2017.

Since 2014, life has become a struggle for many in Bashur. Public servants regularly do not receive their salaries for months at a time. The threat of ISIS continues to caution many foreign companies to do business in Bashur, causing increased unemployment and poverty. Protests against the economy the family dynasties that rule Bashur receive a harsh government response, a characteristic of the region, but in Bashur it is aggravated by the KRG being constantly double crossed, bullied and intimidated by the Governments of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. For instance, 18 years after the new constitution Baghdad has yet to clarify Kurdistan's constitutional rights, including the right to develop newly discovered oil and gas fields, and the status of the disputed territories like oil-rich Kirkuk and the Yezidi district of Shingal (Sinjar). The Government of Iraq (GoI) regularly turns the KRG's allocated revenue off and on, as if fiddling with a garden tap. After six long years of negotiations to re-establish a joint Iraqi – Peshmerga force to fight the remnants of Islamic State (IS) in the disputed territories, this joint force remains non-operational. The GoI frequently refuses to buy wheat from Bashur's farmers and not allow Bashur to export products to southern Iraq and beyond. Since March 2023, all export of oil and gas from Bashur has ceased after Turkey lost an arbitration ruling brought to the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) arbitration court by Iraq regarding Turkey having breached a 1973 pipeline agreement that Iraq had to approve all exports. It took until May 10 for Iraqi authorities to make a formal request to Turkey to re-open the pipeline. How long it takes for Turkey to do so depends on whether Turkey wants to blackmail GoI into not demanding the \$US1.471 billion awarded to Iraq, and not continuing with another phase of arbitration, and any other contentious issues. In May, the Finance Committee stopped work on the budget and any distribution of revenue to Bashir and then the GoI announced it would no longer recognise the extended parliament in Kurdistan or any of its decisions given it delayed holding elections in 2022. It sees this constant sabotage is conducted with impunity.

Then there is Iran and Turkey. Iran has Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Bashur and regularly conducts drone and artillery attacks on Rojhelat political organisations that have been based in Bashur since the 1980s. Meanwhile, Turkey has established over 40 military bases and many checkpoints in Bashur and Nineveh, and regularly attacks and kills alleged PKK 'terrorists' in Bashur, and the disputed territories of Kirkuk and Shingal (Sinjar). These military operations have caused the evacuation of 500 villages and the loss of hundreds of lives and livelihoods, but the GoI and KRG's objections to these infringements on sovereignty are ignored by Turkey, Iran, and the international community.

Many Kurds accuse the KDP/KRG of betraying Kurds in supporting Turkey's defence forces and National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) militarily targeting PKK in the Qandil mountains and villages of Bashur. If true, it is a shocking betrayal of Kurd who are being harmed by these attacks. However, the most virulent critics dismiss the power imbalance in KRG's irreconcilable position: its need to protect Bashur and Kurds from military attack, and its reliance on Turkey for exporting oil and gas, at least until March 2023, and being a supplier of essential foods and construction materials.

Another accusation is that the KRG does not help Kurds in Rojava and Bakur. Such criticism does not give due regard to the KRG's willingness to harbour refugees, politicians, activists, and organisations from Rojava, Bakur and Rojhelat, although some Bashuris think PKK has overstayed its welcome in Qandil. Other overt efforts include Bashuri leaders' negotiating with

the Syrian Kurd-led administration and security forces in Rojava (so far unsuccessfully), supplying Peshmerga and military vehicles to help defend Kobani from ISIS in 2014, and negotiating a tactical alliance between the Syrian Kurd-led forces and the US-led coalition against ISIS after the fight for Kobani. Critical for the survival of Rojava, the KRG maintains the only open border crossing in and out of Rojava, albeit this being intermittently closed for various reasons by the KRG or the Rojava administration. Lastly, the KRG was spontaneously generous in its provision of aid in several convoys to survivors of the February 2023 earthquakes. Other efforts are more covert, such as repeated attempts to mediate between the [Turkish state and PKK](#).

Other criticisms relate to Bashur being ruled by two entrenched family dynasties that monopolise all political and business matters, enriching themselves and dividing Bashur at the expense of Bashur and its people. There is substance to these allegations. Even so, critics often forget how even the most well-intentioned Kurdish leader would find it difficult to appropriately respond to three far stronger, better resourced, even more corrupt, and very authoritarian states, Syria being equally ruthless but distracted by civil war. All try to undermine the first internationally recognised Kurd-led parliament, government, and security forces in modern times. When doing their sums, critics may also not consider that the KRG is obliged to make regular multi-billion dollars repayments to international oil and gas companies, who probably contribute little to no tax.

Because of all the criticisms, many Bashuris are disenchanted with their leaders and their government, blaming them for growing unemployment, irregular payment of salaries, and lack of freedom, justice, and opportunities, despite external factors contributing to their predicament. Disillusioned and disengaged, many young people are voting with their feet, heading to Europe, or, incredibly, wishing for Baghdad to rule over Bashur. A more constructive option would be to embark on much needed political and economic efforts to change the status quo, making use of their education and ingenuity, the diasporas, international law, and the self-interest of allies, to build on the incredible achievements for which their predecessors dedicated their lives.

Rojava (Western Kurdistan / northern Syria)

The Kurdish spring in Rojava surprised many who did not have a knowledge of history and Syrian Kurds' familial, political, and military links with other parts of Kurdistan. For instance, when Syria was a French protectorate, Syria's Kurds and Assyrians in the north gained autonomy between 1939 and 1945 following a joint uprising. All was undone in 1946, when Syria gained independence. In 1952, political parties were banned. This did not stop the secret formation of the Barzani-affiliated Kurdistan Democratic Party – Syria (KDPS) in 1957. Over the next six decades, Syrian Kurds helped their fellow Kurds fight the Baathist Regime in Iraq, and successive regimes in Turkey. In the 1970s, the Arabisation of Rojava emulated Saddam Hussein's Arabisation of Kirkuk. The difference was that hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds were declared non-citizens. This meant they were ineligible for all socialist state benefits, including government education, jobs, hospital care and pensions.

Fast forward to 2003, when the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was established. The PYD follows Öcalan's political, social, and economic concepts of democratic confederalism, an ideology that proposes autonomous regions that do not answer to a nation state, and which are

democratically ruled by citizens with equal rights. Its emphasis on the rights of women, young people, different ethnicities, and the environment, and a pragmatic mix of private ownership and socialism is revolutionary, particularly for the Middle East. It is often described as a third way. In 2011, when Bashar al-Assad opted for civil war in preference to political negotiations, notoriously claiming 'I will rule, or ruin Syria', he withdrew his military from Rojava and in the power vacuum, the Kurds established male and female Peoples' Protection Units (the YPG and YPJ), both men and women later fighting on the frontline against ISIS, commanders being drawn from either sex. While the PYD, YPG and YPJ are inspired by Abdullah Öcalan's ideology, and have benefited from PKK military training, contrary to Turkey's claims they are PKK, these Syrian organisations make their own decisions. Their goal is self-determination within a democratic federation of Syria. They do not claim to represent Kurds beyond Syria and have no intention of attacking Turkey. However, they retain the right to defend themselves.

In early 2014, the YPG and YPJ achieved the unthinkable. They became the first military force to defeat ISIS, the battle taking place in the Syrian Kurdish border town of Kobani. After a month of fighting, they were helped by US airstrikes and Kurdish fighters coming from all parts of Kurdistan and from all political persuasions. At last, the US had found a reliable ally on the ground to fight ISIS in Syria, much to the horror of Turkey. With US support, the YPG, YPJ, and their Arab, Assyrian, Chaldean, and Turkmen allies formed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015, led by a former PKK fighter, the brilliant Mazloun Abdi, who has somehow managed to maintain relations with the US, Russia, Assad, the PUK, KDP and different ethnicities in Syria including many Syrian Arabs. In the five-year fight against ISIS, the SDF suffered an estimated 11,000 deaths, with another 20,000 fighters being seriously injured. In 2019, IS caliphate was finally defeated, but not its ideology. The US-led coalition and SDF remain allies in capturing ISIS cells and holding tens of thousands of ISIS fighters and their families inside prison camps until nation state governments take responsibility for their citizens. Of course, the SDF are defending their land and people, but in doing so they have made, and continue to make, the whole world safer. The SDF has also proved relatively humane in comparison to Turkey's intelligence, defence forces and Syrian proxies who continue to commit horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity in the regions of Syria occupied by Turkey.

While all this was happening, Syria's Kurds and their allies established three autonomous districts which were then expanded and linked under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in 2013 - 2014. Again, the governing structures adopted Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of democratic confederalism, insisting on women and local ethnicities have representation at every level of governance, and that each committee or organisation be led by a male and female co-chair.

Post-ISIS, the AANES, its Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), and coalition of unions and NGOs called TEV-DEM (which was established in 2011), are rebuilding essential services and infrastructure from Kobani to the border with Bashur and south to Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. However, in some segments of the population resentment is building from forced conscription, poor living conditions, and the increased status of Kurds. Öcalan's visionary ideas, especially regarding women and secularism, have mixed reception in the diverse population, from excitement to horror. Horror can be experienced by Arabs who hold patriarchal and conservative Islamic views about honour, women, child marriage and polygamy. Yet maybe the greatest challenge for the AANES and SDF is internal - how to incorporate those who do not follow Öcalan's ideology, such as the Barzani-linked KDPS and Roj Peshmerga (who are

accused of working for Turkey) into the existing structures to avoid Bashur's problems, where the KDP and PUK administer separate provinces and Peshmerga divisions.

The political and military external challenges are huge. They include overcoming Turkey's objections to representatives of the ANNES, the SDC and SDF participating in internationally supported negotiations on a new constitution for Syria, and how to deal with Assad when no country or organisation - not the UN, EU, Russia or the US, the Arab states or Turkey - has been able to convince Assad to compromise on a single detail. Then there is Turkey's paranoia that all non-assimilated Kurds are a national security threat. This paranoia only increased when Syrian Kurds and their allies teamed up with the US-led Coalition to defeat ISIS along the Syrian-Turkish border. The paranoia became overwhelming when Syrian Kurds inspired Bakuri youth to declare autonomous zones in Kurdish-majority city centres in late 2015 - 2016. The Turkish government cut off all negotiations with the PYD. By the time the ANNES had expanded to administer over one third of Syrian territory Turkey considered Syrian Kurds more dangerous than ISIS. They had to be stopped. In 2016, after the SDF defeated ISIS in Manbij and advanced west to free Al-Bab, Turkey invaded the Syrian border towns of Jarablus and al-Rai. There was very little fighting. ISIS joined the invaders or fled to Al-Bab. Turkey's one and only battle against ISIS was in Al-Bab. Turkey co-opted Turkey-backed administrators and Syrian Opposition and Islamist militants to quickly establish town-based administrations and security forces in what became known as the Euphrates Shield Triangle, which extends from Azaz in the west to the Euphrates River in the east and south to Al-Bab. Turkey then threatened Manbij. This plan was foiled by the US. So, Turkey looked further west, and in early 2018 invaded and occupied the peaceful Kurd-majority district of Afrin - a haven for displaced Arabs, but not ISIS. In what the Turks called Operation Olive Branch, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were displaced. Turkey's Special Forces and Syrian proxies perpetrated war crimes, including rape, kidnapping for ransom; and stealing houses, businesses, farms and farm produce, all of which have been well documented by the UN, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Then, in 2019 US President Trump ordered US forces in northeast Syria to withdraw so Turkey could invade Gire Spi (Tal Abyad) and Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-Ain) in what was called Operation Peace Spring. A lesson from all this is that you cannot judge a military operation by its name.

In 2023, all these regions and parts of Idlib are occupied by Turkey, administered by Turkey-backed councils, and secured by Turkey's MIT, Special Forces and Turkey-backed Syrian militias, the latter incorporating ISIS, Al-Qaida, and other fascist Islamists. Anarchy remains the rule of law. Turkey's proxies continue to take Kurds' homes and businesses, destroy infrastructure that supplies water, electricity, and grain to millions of people, and fight and kill each other as much as the people they are meant to protect. Despite Turkey having created several mini-Islamic States in north Syria, and that militias in these states could easily be used to threaten Europe (as admitted by Erdogan and Interior Minister Soyly), no international agency or country is forcing Turkey to withdraw from Syria or demanding that Turkey stop supporting fascist Islamist militants. We can only hope that one day all those who have ordered, overseen and perpetrated war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria (including Syrians and those from Turkey, Russia, Iran, the Assad Regime, and ISIS) will be brought to justice.

In contrast to the chaos in Turkey-occupied areas, and the oppression and scarcities in regime-controlled areas, the Kurd-led structures in north and east Syria are relatively democratic, transparent, and well organised. Their Asayish (police) work with Assad's police and military in Qamishli and along parts of the border, and their defence forces have proved to be capable,

self-disciplined allies of the US-led coalition. In combination, these structures have established a relatively stable region in the face of extreme challenges.

Yet, the ANNES and SDF remain vulnerable. What has so far saved them is US-led coalition backing based on an agreement that the Kurd-led military forces will continue fighting ISIS, not attack Turkey and not demand a separate state, but rather a federal democratic Syria. Arab states have also helped in the rehabilitation of Arab-majority towns like Raqqa. No-one other than Turkey – not the US, Russia, Assad, or most Syrians, want to see an expansion of Turkey’s anarchy. Even so, the survival of the Syrian Kurd-led political and military structures requires deft strategies that are practical and opportunistic without overreaching. For instance, people hoped that the 2023 elections in Turkey would see a new president and government interested in reconciling with Kurds in and outside Turkey. This was not to be. It is highly unlikely that five more years of an Erdogan presidency and AKP-MHP government will see Turkey withdraw its military forces, bureaucrats, and the use of the Turkish language and Lira in Turkey occupied Syria unless international pressure is applied. Otherwise, if Assad remains president, which would be devastating for most Syrians, it is hoped that his regime is pressed into accepting a decentralized system of government that gives Kurds, Druze, and other ethnic groups some degree of self-determination. In this regard, SDF Commander in Chief, Mazloum Abdi, is allegedly seeking help from the United Arab Emirates to convince Assad. Yet, most Arab states are just as authoritarian as Syria so a decentralised Syria will only happen if the international community is willing to mediate and use strong levers, not only at the national level, but also within regions, between political groups and ethnicities, to build a genuinely pluralist society. If only stakeholders were as willing to spend as much money on collaborating with the local population to build a culturally sensitive democratic system as they are to wage war.

Kurds of Bakur (Northern Kurdistan / eastern Turkey)

It could be argued Kurds in Turkey have consistently suffered the most of all Kurds over the last century. Their very existence was denied after they were promised autonomy in Ataturk’s Turkey. Thereafter it became a crime to speak or write in Kurdish, or say the word ‘Kurd’, even in the home, have a Kurdish name or wear Kurdish clothes. Every rebellion from the 1920s was ruthlessly crushed militarily, sometimes with the use of chemical weapons. Kurdish areas were kept impoverished, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were forced to leave their homes, and all were subject to assimilation at school and in society. A ‘good’ Kurd was, and still is, an assimilated Kurd.

In a climate of Turkish military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980, and the Leftist idealism of those opposed to these right-wing military governments, a Marxist inspired, pro-Kurdish organisation called the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was born in 1978. PKK reawakened the Kurdish spirit and the aspiration to create a democratic and independent nation state covering Greater Kurdistan. The PKK quickly became militant and assumed a following in and outside Turkey in the 1980s and 1990s. In response, the Turkish state introduced a system of village guards. This entails paying Kurds to kill and spy on other Kurds. The system led to civilian deaths, sometimes by PKK, but more often by the state who then framed PKK. By 1999, the state had destroyed an estimated 4,000 Kurdish villages, the civil war having killed an oft-repeated figure of ‘40,000’ people. This figure is completely artificial. It may be an over or underestimation, and rather strangely, it has remained static for two decades. Whatever the real figure, non-Turkish academics conclude that most civilians were killed by state forces.

Despite all the killing, PKK persisted, and grew. Turkey decided to cut off the head of the snake. For two decades, PKK's most well-known co-founder and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was head quartered in Syria. Turkey threatened war if Syria did not hand him over. With the CIA's help, in February 1999, Öcalan was kidnapped in Kenya, and brought back to Turkey. Here he was sentenced to death, then given life imprisonment. He has been in prison on the island of Imrali, in near total isolation, for the last 24 years. He has seen his lawyers twice, and members of his family five times in the last 11 years.

In the mid-1990s, Öcalan reformed PKK's ideology and goal, claiming PKK should aim for democratic confederalism, or a series of contiguous multi-ethnic autonomous regions as opposed to an independent nation state called Kurdistan. His subsequent imprisonment did not stop PKK's spread of influence, membership, and splinter groups. The Kurdish awakening in Turkey led to the establishment of a series of pro-Kurdish political parties in the 1990s, but as soon as one party became operational, it was banned. That was until 2012, when the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was established at a time when the then Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was experimenting with more liberal solutions to Turkey's 'Kurdish Question'. Erdoğan's experiment ended abruptly in July 2015, when the HDP became the first pro-Kurdish party to win 13 percent of the total vote to gain 80 seats in the Turkish Grand Assembly (parliament). HDP's success meant Erdoğan had to form a coalition government. He announced the end of the two-year ceasefire with PKK, a state of emergency and a re-run of the parliamentary elections. In response, Kurdish youth barricaded themselves into Kurd-majority city centres and announced they were establishing autonomous zones. The largest political forum of Kurdish non-governmental organizations in Turkey, the Democratic People's Congress (DTK), announced their goal of creating an autonomous region in Turkey. Over the next twelve months the state used snipers, tanks, and airstrikes to reduce the city centres of Sur in Amed (Diyarbakir), [Cizîr](#), [Nisêbîn](#) (Nusbayin) and Şîrnex (Şîrnak) to rubble, killing thousands and displacing 1.5 million people.

Following the re-run of the parliamentary elections in November 2015, Erdogan decided to form a coalition government with the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). A priority of the new government was withdrawing parliamentary immunity from HDP parliamentarians, including co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. Since November 2016, 14 HDP parliamentarians, including two-time presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş, have been in prison on terrorist charges for criticising Erdoğan, the armed forces and police violence, whether in speeches or on social media. At least 10,000 HDP members have been in prison, including 100 HDP mayors, who were replaced by AKP trustees. A month before the 2023 presidential elections, HDP leaders decided not to field a presidential candidate to give an Alevi Kemalist (ie. assimilated) Kurd from Dersim, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the best chance of defeating Erdoğan. They also decided that HDP must run its parliamentary candidates in the name of the Yesil Sol Parti or Green Left Party (YSP) in lieu of the threat that the Turkey's Constitutional Court could ban HDP at any time.

The most important presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey's 100-year history came and went on May 14. They featured the usual challenges: media saturated with Erdoğan and his colleagues calling Opposition candidates 'PKK terrorists'; Erdogan handing out promises of wage and pension rises and free gas for a month, as well as actual cash and Turkish passports, the last to an unverified three million Sunni Arab Syrians so they could vote; the Minister of Interior distributing easily copied authorisations to police so they could vote multiple times in different areas; hundreds of arrests and physical attacks on the Opposition; and the militarisation of Kurd-majority cities on election day and thereafter.

The elections voted in the most nationalist, right-wing parliament in Turkey's 100 year history – some 400 of the 600 seats being won by nationalists, ultranationalists and Islamists. Two days after the election, CHP alleged anomalies in the counting and recording of votes in 25 percent of 20,000 ballot boxes, having only been able to check 50 percent of all ballot boxes. YSP discovered that in at least two Kurd-majority districts all YSP votes were recorded as MHP votes. By this time the Supreme Electoral Board had closed public access to voting databases and concluded anomalies were insignificant. Yet, as pointed out by Pinar Tremblay in '[Turkey Elections 2023: Road to Dictatorship?](#)' these anomalies are the tip of the iceberg.

As for the presidential election, in the first round of voting, Erdoğan allegedly received 2.5 million more votes than Kılıçdaroğlu but failed to exceed the 50 percent requirement. Kılıçdaroğlu's Alevi Kurdish identity and his goal of reconciliation was probably too much for an electorate moulded by eight years of Erdogan's aggressive nationalism. Consequently, before the second round of voting, Kılıçdaroğlu shamelessly veered to the right and teamed up with the ultranationalist Umit Ozdag and his Zafer Party. This showed a concerning lack of integrity and conviction, but the HDP/YSP leadership felt they had no other option but to support Kılıçdaroğlu if they wanted to topple Erdoğan. Two million Kurds who had voted in the first round did not vote in the second round. With fake videos of Kılıçdaroğlu with PKK leaders being projected 24 hours a day in many city streets and other dirty tricks, Erdogan won 52 percent of the vote. Even if Kılıçdaroğlu had won the presidency, with a far right AKP-MHP coalition government and two ultranationalist parties in his six party alliance (Zafer and Akşener's Good Party) Kılıçdaroğlu's pre-election pledges of releasing all political prisoners, including Selahattin Demirtaş; ensuring elected officials could only be removed by another election (a position he reversed before the second round); and returning Turkey to a parliamentary system, were unlikely to eventuate.

In a country where 6.5 years is the average length of schooling and annual income per capita barely reaches \$US9,000, there is enough people who like Erdogan's nationalist Islamist vision of Turkey becoming a superpower, if not an empire. The biggest losers in the 2023 elections were Syrian refugees, Kurds, and youth. Syrian refugees will be pressured to return to an unstable Syria to live in mass produced matchbox houses located in Turkey-occupied regions, and Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq face an escalation of 100 years of failed military solutions. Turkey's youth will face an economy in freefall and seismic social divisions, with up to 50 percent of the population supporting an entrenched ultranationalist, Islamist authoritarianism and at least 48 percent who want democracy, having to bunker down or escape a sinking ship.

The HDP/YSP leadership was forced to make some tough decisions to ensure their candidates could even run in this charade of elections. Now they must face the consequences of their decisions. One huge criticism is the HDP/YSP leadership's lack of consultation with supporters before deciding critical strategy and policy. This includes choosing not to accept Selahattin Demirtaş' offer to run for president, which could have injected ideas and energy into the campaign and denied Erdoğan the opportunity to accuse Kılıçdaroğlu and the Opposition of being terrorists. Criticism has extended to the leadership not reading the mood of Turkey, not respecting the strength of tradition and religion (without becoming hostage to these forces) and failing to inspire and clearly distinguish HDP/YSP from PKK by articulating the benefits of all forms of non-armed resistance. While messaging was muted by a lack of airtime and a heavy police presence on the campaign trail, there was insufficient use

of social media, apart from Demirtaş' flood of tweets. Above all, Demirtaş suggests that HDP/YSP did not inspire a passion and vision of what is possible – how a truly multicultural, tolerant democracy would benefit everyone, and how this necessitates more than just a change of leaders. It requires a total reform of Turkey's institutions. Others suggest that HDP/YSP should focus on Kurdish issues like education in one's mother tongue. Choosing neither of these constructions, HDP/YSP focused on encouraging people to vote for Kılıçdaroğlu and CHP to overthrow Erdogan, even after Kılıçdaroğlu lost in the first round and quickly reverted to a nationalist mindset, gathering ultranationalists along the way. After his second loss on May 28, his ultranationalist and religious allies deserted.

Of course, the benefits of hindsight need to be balanced with a recognition of the difficulties HDP/YSP faces but losing approximately 25 percent of 2015's parliamentary seats points to a need for serious reflection. One much needed reform is changing the policy of limiting politicians to two terms, given this meant respected, articulate parliamentarians were replaced by fresh faces nobody knew. Debates about strategies and policies in and outside the organisation are required to establish what can be done better to recruit articulate people and remain on the cutting edge of advocacy, sustainable policies and ways to expand the party's reach. The leadership have no time to waste. Their next test is the municipal elections scheduled for March 2024.

Then there is PKK and its affiliates. At the close of last century, Abdullah Öcalan did not have a fair trial. That would require independent investigations, and a thorough testing of evidence used to convict him. After 24 years, at the very least, Öcalan's isolation needs to end, not only because this is just. but also, because this torture and PKK's numerous unilateral ceasefires have not stopped Turkey intensifying and expanding its military campaigns against PKK and Kurdish civilians in three countries.

Looking forward, it would seem PKK's least bloody option is to focus on PKK's success in mobilising people, supporting cultural and political organisations around the world, and finding ways to take Erdogan, Süleyman Soylu, Hulusi Akar, Hakan Fidan and others to the International Criminal Court, rather than continue its spasmodic attacks on Turkey's security forces that do not significantly further PKK's goals. At least the non-military options could be used to argue for the removal of PKK from the terrorist lists of Turkey's allies, that is, except for Russia, which does not classify PKK as a terrorist organisation. Getting the PKK delisted should be a priority given Turkey uses this label to justify waging war on literally millions of people. By de-listing PKK, Turkey's NATO allies would send a strong message to Turkey and the world that they are against oppression. It would also help PKK become more politically effective. This is not suggesting that PKK should unilaterally disarm without the Turkish state taking concrete irreversible actions based on constitutional reforms and a binding peace agreement. Both parties need to accept there is no military solution, that peace depends on multi-stakeholder, multi-faceted negotiations.

Öcalan's ideas on democratic confederalism have much to offer the region, if not the world, especially regarding male and female co-chairs heading every committee or organisation. PKK has proved it is not reliant on one or more individuals to run highly organised military and political wings, the latter supporting cultural and media organisations. For example, the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) based in Brussels has 366 individual members who represent organisations from around the world. In recent years three Belgium courts ruled PKK is not a terrorist group, that it is involved in a legitimate struggle and abides by the Geneva Convention. What other terrorist organisation supports human rights and democracy, and saves

tens of thousands of people, as PKK did in defending Yezidis from Islamic State in Shingal (Sinjar) in August 2014?

Yet PKK is pushed into some very dark corners because it faces ruthless state apparatus' intent on wiping out anyone that advocates self-determination. This means PKK's four top leaders are forced to live in isolation from the people they represent, whether this is Öcalan living on the prison island of Imrali, or PKK's three-person Executive Committee (co-founders Cemil Bayik and Murat Karayılan, plus Bahoz Erdal/Fahman Husin) who have allegedly resided in the remote Qandil mountains of Bashur for decades. This Executive Committee has no communication with Öcalan. It is unclear how they make decisions. Rarely are they talked about, let alone publicly questioned or criticised. This isolation extends to every active PKK fighter. Unlike other Kurdish fighters, active PKK fighters are not allowed to marry or have contact with their family of origin, except on infrequent, brief, organised occasions. They live and work surrounded by other PKK fighters and educators. While this is to enhance everyone's safety, the isolation has significant personal, social, and political ramifications. For instance, some criticise PKK for wanting to change the world, and for not being realistic in wanting to eradicate nation states. Given there will always be individuals or entities eager to fill any power vacuum, this aim is a recipe for reinventing an age of empires, one helped, but not enhanced, by technology.

It is usual in politics, that practise rarely lives up to the ideal. PKK and PKK-inspired organisations are no different. Many do not operate in accordance with Öcalan's emphasis on grass roots democracy. For instance, given the sensitivity of so many matters, grassroots organisations invariably refer to KNC Brussels for 'guidance', while PKK supporters' fervent loyalty to Öcalan and adherence to democratic federalism leads to difficulties in working with other individuals and organisations that are not so committed, or that reject PKK's ideology. Of course, PKK is not the only pro-Kurdish organisation that finds it difficult to work with other organisations. Kurds have a notorious unwillingness to coordinate across political divides, even if this jeopardises their survival. The battle for Kobani was a wonderful exception. If only Kobani could inspire ways to overcome disagreements and use compromise and mutual interests to bridge divisions.

It must be emphasised that these concerns pale in comparison to Turkey's military, political and cultural oppression of Kurds in three countries, and its building of fascist Islamic States in northern Syria, and Turkey, the latter by supporting Huda-Par and other extremists. In its inaction, appeasement, and ongoing sales of military hardware the international community is complicit. This complicity cannot be justified by platitudes like the need to 'respect Turkey's national security concerns' and 'keep this troublesome NATO member on side'. One hundred years of appeasement has led to a thug of a state that is as racist and aggressive as Nazi Germany in wanting to 'neutralise' a nation of people and recreate an empire by invading and occupying other countries. To prevent Erdoğan realising his fascist Turkic Islamist empire, the United Nations, NATO, the US, European Union, and other stakeholders need to coordinate in applying strong incentives and disincentives to convince Turkey to embark on a more constructive path. If Turkey continues sliding further into rogue status, and destabilising Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and north Africa, then a threat of last resort could be the territorial division.

Conclusion

Since the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Kurds have spent 100 years idealizing what a modern Kurd-led government would look like. People in Bashur and Rojava now face the hard realities of governing. In any country, democracy is a work in progress, requiring constant struggle and review. But imperfections in leaders and their administrations are especially apparent when they are being militarily attacked and otherwise undermined from multiple quarters, and in the case of Syria, when they have no international recognition.

By necessity, Kurds are incredibly resilient. With every tragedy and set back they must hold onto the belief that this is the dark hour before the dawn. To realise the dawn, they must always be prepared to take advantage of cataclysmic opportunities, politically and militarily. In the meantime, they need to take a step-by-step approach to achieve their goal, this currently being to establish contiguous, (semi) autonomous, multi-ethnic, politically pluralist regions within a democratic federal Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. This can only be achieved if Kurdish leaders attain power through merit; listen and serve their people's interests; and find ways to coordinate across political and ethnic divides, covertly, if need be, while continuing to build alliances, make use of the internet and social media, international laws and courts, and the self-interest of others. After all this effort, if Kurdistanis remain subject to the whims of authoritarian states, they have every right to demand a federation of their own in which all ethnicities, women, youth, and the environment have political representation under one flag. After all, the United Nations enshrines peoples' legal right to self-determination – the right to freely determine our own political status and pursue our own economic, social, and cultural development. In the twenty-first century, it is about time this club of nation states prioritises this right.