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The Kurds in a New Middle East

The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict

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Preface

The state system that came into being in the Middle East after the First World War left the Kurds as significant minorities in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and turned Kurdistan—the regions of the Middle East where the Kurds constitute the majority of the population—into the periphery of these states. The Kurds' subsequent attempts to obtain their political rights and exercise self-determination were repressed, often by brutal force, which exacerbated the conflict and led to more violence.

Until the calamitous failure the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) experienced in its independence bid in September 2017, there was a growing belief among the Kurds that the 'Kurdish moment' in the Middle East had arrived. The transformation triggered by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 turned the Iraqi Kurdish political parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—into important political actors and the new federal state that replaced Saddam Hussein's *Baathist* dictatorship recognised extensive autonomy for the Kurds. Kurdish demands were satisfied to a large extent but the failure to determine the final status of the disputed territories, the growing authoritarianism under the Nouri al-Maliki government (2010–2014) and political instability in the country fuelled Kurdish leadership's secessionist desires.

The growing Kurdish influence in the Middle East continued with the emergence of a Kurdish-led de facto autonomous region in Syria's north and northeast in July 2012. The central role Kurdish forces, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), has been

playing in the international military campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) place Syria's Kurds at the centre of the regional political developments. The Kurds of Turkey have also been hitting the international news headlines in recent years. The rise of the pro-Kurdish movement in Turkey and its strong electoral performance in a number of elections since 2014 enabled it to establish itself as a key political actor in Turkey. Turkey's Kurdish conflict is ongoing and despite the positive developments in the past decade, so far Turkey has not been able to construct an alternative administrative framework to accommodate Kurdish demands for autonomy and resolve the conflict. In the past decade, there have been signs of revival of Iran's Kurdish movement too but its deep-rooted divisions and fragmentation continues.

This book provides a concise account of the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East. It traces the key events and developments taking place in the individual state level conflicts in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran and also examines the regional developments that have affected their trajectory. It also offers an up-to-date and accessible examination of the recent developments, highlights the inter-connections and interdependencies that exist between individual conflicts and the opportunities and challenges that Kurdish political actors involved in these conflicts face.

This is a book for students and scholars of Kurdish politics in the Middle East and Kurdish conflicts in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran. However, given the regional security impact and international security concerns associated with Kurdish conflicts, it will be of interest to a wide array of readers from the policymakers, journalists to the general public.

London, UK Cengiz Gunes

Contents

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party
CHP	Republican People's Party
DBP	Democratic Regions' Party
DFNS	Democratic Federation of Northern Syria
DTK	Democratic Society Congress
FSA	Free Syria Army
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party
HPG	People's Defence Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDPI	Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
KDPS	Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Syria
KNC	Kurdistan National Council
Komala	Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan
Kongra-Gel	People's Congress of Kurdistan
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MGRK	People's Council of West Kurdistan
MHP	Nationalist Action Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PJAK	Party of Free Life in Kurdistan
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Party of Democratic Union
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council

SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Council
TAK	Kurdistan Freedom Falcons
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society
YPG	People's Defence Units
YPJ	Women's Defence Units

CHAPTER 1

The Kurdish Resurgence in a Changing Middle East

Abstract This chapter provides an account of the history of the Kurdish question in the Middle East. It explores the main political developments taking place in each of the Kurdish conflicts and highlights the impact of the regional level processes on their evolution. From the 1960s onwards, Kurdish resistance to states began to take a more organised form. While the states' counter-insurgency efforts succeeded in containing the Kurdish armed campaigns, they have not been able to totally destroy Kurdish movements. Consequently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Kurdish political activism has reached a new height with Kurdish movements in Iraq, Turkey and Syria establishing themselves as important political actors and becoming a significant force in the domestic politics of these states.

Keywords Kurdish resurgence · Regionalisation of the Kurdish conflict · Iraq · Iran · Turkey · Syria

The history of the Kurdish question in the Middle East is a long and complex one. Divided among the states of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, the Kurds are one of the largest nations in the world without their own state. The lack of accurate census data on Kurdish population makes it impossible to provide an accurate figure about the exact number of the Kurds in the region and estimating Kurdish population is a contentious issue, with states tending to underestimate the size of their Kurdish

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population and Kurdish nationalists overestimate. Approximately, the Kurds constitute 20% of the population of Iraq and Turkey and 10% of Iran and Syria, and the Kurdish population across the region is estimated at 35 million (Gurses 2014, p. 253). According to this estimate, nearly half of the Kurds in the region live in Turkey and Kurdish population is estimated to be around 16 million. Kurdish population in Iraq is estimated at 7 million and that in Iran and Syria at 8 million and 2 million, respectively. There are large Kurdish communities in the Diaspora in Europe, Lebanon and the former republics of the Soviet Union, whose population is estimated at around 2 million.

In Iraq, the Kurds constitute the majority of the population of the Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah governorates but large numbers of Kurds reside in Baghdad and in the governorates of Kirkuk, Ninaveh and Diyala. In Iran, Kurdish population is mainly concentrated in the northwest corner in the provinces of Kurdistan, Ilam, Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan along the Iran–Iraq and Iran–Turkey border. There are pockets of Kurdish population in Iran's northeast in the historic region of Khorasan. In Syria, the Kurdish population is concentrated in the northeast and northwest regions and large Kurdish communities existed before the civil war in both Aleppo and Damascus. In Turkey, the Kurds' historic homeland is in the south-eastern and eastern regions of the country and currently more than 80% of the population of the following provinces is Kurdish: Adıyaman, Ağrı, Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şırnak, Şanlıurfa, Tunceli and Van. A significant number of Kurds populate the adjacent area of provinces, such as Elazığ, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş and Malatya (Sirkeci 2000). There are pockets of Kurdish population in central Anatolia, in Sivas, Kayseri, Konya, Kırşehir and Ankara. Also, as a result of the adverse economic conditions in eastern and south-eastern regions, many Kurds have been migrating to western Turkey since the 1950s onward in search of work. From the late 1980s until the early 2000s, with the intensification of conflict in the Kurdish majority regions, many rural Kurds were forced out of their villages and hamlets by the army and security forces and settled in western and southern Turkey. It is estimated that as much as 4 million Kurds were forcefully displaced during the late 1980s and 1990s (Çelik 2005; Jongerden 2001). Consequently, large Kurdish populations reside in western Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, Izmir, Mersin, Adana, Ankara, Bursa and Kocaeli. Kurds make as much as 20% of Istanbul's population of 14 million (Sönmez 2015, p. 49).

The main Kurdish languages are Kurmanji and Sorani with Kurmanji spoken mainly in Turkey and Syria and parts of Iraq and Iran. Sorani is spoken in Iraq and Iran and is the language of education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In addition, a section of the Kurdish population in Turkey, perhaps as much as 2 million, speaks Zazaki or Dimilli. The majority of the Kurds are Sunni Muslim with a minority in Iraq and Iran following Shia Islam. Adherents to other minority religions, such as Alevis, Yazidis and Ah-li Haqq also exist.

On numerous occasions throughout the twentieth century, the Kurds have rebelled in defence of their national rights and against the repression of their identity and culture by the states of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Kurdish grievances have become part of the Middle Eastern politics and Kurdish conflicts have been a significant source of instability in the region. Kurdish rebellions in Iraq between 1961 and 1975 and in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s managed to mobilise a large number of Kurds and presented significant challenges to the authority of these states. The political developments taking place in the Middle East during the past three decades have been creating opportunities for Kurdish political movements. Following the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq in 2005, the establishment of a Kurdish-led de facto autonomous region in Syria since 2012 and the electoral success of the pro-Kurdish movement in Turkey during the past decade, the Kurdish challenge to the existing states have taken on a new dimension.

Kurdish resurgence is taking place at a time Syria is experiencing conflict and civil war leading to a significant loss of power and control over its sovereign territory. With the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Syrian conflict spread to neighbouring Iraq and began to threaten the stability of the whole region (Gunes and Lowe 2015). As I discuss in Chapter 6 more fully, this situation has emboldened both Iran and Turkey to extend their spheres of influence in the region, which brought Kurdish actors and entities face-to-face with two regional powers that are determined to restrict the Kurdish gains and keep the existing state system in the region intact.

There were occasions in the past when Kurdish movements mobilised a large section of the Kurdish populations but it is for the first time in the history of the region that we are witnessing concurrent active conflicts in all parts of Kurdistan. Consequently, the Kurdish question has once again re-entered the regional political debate. It has not been easy for the Kurds to reach where they are but question marks persist on whether

their resurgence in the region is sustainable. Bearing in mind that we are looking at political developments across four states and at a regional conflict with distinct yet interconnected and ongoing conflicts, a number of important questions arise:

- Will the Kurds be a new force in the region and what are the obstacles in front of their ambitions?
- What form Kurdish power in the Middle East is likely to take?
- What domestic and regional factors have shaped the recent dynamics of the Kurdish conflicts in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria?
- What are the impacts of the emergence of the Kurds as significant new actors in a region that is undergoing rapid change and how will it affect the existing power dynamics at the regional level?

These questions are explored via a discussion focusing on the political developments in each of the Kurdish conflicts, highlighting the impact of the regional level processes. In the reminder of this chapter, I explore the historical origins and development of this complex transnational conflict and situate its transformation within the wider regional developments.

1.1 A Brief History of the Kurdish Question

The Kurds have a long presence in the region they populate and their origin is often traced back to the ancient Medes who inhabited the mountainous area in north-western Iran and rose to prominence in the seventh century BC. Kurdish nationalists use the Festival of Newroz and the Legend of Kawa the Blacksmith to narrate the historical emergence of the Kurds and construct the Median Empire as the golden age of the Kurdish nation (Gunes 2012, p. 33; Aydın 2014; O'Shea 2004, p. 151). After the decline and fragmentation of the Abbasid Caliphate in the tenth century, a number of Kurdish emirates rose to prominence. From the eleventh century onwards, Kurdish emirates had to contend with the growing influence of the Seljuk Turks, who became the dominant power in the region after their defeat of the Byzantium Empire in the Battle of Malazgird in 1071.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire from the early sixteenth century onwards resulted in a military contest between the Ottoman and Safavid empires and a large part of Kurdish populated territory came under the rule of the Ottomans after the Battle of Chaldiran in August 1514.

The Ottoman triumph marked a significant change in the way Kurdish emirates negotiated their existence. The Ottoman authorities adopted a policy of accommodation and a decentralised political system to win the support of Kurdish emirates and enlist them in dealing with the threat posed by the Safavid Empire (Kendal 1993, p. 14).

Kurdish emirates provided troops to the Ottoman army when needed and defended the borders of the empire and 'developed varying degrees of autonomy' (Eppel 2016, p. 31). In this period, Emirate of Bitlis established itself as a Kurdish economic and cultural hub but the Ottoman Empire was keen to avoid any possible challenges to its rule in the region and as a result took the emirate's territories under its direct rule in 1655 (Eppel 2016, p. 33). A number of other Kurdish emirates managed to continue their existence within the Ottoman Empire well into the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, the Kurdish emirates of Ardalan and Baban remained loyal to the Safavid and later Qajar rulers of Iran and they too managed to continue their existence until the mid-nineteenth century (McDowall 2004, pp. 32–36).

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Kurdistan remained a borderland between the Ottoman and Persian empires and the site of their long geopolitical competition, which prevented the Kurds' national unification and consolidation of Kurdish political structures in the region: 'Kurdistan's location, which lay in the paths of many invading armies en route to other places ensured a turbulent history and stunted its social and economic development' (O'Shea 2004, p. 190). The expansion of state authority into Kurdish territories during the early nineteenth century resulted in the elimination of the autonomy that the Kurdish emirates held. The changes in the international relations of the region, particularly the end of hostility and establishment of a border between the Ottoman and Persian empires after the signing of the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823 and the growing influence of Russia and Britain, ended the favourable conditions that enabled Kurdish emirates to flourish (Eppel 2016, p. 46).

The Ottoman Empire no longer needed the backing of the Kurdish emirates against the threat posed by the Safavid Empire and began to curb their power in order to protect itself against potential Russian infiltration of its territory. Kurdish emirates did not surrender their autonomy willingly and resisted the Ottoman forces in a number of revolts during the 1840s but ultimately they could not preserve their status. With the political structures that could have evolved into a

centre of Kurdish power eliminated, the Kurds remained a deeply fragmented society: 'The policies followed by rival empires, of creating and manipulating ruling dynasties, intensified social divisions, reinforcing a tribal hierarchy and further inhibiting political and social advances' (O'Shea 2004, p. 191).

However, the demise of Kurdish emirates did not end the Kurds' ability to mobilise collectively. In the second half of the nineteenth century, religious elites rose to prominence and began to act as the leaders of the Kurds. In particular, Sufi orders, such as the *Naqshbandiyya* or *Qadiriyya* began to play a more important role in the social and political life of the Kurds. From the end of nineteenth century onwards, a movement influenced by modern nationalist ideas also emerged and began to gain popularity among the Kurdish intelligentsia based in the Empire's capital, Istanbul. The emergence of Kurdish nationalism coincided with the rise of nationalism among the Ottoman Empire's other minorities.

A number of Kurdish individuals rose to prominence in the empire's bureaucracy and attempts were made to establish organisations that campaigned for the development of Kurdish society and raising the Kurds' national consciousness. The Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress (*Kürt Teavün ve Terraki Cemiyeti*) established in 1908 and the Society for the Rise of Kurdistan (*Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*) established in December 1918 were the main Kurdish nationalist organisations and these movements came into being and remained active at a time the Ottoman Empire was undergoing a significant transformation (Bajalan 2016). However, attempts to organise a stronger Kurdish movement and start working towards the establishment of a Kurdish state were interrupted by the First World War.

Small-scale Kurdish revolts took place in Iran, Iraq and Turkey between 1918 and 1922, and Kurdish attempts to represent their interests and demands at the international conferences held by the dominant international powers to decide the future of the collapsing Ottoman Empire did not succeed. Initially, a consensus on the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Turkey was reached under the Treaty of Sèvres, which was prepared in August 1920 by the victorious Allied Powers and aimed at the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. The article 62 of the treaty made provision for the establishment of a commission to determine the boundaries of Kurdish autonomous region and the article 64 paved the way towards the establishment of an independent Kurdish state if the majority of the population of the predominantly Kurdish

region expressed support for it. It also postulated that the Kurdish people in the former Ottoman province of Mosul, which remained under British rule, could join the Kurdish state should they choose to do so (Vanly 1993, p. 146). The Treaty of Sèvres was never implemented and was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923. It was signed by the Allied Powers and the newly created Republic of Turkey and neither mentioned Kurdish autonomy nor offered a path towards the establishment of a Kurdish state.

The idea of a Kurdish state in Greater Kurdistan and spanning all Kurdish populated territories in the Middle East was initially advocated by the Xoybûn (Being Oneself) during the late 1920s and 1930s. Xoybûn was a Kurdish nationalist organisation established in Lebanon in 1927 by Kurdish nationalists intellectuals exiled from Turkey to Syria and Lebanon after the establishment of the Turkish republic and it led the Ararat Rebellion in Turkey between 1928–1930 (McDowall 2004, pp. 203–205). Ultimately, the early Kurdish attempts to secure their demands through armed insurrections were not able to change the course of history but the idea of an independent state covering the entire territory of Greater Kurdistan and as a homeland for all Kurds retained its appeal and re-appeared in the second half of the twentieth century.

Alongside the discontinuities imposed by national borders, internally, Kurdish identity served as a source of differentiation within these states and as a connection across the state boundaries. Kurdish populated territories became peripheries of the newly established states in the Middle East that were highly centralised and authoritarian and adopted policies that left little room for the recognition of Kurdish identity and rights. Throughout the twentieth century, Kurdish movements in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria have resisted the states and their attempts to control the territories that the Kurds populated. The Kurds had to rely on violent means to subvert the nationalist projects that the states pursued but this drew them into protracted conflicts and pitted them against far superior military forces. One of the key developments in Kurdish politics in the mid-twentieth century was the establishment of a Kurdish republic in Mahabad, Iran, in 1946. This came as a result of the invasion of Iran by the British and Soviet forces following the conclusion of the Second World War. The withdrawal of the Soviet forces enabled the Iranian army to capture the areas under the Kurdish control and most of the leaders of the Kurdish republic were executed by the Iranian authorities but some managed to escape to the Soviet Union.

1.2 The Re-emergence of Kurdish Nationalism During the 1960s

From the late 1950s onwards, Kurdish resistance in Iraq was led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP was established as a clandestine political party in 1946 and was led by Mustafa Barzani from 1958 onwards, following his return to Iraq from exile in Soviet Union (McDowall 2004, p. 303). The political instability Iraq experienced during the 1960s as a result of the successive *coup d'états* organised by rival factions in the army created political space for the Kurds to organise and sustain an armed struggle. The KDP-led revolt reached a conclusion with the autonomy agreement in March 1970. Though the agreement offered extensive powers to the Kurds, ultimately it was not implemented in its original form and the Kurdish leadership rejected the new and much reduced 'take it or leave it' autonomy offer from Baghdad in March 1974 (Anderson 1974). In 1975, Iran stopped the support it provided to the Kurdish forces in exchange of territorial concessions from Iraq in the Persian Gulf following the Algiers Agreement signed between Iran and Iraq in 1975 (Vanly 1993). In March 1975, the KDP decided to end the insurgency and withdraw its forces to Iran.

The bitter end to the Kurdish revolt in Iraq had major ramifications in Kurdish politics across the region. It resulted in the weakening of the conservative brand of Kurdish nationalism exemplified by the KDP and Barzani's leadership and resulted in the establishment of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under the leadership of Jalal Talabani in Damuscus in 1975, advocating a socialist line. The division of the movement led to a factional conflict throughout the 1970s between the KDP and the PUK, which further fragmented the Iraqi Kurdish movement. The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) created opportunities for the Kurdish parties to re-establish their presence and increase their political and military activities in Iraqi Kurdistan (McDowall 2004, pp. 346–347).

During the late 1970s, the Kurdish movement in Iran was also highly active and after the overthrow of the Shah's regime, it mobilised Kurds around the demand of territorial autonomy. However, it was not long before the Kurdish forces came under attack by the forces of the Islamist regime that took power in Iran following the revolution and the Kurdish resistance against the Islamist takeover lasted until 1982. Subsequently, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the leaders of the Kurdish political parties were assassinated, which further weakened the movement.

Attempts at resuming the struggle during the 1990s were made by the Iranian Kurdish political parties but it is only in the past decade that we have witnessed the signs of their revival. The first Kurdish political party in Syria was established in 1957 but it faced series of divisions in the subsequent decades and remained fragmented and until 2011, unable to appeal to the masses or generate mass political mobilisation.

The Kurds in Turkey too increased their activism during the 1970s and a number of Kurdish socialist parties and groups were established. However, the nascent Kurdish movement emerged within a harsh and violent political environment and many of the Kurdish political activists were arrested and remained in prison following the military coup of 12 September 1980. In the subsequent years of the 1980s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) established itself as the main Kurdish political force in Turkey and managed to survive the repression by moving its members to Syria and Lebanon from 1979 onwards. This enabled it to transform itself into a guerrilla movement from the early 1980s onwards. In the subsequent decades, it managed to establish itself as a major political actor in Kurdish politics in Turkey (Gunes 2013). Despite Turkey's ongoing extensive counter-insurgency efforts, the PKK managed to survive and grow as a movement and mobilise a large section of the Kurdish population in Turkey.

Hence, distinct social dynamics and ideologies have dominated different parts of Kurdish political space, and local and national conditions played a significant role in the formation of each Kurdish conflict. Attempts at forging a common Kurdish position or achieving closer cooperation among different Kurdish movements were unsuccessful. In 1982, the PKK started to form good relations with the KDP, which in 1983 was formalised as an alliance agreement that facilitated the PKK's movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (Öcalan 1993, pp. 447–449). The alliance agreement emphasised that both parties were committed to fostering good relations among the Kurdish political groups in the region. A protocol expressing similar measures was signed by the PKK and the PUK in May 1988, calling for fostering better relations between the two parties.

However, these attempts neither resulted in close cooperation between the political parties nor ended the organisational fragmentation of Kurdish movements. In fact, intra-Kurdish conflicts rather than cooperation have been more common. This took place during the 1970s and during the mid-1990s within the Kurdish movement in Iraq, between the Iranian Kurdish political parties during the mid-1980s and between

the PKK and the Iraqi Kurdish parties in 1992. In 2013, representatives of Kurdish political movements from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey met in Erbil to take steps to convene a Kurdish National Congress. Eventually, their efforts were abandoned in the face of major differences. However, since 2014, as the Kurds across the region have become one of the main target groups for ISIS attacks, we have witnessed the development of some cooperation between Kurdish movements in Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

Ethnic conflicts have been regular occurrences in many states in the world and consequently, there is a growing literature that has delved into the causes of such conflicts and the conditions under which these conflicts turn violent. In the existing literature, domestic level explanations carry a significant amount of weight and discriminatory political institutions and exclusionary nationalist ideologies are identified as two main political factors behind the outbreak of ethnic conflicts (Brown 1993, p. 68). The presence of both these factors creates a situation in which the state uses various instruments of violence or punitive measures to oppress the demands raised by an ethnic minority or the political groups representing it.

Throughout the twentieth century, states have fervently opposed Kurdish demands on grounds that their realisation could radically transform the political geography of the region and adopted harsh measures to establish their territorial control over Kurdistan. The desire to create a homogenous nation led to suppression of ethnic identity and loyalties. Even when a Kurdish identity and difference was tolerated, it did not end the marginalisation of Kurds as Kurdish identity was continued to be perceived in an inferior position to the national identity of the dominant group within the state. Collectively, the policies the states pursued turned Kurdish populated regions to the peripheries and left the Kurds as a marginalised persecuted minority in each state. For example, after consolidating their power in Turkey, Turkish nationalists pursued policies to 'Turkify' Kurdish geography by changing the Kurdish names of towns, cities, villages and mountains to Turkish names, forcefully displaced Kurds, prohibited the teaching of Kurdish language in schools and forcefully assimilated Kurds (Bayır 2013; Rygiel 1998). Also, as part of the state's counter-insurgency against the PKK, a large number of Kurdish civilians were forcefully displaced during 1980s and 1990s, many of whom had to settle in the cities in Kurdish majority regions of Turkey and beyond in Turkey's metropolitan areas in the west and south of the country, as well as in western Europe (Jongerden 2007; Çelik 2005).

In addition, insufficient state investment in the Kurdish majority region ensured that it remained economically underdeveloped. The economic policies were shaped by the Turkish state's political considerations and aimed at preventing the emergence of an economic base that could support the development of independent Kurdish political structures, a policy described as 'de-development' by Yadirgi (2017). Consequently, very little economic opportunities were available to the Kurds in Turkey and as a result, from 1950s onwards, many Kurds migrated to western Turkey in search of better economic opportunities, which led to the dispersal of Kurdish population in Turkey.

However, the policy of forced displacement was not unique to only Turkey. In Iraq, settlement of ethnic Arabs on Kurdish populated areas, particularly in the oil-rich Kirkuk province, was carried out during the 1970s and 1980s by Saddam Hussein's *Baathist* regime. Furthermore, as part of the Anfal campaign in the late-1980s, chemical weapons were used to carry a massacre against Kurdish civilians in Halabja. Syria too used similar Arabisation policies during the early 1970s and Arabs were settled in Kurdish populated regions in order to create a protective 'Arab belt' against possible Kurdish agitation. In 1962 Syrian citizenship was removed from around 120,000 Kurds. During the mid-1970s, the state settled ethnic Arabs in Jazira province and distributed arable land that it confiscated from the Kurds.

The issue of the diffusion of violence from one conflict region to neighbouring regions is an issue that has also been attracting considerable academic interest. Transnational ties linked to ethnicity are identified as a strong influence on the decisions to use violence because groups that have transnational communities have more resources for mobilisation for conflict (Gleditsch 2007, p. 296). In particular, external sanctuaries in neighbouring states provide an important opportunity to a rebel group to mobilise (Salehyan 2007, pp. 225–226). Furthermore, insurgent group are more likely to survive the military operations and regroup and restart the insurgency if they have a kin ethnic group in neighbouring states (Gurses 2015).

The interconnections between different Kurdish conflicts in the region necessitates that we pay attention to the regional political developments. The manner in which Kurdish movements from different countries influence each other and the ideological contiguity that exists between them is an important aspect of the regional dimension of the Kurdish

conflict. The involvement of regional powers in Kurdish conflicts, who are motivated by using the Kurdish actors to weaken a neighbour or win concessions from them, is another aspect of its regional dimension. The Kurds were the enemy within each state and a 'card to be played' by the regional powers in their power game (Vanly 1993, p. 175). The Kurdish movements were forced to rely on neighbouring powers who they knew were likely to abandon them once the war started or could change course as the war continued but they 'had to play at both the complex interdependent regional and international systems, attempting to maximise their power vis-à-vis existing regional rivalries and superpower interests' in order to secure their survival (Shareef 2014, p. 136).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK was based in Syria and Lebanon and this was tolerated by the Syrian state because of its disputes with Turkey. Similarly, the PUK was based in Syria and its activities were tolerated or even encouraged because of Syria's rivalry with Iraq. The rivalry and conflict between the states in the region created opportunities for Kurdish movements to organise and challenge individual states, which integrated Kurdish actors into the existing power dynamics in the region. As a result, the Kurdish movements were able to survive and grow in a very challenging political environment.

There are also many occasions when the regional powers cooperated on security matters pertaining to the activities of Kurdish armed groups. In 1983, Turkey crossed into Iraq in pursuit of Kurdish rebels and in 1984, reached an agreement with the government of Iraq that enabled Turkey to conduct military operations inside Iraq within 10 kilometres of Turkish border (Shaked and Dishon 1986, p. 746). This agreement enabled Turkey to conduct many operations against the PKK guerrillas during the 1990s and 2000s. Turkey signed the Adana agreement with Syria in 1998, which focused mainly on joint action to combat PKK activities in Syria. In the subsequent years, during the 2000, the relations between Turkey and Syria improved markedly and Syria provided diplomatic support to Turkey for its incursion into Iraq in 2008 (Gurses 2014, p. 255). Turkey developed a similar security framework with Iran and signed a security cooperation agreement in 1992. However, the 1990s were a tense period in Turkey–Iran relations and Turkey often accused Iran of providing support to the PKK. During the 2000s, the security cooperation between the two countries improved significantly, with Iran classifying the PKK as a terrorist organisation in 2004 (Elik 2012, pp. 91–92).

1.3 The Geopolitics of the Middle East and the Kurdish Question

The term 'geopolitics' was coined by Rudolf Kjellén in 1899 and refers to spatiality of world politics (Cohen 2015, p. 24; Tuathail 1998). As a mode of analysis geopolitics emerged in the late nineteenth century and its emergence is connected to the hegemonic struggles that the European imperialist powers waged for domination of territory and control of resources. More specifically, Cohen (2015, p. 16) defines geopolitics as 'the analysis of the interaction between, on the one hand, geographical settings and perspectives and, on the other, political processes'. Geopolitical shifts affect the relationships among states and the balance of power in the world and geopolitical analysis is highly useful for understanding the combined impacts of the international and domestic or state level processes (Cohen 2015). Cohen (2015, p. 37) describes the Middle East as a 'shatterbelt' as its internal division and fragmentation has been intensified by pressure of competing powers from different geopolitical realms. Hence, as a region, its transformation has been shaped by the actions of not only the regional powers but also of the great powers who sought to control the use of the region's vast energy resources or prevent or limit a rival's access.

As an example, the division of post-Ottoman territory into respective British and French spheres of influence, at the San Remo Conference in 1920 reflected the geopolitical interests of Great Britain and France and paid very little attention to the ethnic make-up of these territories or the aspiration of its population. The idea of dividing the former Ottoman provinces (*vilayet*) of Aleppo, Baghdad, Basra, Beirut, Damascus, Mosul and Syria into British and French zones of influence was first conceived secretly in the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916. The architects of the region's new state system were aware of the Kurds' ambitions and demands but thought of the Kurds as weak, disunited and violent people who had very little to contribute to the new Middle East that they were building (Culcasi 2006, p. 684). As a result, both of the new states of Iraq and Syria contained significant Kurdish minority populations and the international borders imposed a division on the Kurdish populated territories. Consequently, a state around the core area of Kurdistan did not develop leaving it as 'a microcosm of the peripheral zone, within a peripheral zone' and this peripherality 'has been a major barrier to state formation and development (O'Shea 2004, pp. 22 and 25).

The competition over territory is central to understanding Kurdish conflicts and as Chapters 2–5 discuss in greater detail, a number of Kurdish movements and entities are involved in this process. Reordering these peripheries in the borderlands of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey as a homeland for the Kurds has been at the heart of the political struggles waged by Kurdish movements and Kurdish territorial ambitions have oscillated between regional autonomy and independence. As mentioned above, the idea of a pan-Kurdish state unifying Greater Kurdistan as a homeland for all Kurds was initially articulated by the Xoybûn during the 1920s and 1930s. This notion of Greater Kurdistan was re-articulated in the discourse of the newly emerging Kurdish national movement in Turkey during the 1970s. The armed struggle by the PKK during the 1980s and the 1990s was motivated by such a pan-Kurdish geopolitical imagination and the idea of Kurdistan as a distinct geographic entity was evoked in its discourse. During the mid-1990s, the PKK began to move away from the idea of an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East and frame its political demands around the accommodation of Kurdish rights within these states. During the 2000s, the idea of 'democratic autonomy' has been developed, which is an administrative framework to accommodate Kurdish rights within the existing state borders through decentralisation and development of Kurdish self-governments. Approaches based on ethnic federalism or territorial autonomy has a long history in Kurdish political discourse and has been demanded by Kurdish movements in Iraq and Iran. A number of Kurdish political parties in Turkey and Syria also raise such demands in the contemporary period.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Zagros Mountains at the intersection of Iraq, Iran and Turkey have been a sanctuary to Kurdish movements and provided a suitable environment to conduct a guerrilla campaign against these states. The *peshmerga* ('Those who face death') of the Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish movements have been present since the early 1960s and guerrillas of the PKK since the early 1980s in these mountainous areas, and the attempts by Iraq, Iran and Turkey to eliminate their presence have not so far succeeded.

To counter the representation of Kurdish territories within the geopolitical visions of the nation-states that controlled them and to strengthen their territorial claims, Kurdish movements produced and used maps of Kurdistan that brought together the Kurdish populated territories in northern Iraq, north-western Iran, northeast Syria and southeast Turkey. The spatial representations of Kurdistan as a homogenous geographic

location and the homeland of the Kurds in the maps contributed to the dissemination of the Kurdish geopolitical visions to a wider audience and strengthened the association the Kurds had with these territories (O'Shea 2004). In addition, the Kurds used national myth of origin, the Newroz festival and the Legend of Kawa, to trace the Kurdish presence in the region as far back as the ancient Medes and construct their own representation of the alternative Kurdish society they sought to create (Gunes 2012, p. 33; O'Shea 2004, p. 151).

However, it was not only the competing geopolitical visions of the nation-states busy with nationalising Kurdish territory that the Kurdish movements had to contend with. Kurdish conflicts have been significant security concerns in the Middle East and have been attracting the attention of the international powers involved in the region, most notably the United States. The United States and other western media accounts of Kurdish conflicts have also utilised maps of Kurdistan to capture and convey Kurdish struggles and territorial claims. Often, these maps 'reflected U.S. political agendas *and* created particular interrelated images and narratives of the Kurds and Kurdistan' (Culasi 2006, p. 681). The creation of a Soviet-backed Kurdish republic in Mahabad was interpreted through the prism of spread of communism and expansion of Soviet influence in the region (Culasi 2006, p. 694). The representation of Kurdish political ambitions in the Middle East as undesirable or a threat to the US interests in the region continued to persist until the 1991 Gulf War.

In the 1970s, the US engagement with the Iraqi Kurds was done on the behest of its regional ally Iran, who was keen to provide the Kurds of Iraq with military aid and use the Kurdish insurgency to extract concessions from Iraq in the Iran–Iraq territorial dispute in the Persian Gulf (Vanly 1993, p. 169). However, in the early 1990s, the Kurds of Iraq began to emerge as a potential US ally and this was a significant development: 'If there is one factor that has forever changed the Kurds' fate in Iraq, it is the United States' (Bengio 2012, p. 260). The US policymakers initially perceived the Kurds as a 'moral burden' but as the United States increased its efforts to contain or remove Saddam Hussein during the 1990s, they came to be seen as 'allies of sorts': 'the US decision to unseat the regime by means of the opposition cast the Kurds, who would hold the key to its success, in a pivotal role' (Bengio 2012, p. 262). This led to the United States recognising Kurdish demands within the unity of Iraq at a summit held in Washington between the leaders

of Kurdish political parties, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani and the Secretary of State Madeline Albright in September 1998 (Bengio 2012, p. 263). In 2003, the Kurdish forces took part in the US efforts to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime and they were the main ground force against the Iraqi Army in the Northern Front (Bengio 2012, p. 267). Subsequently, the Kurds consolidated their de facto autonomy in the new federal state that came into being in Iraq. In recent years, the importance of the KRI for the wider regional stability and as an ally of the western democracies was emphasised by the KRI's leadership, who often portrayed it as an energy-rich region with a functional democracy and economy.

A similar process has been taking place in Syria recently. The United States began to directly involve in Syria in autumn 2014 after ISIS captured a large amount of territory. In October 2014, it began its engagement with the Kurdish forces in Syria and initially involved in airstrikes in support of the Kurdish offensive against ISIS. The United States began to increase its military ties with the Kurdish forces and provide training and arms in early 2016 as part of the offensive to capture Manbij city from ISIS. In May 2017 and as part of the impending campaign to capture Raqqa city from ISIS, the US further increased its military support to the Kurdish-led forces (McLaughlin 2018). The US engagement with the Kurds of Syria came about as a result of the necessities on the ground in Syria and developed as part of US efforts to defeat the threat posed by ISIS and such Islamist groups. The border regions between Iraq and Syria became the base of ISIS and the territory of its self-declared caliphate. ISIS began to pose a huge threat to the stability of Iraq as it captured large swathes of territory in Iraq's northwest in the summer of 2015. In addition, as the attack ISIS carried out in Western Europe and America demonstrated, ISIS's presence began to cause a huge security threat to the west. The Kurdish forces emerged as the only viable option to fight ISIS in Syria and subsequently their importance to both defeating ISIS and stabilising the regions previously under its control continued.

The US support and protection has been an important factor behind the Kurds' resurgence in Syria and the expansion of their territorial control. Despite Turkey's ongoing opposition to the US cooperation with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the United States has continued to work with both the Kurdish-led military forces and provide them with training and weapons. The US Secretary of Defence Jim

Mattis's statement in early June 2018, indicates that it will continue to make the Kurdish-led forces a central element of its campaign against ISIS:

> At the same time, the SDF was the only organization at the time that was able to throw ISIS off track and defeat them in the field in very, very tough fighting. And we will not simply cast that organization aside, because it is …critical to destroying the physical caliphate [and] critical to preventing the rise of ISIS 2.0. (US Department of Defence 2018)

Although in the end of March 2018 President Donald Trump talked about his desire to pull back the estimated 2000 US troops based in Syria, subsequently it was decided that they will be kept there for a longer period (Davis 2018). The United States presence in Syria is set to continue in the short and medium term in order to maintain leverage in diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian conflict and counter the Russian and Iranian influence in the region. Of these, the growing influence of Iran in Syria and Iraq has emerged as a key policy issue for the United States because it has the potential to turn Iran into the hegemonic power in the region. Such a possibility will unsettle the balance of power in the region and is perceived as a major threat by two close US allies in the region: Israel and Saudi Arabia.

However, in contrast with the protective attitude the United States adopted towards Iraq's and Syria's Kurdish movements, it has been a strong supporter of Turkey's military campaign against the PKK. Turkey's description of the Kurdish struggle as 'separatism' and 'terrorism' continues to be widely accepted internationally, particularly by the states that had a close political and security alliance with Turkey. Turkey is a founding member of the NATO and has had close political and security relations with other NATO member states, particularly the United states. During the 1990s and 2000s, the United States and Germany provided high-tech weaponry to Turkish army that it used in its counter-insurgency campaign against the PKK guerrillas. When the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan left Syria in 1998, the United States pressurised Italy and Greece not to grant him refuge and assisted Turkey in capturing him in Nairobi, Kenya in February 1999 (Weiner 1999). Furthermore, Turkey used its alliance with the United States and European states to restrict the political space available to the PKK or other Kurdish representative organisations.

The political pressure on the PKK intensified as a result of the changing international conditions following the 9/11 attacks and the 'war on terror' that followed it. The PKK and the organisations that it established were added to the list of proscribed organisation in both Europe and the United states. As part of the Terrorism Act 2000, the UK included the PKK among the proscribed organisations. In Germany, following large-scale unrest in 1993, and in France the PKK activities have been banned. In May 2002, the PKK was added to the EU list of terrorist organisation but this decision was overturned by the European Court of First Instance in April 2008 on 'procedural grounds' (BBC 2008). Hence, as the discussions in the following chapters highlight, each Kurdish political actor in the region has a different level of engagement with the regional and international powers and face different opportunities and constraints.

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CHAPTER 2

The Kurdish Conflict in Iraq: Towards a Sustainable Solution

Abstract This chapter offers a discussion of the political developments in Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the early 1960s, the Kurdish national movement has been active and despite the challenges and setbacks it faced, it managed to establish itself as an important political actor in the domestic politics of Iraq. This chapter first provides an account of the evolution of the Kurdish conflict in Iraq before proceeding to discuss the establishment of Kurdish de facto autonomy in 1991 and its subsequent consolidation in 2005. Although significant progress has been made in the accommodation of Kurdish rights in Iraq, there remain significant barriers to Kurdish aspirations and the challenges that the Kurds of Iraq face is the final issue discussed in this chapter.

Keywords KDP · PUK · KRG · KRI · Massoud Barzani · Jalal Talabani · Turkey–KRI relations

Since October 1991, the governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah have been under the rule of Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Kurdish autonomy came to be recognised in the new administrative framework that came into being in Iraq in 2005. However, not all of the Kurdish populated areas are formally part of the autonomous entity, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI hereafter), and the final status of the 'disputed' territories was to be decided by a referendum in those areas,

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which has not been held for various reasons. The relative stability and security the KRI experienced has provided it with a platform to represent itself as the 'other Iraq' and develop its relations with neighbouring states and the international community. From 2009 onwards, the KRI took steps to develop its oil and gas industry and attract investment from international oil companies to increase its capacity for a gradual move towards independence.

However, the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in June 2014 was a transformative moment for the KRI and the public debate on its independence. ISIS's capture of significant territory in northern Iraq significantly weakened the Iraqi state and accelerated the momentum towards independence. The Kurdish leadership enthusiastically framed Mosul's fall to ISIS as the start of the disintegration of the Iraqi state and proof that a united Iraq was no longer viable (Krever 2014). The KRI's *peshmerga* forces moved into disputed areas, including the Kirkuk city and surrounding areas that were abandoned by the Iraqi army after they came under ISIS attack. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi federal government's inability to reach an agreement on the status of these disputed territories led to the KRI holding a referendum on its independence on 25 September 2017, in which 93.73% of the voters cast a vote in favour of independence (KHEC 2017). However, due to the opposition of Iraqi federal government and the regional and international powers, the KRG reversed its decision of pursuing independence. On 16 October 2017, the Iraqi army and the Shia militias attacked and took back the control of the disputed territories, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

2.1 Historical Overview of the Kurdish Conflict in Iraq

Following the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the First World War, the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul came under the control of the British forces and in 1920, the state of Iraq under a British Mandate was created. In 1919, the region witnessed the first Kurdish revolt for greater recognition of Kurdish rights, under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud. Sheikh Mahmud was the head of a *Qadiriyya* Sufi order and was appointed the Governor of Sulaymaniyah by the British administration in December 1918, but due to opposition from other Kurdish leaders and tribes, he was removed from his position in March

1919 (McDowall 2004, pp. 156–157), which triggered his revolt. The British forces suppressed the revolt with relative ease and exiled Sheikh Mahmud to India. However, unrest continued in Iraqi Kurdistan and in order to re-establish order, Sheikh Mahmud was reinstated in 1922 and soon after, he restarted his activities to establish a Kurdish Kingdom. He persuaded local tribal chiefs to support his efforts and gradually increased his sphere of influence and remained an important political figure in Sulaymaniyah until his headquarters were destroyed in 1924 (McDowall 2004, p. 163). The newly created Turkish Republic contested the sovereignty of the former Ottoman province of Mosul, where most Kurdish populated regions were located but the League of Nations decided on the matter in Britain's favour and recognised Mosul province as part of Iraqi territory on 16 December 1925, with several promises for Kurdish autonomy being included in the legal framework that settled the issue (Vanly 1993, p. 148).

During the 1930s, several Kurdish political and cultural publications appeared in Iraq and stronger attempts at political organisation by the Kurds were also made. In 1940, a new nationalist organisation Hiwa (Hope) was established and began to organise among the Kurdish population. In 1943, Mulla Mustafa Barzani organised a revolt against the Iraqi rule but it was put down in 1945 with the help of British Air force and he escaped to Iran where he took part in the establishment of a Kurdish republic in Mahabad in early 1946 (Vanly 1993, p. 149). Following the defeat of the Kurdish forces in Mahabad later the same year, Barzani went into exile in the Soviet Union and remained there until 1958 when he returned back to Iraq following the overthrow of monarchy by General Abd al-Karim Qasim in a *coup d'état* on 14 July 1958. In Barzani's absence, Kurdish nationalist activities continued underground but there was an instant revival soon after his return and Barzani established himself as a key figure in the Kurdish movement during the 1960s.

General Qasim's *coup d'état* was popularly supported by the opposition forces in Iraq, including the Kurds and the liberalisation it ushered promised the recognition of Kurdish identity and the rights of minorities in Iraq (Vanly 1993, p. 150). Initially, the early years of Qasim's rule witnessed growing Kurdish cultural and political activism but soon afterwards, he initiated repressive measures that began to target the political activities of the Kurdish movement (Vanly 1993, p. 151). In March 1961, Barzani informed the Iraqi government of the demand for

greater Kurdish autonomy but this demand was flatly rejected by Qasim (Stansfield 2003, p. 68). The repression reached a new height during 1961 as the Arab nationalist character of Qasim's rule began to manifest itself more explicitly. Qasim's land reforms that introduced an upper limit to the amount of land people could own and a land tax angered Kurdish landowners who resisted its implementation (Malek 1989, p. 82).

On 9 September 1961, Iraqi army attacked the Kurdish regions and in response the Kurds, under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani and the KDP, began to organise a resistance. The Kurdish forces made gradual progress during 1962 and 1963 and its strength increased to 20,000 fighters by the middle of 1963 (Vanly 1993, p. 151). A Kurdish government was set up in 1964 to administer the territories under Kurdish control. Qasim was removed from power on 8 February 1963 by a group of *Baathist* officers and in June 1963 a new military campaign against the Kurdish insurgents started (Vanly 1993, p. 152). Abdul Salim Arif, a general in the Iraqi Army was selected as the president and he ruled the country until his death in April 1966, when his brother Abdul Rahman Arif, who served until 17 July 1968, took power. However, the military campaign made little progress in defeating the Kurdish movement and soon after in February 1964 a ceasefire was agreed that brought an end to the clashes between the Kurdish forces and Iraqi Army. The ceasefire lasted until 1965 when the second round of armed conflict began. After the Baathist coup in 1968, Saddam Hussein was appointed as the vice-president of Iraq and the conflict between the Kurdish forces and the Iraqi Army continued until 1970, when secret negotiations resulted in an autonomy agreement on 11 March 1970 (Vanly 1993, p. 153).

The autonomy agreement recognised the Kurdish language as an official language of Iraq and the right to provide education in it in the majority Kurdish regions. It also was committed to the Kurds' full participation in the country's politics and administration with the senior government posts in the Kurdish majority region being held by the Kurds and lifted the restrictions that blocked the development of Kurdish civil society organisations. It promised to provide state support for the development of Kurdish language and culture, adopt policies to promote the development of Kurdish regions and accepted the future 'unification of Kurdish majority areas as a self-governing unit' (McDowall 2004, p. 328; Vanly 1993, pp. 153–155; Stansfield 2003, pp. 75–77).

The implementation of the agreement was attempted but soon its limitations were revealed. One of the chief weaknesses was the disagreement about the exact areas that would be included in the autonomous Kurdish region and the exact competencies that it would have. One of the key demands raised by the Kurdish side was the inclusion of the Kirkuk governorate within the Kurdish autonomous region, which the Baathist government opposed and it refused to follow the agreed procedure to decide the status of Kirkuk (Vanly 1993, p. 156). Very little progress was made in the first four years in the implementation of the original autonomy agreement and on 11 March 1974, an alternative autonomy proposal with significantly reduced terms and refusing to accept Kurdish claims over the city of Kirkuk was made by the Iraqi government, which was refused by Mulla Mustafa Barzani and led to the resumption of armed conflict in 1974 (McDowall 2004, p. 337; Romano 2010, p. 1346).

The Iraqi Army's superior firepower, including intense air bombardment began to pay dividends and in the summer of 1974, it made headways in the mountainous terrain with the Kurdish forces unable to prevent their progress (Bengio 2012, p. 129). The Kurdish position was further weakened by the signing of the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran, which was reached on 6 March 1975 and resulted in Iran ending its military support for the Kurdish forces in exchange of Iraqi concessions in the territorial dispute in the Gulf between the two states. The support the Kurdish forces received from Iran was of crucial importance for the survival of the insurgency but concerns about the plight of Kurds in Iraq was not what was behind Iran's support. From 1966 onwards, the Shah supported Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish rebellion, with the support of Israel and the United States, in order to weaken and pressurise Iraq (Malek 1989, p. 83).

Initially, the decision to continue the insurgency was taken by the KDP leadership but soon after it decided to end the military campaign and retreat its forces, estimated to be between 35,000 and 40,000, to Iran on 18 March 1975 (Vanly 1993, pp. 172–173; Bengio 2012, pp. 144–146). Barzani's decision to end the Kurdish resistance and relocate to Iran was a major source of division within the movement and generated much resentment against his leadership in the KDP. Subsequently, Mulla Mustafa Barzani moved to the United States to receive medical treatment and remained there until his death on 1 March 1979. Upon Mulla Mustafa Barzani's death, the KDP was led by his

older son Idris Barzani who died in 1987 and subsequently by Massoud Barzani.

A significant section of the KDP's leadership was in favour of continuing the resistance against the Baathist regime and they began to establish new political organisations. The most significant of these groups was the PUK, which was established on 1 June 1975 in Damascus under the leadership of Jalal Talabani and united the groups that broke away from the KDP, such as the leftist Komala (Organisation) led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, and the Kurdistan Socialist Movement (KSM), which was led by Ali Askari and brought together the leftist and dissident members of the KDP. Combining the power of these two organisations enabled the PUK to start its armed campaign within Iraqi Kurdistan in 1976 and established itself as a strong political and military movement in Iraq in the subsequent decades (Stansfield 2003, pp. 83–84; McDowall 2004, pp. 343–352).

From May 1976 onwards, the KDP began to re-establish its presence in Iraqi Kurdistan under KDP-Provisional Leadership and started its recovery (Vanly 1993, p. 187). The late 1970s was a period of factional rivalry within the KDP and the factions were principally divided into two camps: the leftist elements within the KDP congregated around Sami Abdul Rahman, with the traditionalists supporting Idris Barzani (Stansfield 2003, p. 87). Eventually, Idris Barzani managed to gain the control of the KDP with his rivals dissociating themselves from the party. The main challenge to the KDP and the leadership of the Barzanis emanated from the PUK and the initial tense relations that existed between the two parties soon led to the outbreak of violence in the summer of 1976, with the *peshmerga* forces loyal to the KDP ambushing and killing around 50 PUK *peshmerga* fighters. The KDP's deadliest attack against the PUK took place in June 1978 when a group of 800 PUK *peshmerga* fighters led by Ali Askari were ambushed near the Turkey–Iraq border resulting in the death of many of the fighters. Both Ali Askari and his deputy Khalid Said were executed by the KDP *peshmerga* forces (McDowall 2004, pp. 344–345).

The Iran–Iraq War that began in September 1980 offered Kurdish parties more room for manoeuvre and impetus in their attempts to re-establish their presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. With the reduced presence of the Iraqi army in the Kurdish regions, both the PUK and KDP were able to increase their activities and exploit the war between Iran and Iraq to their advantage. The KDP leadership was based in Iran and began to

receive military aid and logistical support from the Iranian state. During the 1980s, the PUK managed to establish a strong support base in the Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk governorates and developed a left-wing political discourse. The KDP continued to receive military support and money from Iran during 1979 and the early 1980s. The PUK was initially allied with Syria then signed a ceasefire agreement with the Iraqi government in October 1983 to facilitate the negotiation for Kurdish autonomy, which lasted for a year (Bengio 2012, pp. 171–173). In October 1986, the PUK began to form an alliance with Iran and develop closer ties with the KDP (Bengio 2012, p. 171).

During the mid-1980s, the Iraqi state intensified its campaign to bring Kurdish controlled areas under its control and intensified its Arabisation policy through the Anfal Campaign, which was a multidimensional approach that aimed at the destruction of the 'destroying the traditional rural economy and infrastructure of Iraqi Kurdistan and killing many tens of thousands of its inhabitants' (HRW 1993, p. 26) and involved forced displacement of rural Kurdish communities, summary executions and forced disappearances. It was coordinated by Saddam Hussein's cousin, Ali Hassan Al-Majid ('Chemical Ali'), who was 'granted power that was equivalent, in Northern Iraq, to that of the President himself, with authority over all agencies of the state' between 1987 and 1989 (HRW 1993, p. 3).

Arabisation policies were previously pursued by the state in Iraq, with ethnic Arabs being settled on Kurdish populated areas that were deemed of strategic importance to the state due to its resources or location. However, the Anfal Campaign went beyond any of the previous Arabisation policies and its implementation was intensified in 1988. In total 4000 villages were destroyed and 182,000 people killed, according to Kurdish sources. According to the estimates of Human Rights Watch, as many as 100,000 people, many of them women and children, lost their life as a result of the Anfal Campaign (HRW 1993, p. xiv). The chemical attack on the town of Halabja on 16 March 1988 alone resulted in the death of 5000 Kurds. As a result of the widespread destruction and chemical attacks targeting civilians, as much as 140,000 Kurds fled Iraq and took refuge in Turkey and Iran in 1988, which brought the plight of the Iraqi Kurds to world's attention.

Iraq's unexpected invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the international condemnation and Gulf War that followed it brought further instability to the region. After the US forces succeeded in expelling Iraqi

army from Kuwait in February 1991, Kurds in the north and Shias in the south were encouraged to rise against Saddam's rule with the aim of overthrowing the regime. This incitement by the United States led to an uprising on 1 March 1991 in Iraq's south but soon it spread to the central and northern Iraq. On 5 March 1991, a popular uprising ('Raparin') in the town of Ranya, located in the northern edge of the Sulaymaniyah governorate, took place and culminated in Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters taking control of the town. In the following day, this popular uprising spread to the main cities of the region, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. However, shortly afterwards, Iraqi military regrouped and began suppressing the uprising, which resulted in a massive exodus of Kurds in March/April 1991. Turkey refused to take in the Kurdish civilians and in order to prevent a humanitarian disaster, and on 5 April 1991, the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 688 and began implementing a no-fly zone in Iraq's north and south. This UN action proved to be a significant development in the history of the Kurds and enabled the Kurds to establish self-government to manage their own affairs.

2.2 The Consolidation of Kurdish Autonomy and the KRI

The establishment of the no-fly zone in April 1991 to protect the Kurds in the north and Shias in the south set in motion the developments that resulted in the establishment of de facto Kurdish autonomy in Iraq in October 1991. Throughout the 1990s, Iraq's position in the international stage deteriorated and the UN sanctions imposed significant restrictions on its ability to generate revenue from its oil resources. In contrast, the Kurds strengthened their position and increased their legitimacy domestically as well as at the international stage. In May 1992, elections were held for an assembly in the three provinces that the Kurdish forces controlled and a government comprising of the region's two main parties, the KDP and the PUK was established in Erbil. The subsequent period of consolidating autonomy was not swift or straightforward and the mid-1990s witnessed the Kurdistan Region's descent into conflict between the KDP's and PUK's military forces, with the KDP driven out of the KRI's capital, Erbil (Stansfield 2003, p. 153). The KDP forces—with the support of the Iraqi army—took back Erbil in August 1996 and subsequently two separate Kurdish administrations

came into being, with the KDP controlling Dohuk and Erbil governorates and the PUK controlling the Sulaymaniyah governorate.

The development of an 'independent economic system' due to the isolation the region experienced from the rest of Iraq was another factor that supported the Kurds' attempts to build autonomy (Voller 2014, p. 77). Subsequently, the financial support the region gained as part of the UN Oil for Food Program strengthened Kurdish autonomy because it 'incentivized the KDP and PUK to cease fighting, immensely improved the KRG's economic situation, and eventually further distinguished the KRG from the rest of Iraq' (Voller 2014, p. 84). The invasion of Iraq by US and British military forces in 2003 heralded a new era of influence for the Kurds and in order to reap the potential rewards a decision to merge the two administrations was reached on 12 June 2003. The Kurds were able to consolidate their position because they were able to act as a united force putting aside the differences between different Kurdish political parties. Although the new arrangements resulted in the reintegration of Kurdistan Region into Iraq, it was done on terms favourable to the Kurds. Kurdish political parties took part in the elections in Iraq in 2005 under a joint list and Kurdish de facto autonomy was recognised in Iraq's new constitution drafted in 2005 and accepted by a referendum in October of the same year (Voller 2014, pp. 101–102). The Kurds managed to secure some of the key political positions in the Iraqi state, including the presidency and foreign ministry.

The new Iraq that came into being was conceived of as a federal state and the areas under the Kurdish administration came to be recognised as the 'region of Kurdistan' (article 117) (Comparative Constitutions Project 2017). The Kurdish language is constitutionally recognised as one of the two official languages of Iraq (article 4) and as citizens of Iraq, Kurds are represented in federal level institutions such as the Council of Representatives. The Iraqi federal government has authority in areas of foreign policy, national security and fiscal policy (article 110). The management of oil and gas resources is carried out jointly by the federal government and the governorates and the regional governments (article 112) and the policy in the areas of regulation of electric energy, customs, environment policy, development planning, public health, education and management of internal water resources is jointly determined by the federal and regional governments (article 114). The article 121 of the Iraqi constitution stipulates that the 'regional powers shall have the right to exercise executive, legislative, and judicial powers in accordance

with this Constitution'. The competencies of the KRG include 'allocating the Regional budget, policing and security, education and health policies, natural resources management and infrastructure development' (KRG 2018). It has complete control over and responsibility for its own internal security and the organisation of its police and security forces, and its own military forces, the *peshmerga*, which are outside the command of the Iraqi military forces.

It is important to emphasise that only three provinces are currently under Kurdish control and the status of the disputed territories where the Kurds either did not constitute an outright majority or in which significant populations of other ethnocultural groups reside, were left out of the areas under the control of the KRG. These disputed territories are located in the Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala governorates and include the city of Kirkuk. The article 140 of the current Iraqi constitution made provisions for a referendum on the final status of the disputed territories to be held by 31 December 2007 but for various reasons it was not held. Much effort has gone into trying to decide the status of these disputed territories, with the control of Kirkuk becoming the focal point in the Iraqi–Kurdish conflict (Anderson and Stansfield 2009; Romano 2010; Wolff 2010). Following ISIS offensive in northern Iraq in August 2014, many of the disputed territories have come under the control of the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces but they had to withdraw from the disputed territories in October 2017 after the Iraqi army and the Shia militias advance.

Overall, addressing the final status of Kirkuk—as well as the other disputed territories—remains the main challenge for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq (Anderson and Stansfield 2009). In fact, Kirkuk has been the 'most intractable problem' in relation to the accommodation of Kurds within a unified Iraq and its status 'has thus become a major bone of contention between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq as a whole, and has become entangled in two other disputes, over a federal hydrocarbons law and over constitutional reform' (Wolff 2010, p. 1361). Saddam Hussein's Arabisation policies resulted in the forced displacement of Kurds during the 1980s and the settlement of ethnic Arabs in the area. This policy was mainly reversed after the fall of Saddam's Baathist regime in 2003 with formerly displaced Kurds returning back to Kirkuk. Currently, the Kurds constitute just over half of the population of Kirkuk (Wolff 2010, p. 1369) but the exact composition is unknown as there is not any recent census data available.

Kirkuk's status is further complicated by regional dynamics and Turkey's insistence that it should not fall under Kurdish control as it would significantly empower the Kurds as a regional actor (Wolff 2010, p. 1364). Determining the status of Kirkuk in favour of the Kurds is seen as a tool for Kurdish empowerment at the expense of the other communities that would lead to their marginalisation (Wolff 2010, p. 1370). Although the Kurdish political parties have attempted to build a more inclusive 'Kurdistani' identity by reaching out to the main minority groups in the KRI, such as the Assyrians and Turkmens, their efforts have not, by and large, been successful (Stansfield and Ahmadzadeh 2008, pp. 141–145). Article 5 of the Draft Constitution of the KRI, which was approved by its parliament on 24 June 2009 affirms a commitment to the recognition of ethnocultural pluralism, with Arabic and Kurdish recognised as its official languages and communities' rights to educate their children in their mother tongue, including in Assyrian, Armenian and Turkmen, guaranteed under article 14 (KRI 2009). However, there are difficulties associated with the practical application of this right as it can be only exercised in areas where they form the majority of the population (Barkey and Gavrilis 2016, p. 37). Hence, the accommodation of Kurdish rights has not propelled Iraq or the KRI to develop a regime of minority rights that effectively addresses the rights and needs of all minorities: 'Despite the superstructure of a quasi-consociational federalism, Iraq's flawed territorial and majoritarian approach to minority rights leaves many minorities unprotected' (Barkey and Gavrilis 2016, p. 37).

Control of oil resources has long been a key objective of Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq and was seen as a tool to increase its leverage internationally (Voller 2013, p. 71). A Turkish oil company, Genel Enerji, has been operating in the KRI since 2002 but the KRG intensified its efforts to develop its own oil sector after 2009, when the KRI's parliament ratified a hydrocarbon law that enabled it to issue contracts to oil companies to explore oil in the KRI (Voller 2013, p. 72). The issue of the exploitation and management of natural resources of the KRI has turned into one of the key issues in the disagreements between the KRG and Iraqi federal government. The KRG's steps to increase its economic autonomy has been interpreted by the government of Iraq as unilateral and unconstitutional and led to the suspension of the KRI's budget payments in 2014.

The contracts the KRG signed with a number of small- and medium-sized oil companies were production sharing agreements (Natali 2012,

p. 111; Voller 2013, p. 72). The most significant development in the KRG's efforts to produce and sell oil independent of Iraqi central government took place in October 2011 when it reached an agreement with ExxonMobil, despite the opposition of the Iraqi central government (Natali 2012, p. 110; Voller 2013, p. 73). A similar agreement was reached with Chevron in 2012 and Total in July 2012 (Jacobs and Rasheed 2012). More recently in 2017, the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft began operating in the KRI in areas of oil exploration and development of infrastructure for exportation of oil (Rosneft 2017). The worsening security situation in the region after 2014 forced the oil exploration to be halted but recently the both ExxonMobil and Chevron resumed their activities in the KRI (Bousso and Zhdannikov 2017). It is estimated that KRI also has 75 trillion cubic feet of gas reserves and in 2017 efforts to increase the extraction of gas has also increased (Zhdannikov 2017).

Having recognised and legitimate political institutions have enabled the Iraqi Kurdish political parties to find a consensus and act in accord and become more effective political actors in the post-Saddam Iraq. Since 2005, the KRI has developed its own party system and regular elections have been held. The KRI has a 111 member parliament, which is elected every four years and 11 seats are reserved for the representatives of the Assyrian (5), Turkmen (5) and Armenian (1) communities (BBC 2013). Elections were held for the Kurdistan Parliament in 2005, 2009 and 2013 and the next election is expected to be held in September 2018. In addition, the Kurdish parties have been contesting the Iraqi parliamentary elections.

The dominant political parties in the KRI, the KDP and PUK, forged a united front in 2003 and has continued their cooperation afterwards. In fact, the region has been ruled by a KDP–PUK joint administration since 2005 and both parties contested the December 2005 election under a joint list, winning 53 seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives (Election Guide 2005). Since 2009, the KDP and PUK's dominance has been challenged by the Gorran (Change) movement, which was established by Nawshirwan Mustafa after he left the PUK and the party's principal demands have revolved around political reform in the KRI. Gorran's emergence has resulted in the decline of the PUK. In addition, there are smaller left-wing and three Islamist political parties active in the KRI (Natali 2010, pp. 96–102). The Kurdistan Islamic Union was formed in 1994 and shares a close ideological affinity with the Muslim

Brotherhood and is popularly known as *Yekgirtu*. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan was established in 1979 and currently remains active but in 2001 its then leader Ali Bapir left the party to establish the Islamic Group in Kurdistan.

In 2009, the KDP and PUK contested the elections together again under a joint list and managed to win 57% of the popular vote and 59 seats in the Kurdish parliament. The Gorran Movement won 25 seats and the alliance of Islamist parties won 13 seats (KRG 2009). In the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary election, the Kurdistan List won 43 seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives while the Gorran movement won 8 and the Kurdish Islamist parties won 6 (Ramzi 2010). In the KRI's parliamentary elections held in 2013, the KDP won 38 seats, the Gorran Movement won 24, the PUK won 18, the Kurdistan Islamic Union 10 and Islamic Group in Kurdistan 6, with the remaining four seats going to the smaller parties (NDI 2013). Since 2005, Massoud Barzani has been the president of the KRI. He was last elected in 2009 for a four-year term but his term was extended in 2013 for two years because of the political instability Iraq and the KRI faced as a result of ISIS insurgency. In 2015, his term was extended again for two years but this move was opposed by some of the political parties and the political disagreements resulted in the closure of the parliament between October 2015 and May 2017.

2.3 The KRI's Challenges

Despite the Kurdish attempts to paint a picture of the KRI as the 'other Iraq' and a region with a functional democracy and economy, Kurdish autonomy has neither resulted in the consolidation of democracy nor fostered good governance. Despite the regular elections, the KRI developed an elite-driven political culture and the main political positions have been occupied by the members of either the Barzani or the Talabani families. The KRI's military forces too continue to be divided along partisan lines, loyal to either the KDP or the PUK. The KRI received its share of the budget from the Iraqi authorities but this has not been translated into improving the living conditions of the ordinary people. The suspension of the KRI's budget since 2014 resulted in economic and social instability in the region, challenged its domestic legitimacy and its image as the stable and secures Iraq. The KRI's inability to pay the salaries of its public sector workers since 2014 has been a source

of regular protests and increasingly the corruption caused by patronage networks and nepotism and the mismanagement of the public resources have become the targets of sustained criticism in recent months (HRW 2018).

Also, the KRG's attempts to increase its economic autonomy have not resulted in stronger economic growth but rather greater dependency on Turkey. Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds date back to the 1990s and we have seen deepening of this relationship in the past decade because of the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the Shia government in Baghdad. The improvement in the relations culminated in Turkey building a gas and oil pipeline from the KRI despite the objection of Iraqi government (Bengio 2014, p. 270). In the past decade, the KRI has become an important market for Turkish exports. The budget dispute with the Iraqi central government has prompted the KRG to more actively cultivate economic relations with Turkey. In an interview with the Time magazine published on 21 December 2012, the Prime Minister of the KRI, Nechirvan Barzani highlighted Turkey's historical opposition towards Kurdish independence before drawing attention to the importance of Turkey's changing perception of the KRI. He stated:

> Things have changed in Turkey. It's very simple. Turkey needs something that it doesn't have. We need certain things that we don't have. This has been the proper understanding on both sides. And it doesn't have anything to do with politics. It's an economic matter. They would like, and we would like likewise, to achieve progress. Because Turkey is a very important country for us. Of course if we are able through economic cooperation to further develop this relationship, we will certainly do it. (Newton-Small 2012)

This statement came at the back of official visits by the then foreign and prime ministers of Turkey Ahmet Davutoğlu and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2009 and 2011 respectively. At the pre-crisis years, the number of Turkish companies doing business in the KRI was 1500 and accounting to more than half of all foreign companies registered (Bache Fidan 2016, p. 121). The KRI's dependency on Turkish imports of consumer goods and foodstuff means that Turkey plays a critical role in the KRI's economic survival and development. Turkey has allowed the transportation of Kurdish oil via its territory and allowed to build a new pipeline despite

central government's opposition but the flow of oil has not been continues as the KRI has hoped would be the case. On occasions, the pipeline was cut off for extended periods (Johnson 2016). The KRI is beginning to be seen as a partner in Turkey and the improvements in KRI–Turkey relations have had a positive impact on Turkey's management of its Kurdish conflict with the KRI's president Massoud Barzani acting as a mediator between the PKK and Ankara (Bengio 2014, pp. 273–276).

Turkey's relations with the KRI are conditional on the continuation of the status quo and Turkey is not very likely to support the creation of an independent Kurdish state. In 2015, Davutoglu stated that 'A Kurdish independent state will endanger the region and turn it into chaos' (Rudaw 2015). Consequently, the KRI's dependence on Turkey has been raising serious questions about the viability and long-term sustainability of the KRI's economic model. The dependency on Turkey proved to the KRI's detriment when Turkey took measures against the KRG after it refused to back down from the referendum, which shows—contrary to the KRG official's expectations—that the Turkish authorities are unlikely to support the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. Despite the developing Turkey–KRI relations, Turkey sees independence of the KRI as a source of instability in the region and this opposition was clearly articulated by Erdoğan in his usual derisive style when he stated: 'We won't allow our region and our country's security to be placed in danger just because some people want to realize their childhood dream' (YNetNews 2017).

The KRI's inability to consolidate its military forces under one central command structure has proved a major weakness which became apparent at the beginning of 2014, when ISIS attacked the Nineveh and Kirkuk governorates and increasingly targeted the Kurdish controlled or populated territories. On 1 August 2014, it began to take the control of territory formerly controlled by the Kurdish forces, including the towns of Zumar and Sinjar. ISIS came as far as the towns of Gwer and Makhmour in the Nineveh governorates and reached 40 kilometres of its capital city Erbil, causing widespread panic among its population. ISIS advances in Sinjar and surrounding areas in early August 2014 resulted in a humanitarian crisis.

The Yazidi minority in the northern part of the Nineveh governorate suffered the most from the hands of ISIS with 5000 Yazidi men executed, as many as 7000 Yazidi women taken as slaves, almost 200,000

Yazidis were displaced with many moving to KRI and thousands stranded on the Sinjar Mountain in an attempt to escape the assault. The increased threat levels and the worsening security situation have revealed the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Kurdish *peshmerga* forces. The consequences could have been far worse for the KRI as well as the entire region had the United States not carried out prompt air strikes against advancing ISIS forces (Spencer 2014). Since then, the military aid the *peshmerga* received from numerous countries enabled them to stabilise their position and regain the control of the lost territory in Nineveh. The human cost of the conflict with ISIS for the *peshmerga* forces has been quite high and rising steadily as the conflict dragged on. In June 2017, according to the official figures, the number of *peshmerga* fighters who lost their live reached 1760 with over 9000 injured in combat (Mostafa 2017). Many of the casualties have lost their lives in combat and as a result of car bombs.

Following the initial shock of the failure in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, some progress in the negotiations with the Iraqi federal government has been made, increasing the possibility of finding a long-term compromise. The dialogue between the KRG and the Iraqi government in the aftermath of the referendum has resulted in the resolution of some of the issues that has been affecting the relations, such as the suspension of the international flights to the KRI. These negotiations are continuing but the Iraqi federal government is likely to use the weakness of the KRG to extract further concessions. One proposal that has been made is to cut the KRI's budget allocation from 17 to 12.6%, which will significantly weaken the KRG's hold over the people and sustain the system of patronage that has been created (Stocker 2017). With the exception of the KDP, Kurdish political parties lost seats at the Iraqi parliamentary elections held in May 2018. The record low voter turnout meant that the KDP won the same amount of seats with fewer votes compared to the 2014 election. The New Generation Movement won 4 and Bahram Salih's Coalition for Democracy and Justice won 2 seats. The results of some districts in Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah governorates have been challenged by the minor parties. The allegations of fraud across the country forced Iraqi Parliament to order a manual recount of the votes on 6 June 2018 (BBC 2018). However, due to a fire at the warehouse where the ballots were being kept, the recount was not carried out at the time of writing (Brochetto and Sirgany 2018).

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CHAPTER 3

Turkey's Kurdish Conflict: The Sudden Reversal of Gradual Progress

Abstract This chapter focuses on the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and discusses the key events and developments that have shaped its trajectory. Firstly, it provides the historical overview of the conflict and sets out the emergence and evolution of contemporary Kurdish national movement in Turkey since 1960s. Secondly, it provides an account of the positive developments that has transformed the conflict and resulted in an improvement in Kurdish rights in Turkey. While the 2000s and the first half of the 2010s have witnessed significantly less violence in the conflict, the failure to bring about a resolution has ended the progress made in the transformation of the conflict since the summer of 2015. Consequently, in the final section, the chapter provides an account of the reasons behind the recent acceleration of violence and assesses the future prospects for the Kurds in Turkey.

Keywords PKK · HDP · Abdullah Öcalan · National liberation · Democratic autonomy · Democratic confederalism

Almost half of the Kurds live in Turkey and the Kurdish population is estimated to constitute 20% of Turkey's 80 million inhabitants (Gurses 2014, p. 253). Since the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, Kurdish nationalism and political activism have been a significant aspect of Turkish politics. In the past 50 years, Kurds' challenge has taken a more formidable and organised form. In the late 1960s, large numbers of

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Kurdish political activists began to participate in the activities of Turkey's left-wing movement but soon during the 1970s, they began to gradually separate themselves from it to establish organisations that more directly advocated Kurdish rights. In the early 1970s, they appropriated a socialist discourse and began to problematise the Kurds' national oppression and economic exploitation. This gradually culminated in the conception of Kurdistan as a 'colony' and Kurds as a colonised people, and this framing of the Kurdish question gained widespread acceptance among Kurdish activists from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Kurdish question manifested itself in the form of an armed conflict between the Turkish Army and the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan [PKK]). The PKK was formally established on 27 November 1978 as a clandestine organisation and its initial aim was to unify Kurds under an independent and socialist republic. It managed to mobilise large numbers of Kurds during the 1980s and 1990s in its armed and political struggle against the Turkish state. The pro-Kurdish democratic movement in Turkey that is now being represented at the parliament in Ankara by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is the other main political actor representing the Kurds in Turkey. It emerged on 7 June 1990 when the People's Labour Party (HEP) was established and since then the pro-Kurdish movement has been represented by a number of other political parties. The pro-Kurdish political parties have been subjected to state repression and accused of promoting Kurdish separatism. As a result, the following pro-Kurdish political parties were closed down by Turkey's constitutional court: the HEP in 1993, the Democracy Party (DEP) in 1994, the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) in 2003, and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009.

During 2000s, the conflict underwent significant transformations following the PKK's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire in 1999, prompted by Turkey's capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999. The democratisation reforms carried out to meet the EU accession conditions during the 2000s created the potential for a peaceful end to the conflict. Dialogue between the PKK and the state and government representatives further strengthened this potential but the reform process has been very slow and the persistence of the political disagreements on the level of recognition for the Kurdish identity in Turkey ended the dialogue process in April 2015. Consequently, violence in the conflict began to accelerate from the summer of 2015 onwards as Turkey's descent into

authoritarianism gathered pace. Currently, many of the positive developments of the past decade have been reversed and the optimism and hope that people had for a peaceful end to the conflict have all disappeared.

3.1 Historical Overview of Turkey's Kurdish Conflict

After the Turkish nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk consolidated their rule in Turkey, wide-ranging policies that resulted in the suppression of Kurdish culture and language were adopted. The definition of identity in exclusive terms denied the possibility of existence of the other cultural and national identifications, and justified the repressive practices to homogenise Turkey. The wide-ranging policies to create the desired homogenous Turkish nation included the Turkification of Kurdish geography by changing the popularly known Kurdish names of towns, villages, mountains to Turkish ones and building symbols of Turkish nationalism in Kurdish areas; the enforcement of the Turkish language by forbidding the Kurds from learning and speaking Kurdish; and, banning the use of terms such as 'Kurdistan' and 'Kurd' (Bayır 2013, p. 105). The Kurds resisted Turkish nationalism during the 1920s and 1930s and a series of revolts but their resistance was defeated and in contrast with the early decades of the republic, very little organised Kurdish dissent took place during the 1940s and 1950s, which are described as the period of 'quiet years' or a period of 'silence' (Bozarslan 2008, p. 343; Kendal 1993, p. 62).

The liberalisation of Turkey's political system during the late 1940s and 1950s, the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq (especially the return of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in 1958 to Iraqi Kurdistan and the subsequent reinvigoration of the Kurdish struggle there), and the emergence of a new generation of politically active Kurdish activists influenced the politicisation of the Kurds in Turkey during the 1960s. A new generation of Kurdish activist intellectuals emerged during the 1950s to take a leading role in the advocacy of Kurdish rights in Turkey. They were mainly involved in publishing cultural and political magazines and began to take a more active role in political parties too during the 1960s. These included Sait Kırmızıtoprak and Sait Elçi, who were involved in the establishment of the Kurdistan Democrat Party of Turkey (TKDP) in 1965, Edip Karahan and Musa Anter who published the Kurdish political magazines, *Dicle-Fırat* (1962–1963) and *Deng* (1963), and Mehmet Emin Bozarslan who transliterated and published the Kurdish national

epic *Mem-û-Zîn* in 1968 (Gunes 2012, pp. 50–53; Yüksel 2009, p. 360). Many other Kurdish activists were active within the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) during the late 1960s and played a leading role in the formation of the Kurdish movement during the early 1970s.

Kurdish activists challenged the economic underdevelopment that the Kurdish regions suffered disproportionately and argued that it was due to the lack of state investment, especially in the areas of education and health infrastructure. Furthermore, they argued that the state deliberately neglected the region in order to facilitate and accelerate the cultural assimilation of the Kurds:

> The East has been neglected for centuries and as a result it became a zone of deprivation. This negligence continued during the republican era. Regardless of their party belonging, every politician, in order to assimilate the people and intellectuals of the East, *systematically and purposefully*, represented the East, to the world and Turkey, as an area full of fanaticism, ignorance and as the enemy of civilisation. (Edip Karahan quoted in Gunes 2012, p. 54)

The second half of the 1960s is characterised by the evolution of Kurdish activism towards a more organised form. The reinvigoration of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq had a direct bearing on this development. This is evidenced by the establishment of the TKDP, which advocated a similar program as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, and brought various sectors of Kurdish society together, including urban notables, craftsmen and students. Its establishment marked 'a new stage in the autonomisation of the Kurdish movement in terms of the worker and student movements' (Bozarslan 1992, pp. 98–99). However, soon after its establishment the party was marred by internal divisions, and in January 1968 many leading members were arrested by the state for their political activities.

The TKDP advocated the establishment of a separate autonomous Kurdish administrative region within Turkey incorporating the areas that Kurds form a majority. More specifically, within such a framework, it sought constitutional recognition for Kurdish national identity and the right to be represented in the national assembly and the 'council of Ministers' (Gunes 2012, p. 58). The necessity of recognising the national diversity of Turkey was stressed because the Kurds had 'at least the same rights as the Turks over this homeland and are a principal

element of Turkey' (Epözdemir 2005, p. 26). Another source of Kurdish activism in the 1960s was the TİP and the socialist movement in general. The TİP offered Kurds a platform where economic, political and social demands could be discussed. Through involvement in the TİP and Turkey's left-wing movement, Kurdish activists contributed to the debate on the Kurdish question and began to develop and disseminate an alternative interpretation of social reality challenging the official ideology of the Turkish state. From the early 1970s onwards, they reconceptualised the Kurdish question as a national problem and an issue of colonialism.

The nascent Kurdish movement started to attract mass support during the late 1960s. In 1967 and 1968, during the 'meetings of the East' (*Doğu Mitingleri*), Kurdish political demands were publicly expressed and these meetings culminated in the emergence of the Revolutionary Cultural Centres of the East (DDKO) in 1969. The DDKO formulated its program on popular issues, such as underdevelopment and the lack of state investment in the majority of the Kurdish regions (Gunes 2012, pp. 66–71). The military coup in 1971 intensified political oppression in Turkey and closed down the DDKO centres and prosecuted its leaders and members. During the mid-1970s numerous Kurdish left-wing groups or parties emerged, including the Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan (TKSP) in 1974, the PKK in 1978 (initially formed as a small political cell in 1973), Rizgarî (Liberation) in 1976, the Kurdistan National Liberationists (KUK) in 1978, Kawa in 1978, Ala Rizgarî (The Flag of Liberation) in 1979) and Tekoşin (Struggle) in 1979.

In varying degrees, all these political parties and groups advocated national liberation of the Kurds and in their discourse Kurdistan was seen as an international and interstate colony. In their analysis, the Kurds' national fragmentation and oppression was caused by Kurdistan's division and disunity, and could only end through armed struggle. The Kurdish national liberation discourse described Kurdistan as a key region in the Middle East, which had a wealth of natural resources, notably rich oil reserves. The role Britain and France played in the division of Kurdistan was emphasised and attention was drawn to the repression by the countries that ruled Kurdistan with the support of the imperialist forces of any attempts by the Kurds to achieve national unification. This was articulated by the PKK in the following way:

> In political terms, Kurdistan is under the rule of four colonialist states that are tied to imperialism. Each state, in the light of its interests and the interests of the international monopolies, plays the central role in developing colonialism in the part it keeps under its rule. (Öcalan 1992, p. 100)

In July 1979, PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan moved to Syria and then to Lebanon's Beqaa Valley where efforts to transform the PKK into a guerrilla movement were intensified. On 15 August 1984, the PKK started its guerrilla war with concurrent attacks on military posts in the towns of Eruh and Şemdinli, near the Turkey–Iraq border. During the late 1980s, the numbers of PKK guerrillas increased significantly, which allowed it to increase its presence in the region. The mountainous terrain alongside the Turkey–Iraq border provided many hiding places for the guerrillas to seek shelter and was particularly suitable for the successful execution of the guerrilla war.

The main form of military activity by the PKK consisted of raids on gendarme stations and other forms of military installations near the borders of Iraq and Iran, raids on gendarme and army stations in rural areas, ambushes, road checks, raids on villages where the village guards were located and sabotage against economic facilities or state institutions in the Kurdish regions. Although mainly hit and run tactics were deployed in the Turkish army's numerous large-scale operations against the guerrillas and other forms of 'hot pursuits' during the early 1990s, these resulted in large-scale skirmishes that lasted a few days or even weeks. Therefore, the early 1990s were exceptional years in terms of the level of violence with attacks becoming much more frequent and widespread.

In addition to its military activities, the PKK established a complex, well-organised political network through the Kurdistan People's Liberation Front (ERNK), established in 1986 and active in the Kurdish region as well as in Western Europe. In fact, the Kurdish Diaspora communities have been very active during the past 30 years. As early as the 1980s, Kurdish national representative organisations in Europe were established that provided representation to the Kurds in the international arena. The financial and human resources that various Kurdish movements were able to harness through their activities in Europe continue to play a significant role in increasing their capacity to carry out political and military activities in Turkey.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the PKK's insurgency intensified, it managed to gather popular support from the Kurds and

increased its influence. That popular support was demonstrated in the spring of 1991 and 1992 when large numbers of Kurds took part in popular uprisings, known as *Serhildan*, across Kurdish towns (Gunes 2013a, 2017a). Shop closures and boycotts were organised by many Kurds in most towns in the South East, especially in Diyarbakır, Batman, Şırnak, and Siirt. The PKK-led Kurdish rebellion was the most radical and has lasted the longest in the history of the Kurds in Turkey and the conflict cost the lives of more than 45,000 people (mainly soldiers, guerrillas, village guards and Kurdish civilians), and resulted in the forced evacuation of 3500 villages and hamlets (Bozarslan 2014, p. xv). However, with the evacuation of rural Kurdish settlements, the Turkish state was able to cut-off the support Kurdish peasants were giving to the PKK, weakening the PKK weakened militarily.

In 1987 the Turkish state declared a State of Emergency bringing the majority of the Kurdish regions under military rule coordinated through the Governorship of the Region Under Emergency Rule (OHAL), which covered the 13 Kurdish majority provinces in the East and Southeast of Turkey. From the early 1990s onwards, due to the stalemate the PKK began to experience in its guerrilla war, it began to intimate that the accommodation of Kurdish rights within Turkey were acceptable and call for dialogue to settle the conflict peacefully. In 1993, in an attempt to initiate a process that would eventually lead to a negotiated political solution to the conflict, the PKK declared its first unilateral ceasefire. During the mid-1990s, it moderated its aims, lowered its Marxist–Leninis t rhetoric and in the subsequent decades ceased fire for long periods of time, which brought about a transformation in the conflict.

3.2 Transformation in the Conflict and Turkey's Democratic Openings

The PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured by Turkey on 15 February 1999 and his capture triggered a significant transformation in the conflict in the subsequent years and resulted in the PKK adopting a new political programme that centred on the accommodation of Kurdish rights and demands within the existing states. The PKK was led by Abdullah Öcalan since its formation in 1978 and he was based in Syria from 1979 until 9 October 1998 when he was forced out as a result of Turkish and US military pressure on Syria. His attempts to find shelter in Greece, Russia and Italy were unsuccessful and he was captured

in Nairobi, Kenya by Turkish intelligence agents, with support from the CIA and Israel's Mossad, on 15 February 1999 (Weiner 1999). He was found guilty of 'founding and leading a terror organisation' and sentenced to death but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He has been held at the high-security prison on the island of İmralı in the Marmara Sea ever since (Gunes 2017b, p. 13). He was kept in solitary confinement until 2009 and his communication with the external world was severely restricted. However, despite his imprisonment, Öcalan has been an influential figure in the PKK and his interventions has played a central role in the PKK's ideological transformation during the 2000s.

Öcalan used his court trial in 1999 to develop a new framework for a way out of the conflict and the accommodation of Kurdish rights within Turkey through the re-organisation of the relations between Kurds and the state in Turkey on the basis of equality and freedom (Öcalan 1999). He rejected the separatist approach his movement had previously taken and on 1 September 1999, he ordered the PKK to pull its guerrillas out of Turkey and cease military activity. The PKK observed its unilateral ceasefire from 1999 until 2004 and this resulted in a significant reduction in violence leading to a sense of normalisation returning to the region. Öcalan's democratic solution to the Kurdish question was further developed in the texts that he submitted in his defence to the European Court of Human Rights that examined his case. In these texts, Öcalan conceptualises the solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey on the basis of development and deepening of democracy and creation of decentralised and democratized political entities (Gunes 2012, p. 136; 2013b).

The ideas developed by Öcalan served as the basis of the PKK's subsequent ideological transformation during the early 2000s. Currently, the accommodation of Kurdish rights and demands within the existing states in the Middle East through democratisation, decentralisation, autonomy and self-government is the official policy of the PKK (Akkaya and Jongerden 2014). Alongside the PKK's ideological transformation, steps were taken for reorganising the movement, with the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK) being established in April 2002 as a representative body, which remained active until November 2003, when it was replaced by the People's Congress of Kurdistan (KongraGel). In 2005, the PKK accepted a new party program where it perceived of a solution to the Kurdish question through the 'democratic transformation' of the current state system in the Middle East and the

establishment of self-governing Kurdish communities in the region that are brought together within larger federal and confederal entities (PKK 2005, p. 13). This proposed confederal Kurdish entity would neither challenge the internationally recognised borders nor resort to nationalism or establishing a nation-state. Instead its central focus would be on developing an administrative framework for Kurdish self-government.

The mid-2000s also witnessed the establishment of a new organisation, the Union of Kurdistan Communities (Koma Civakên Kurdistan [KCK]) with the specific objective of putting the 'democratic confederalism' proposal into practice. The KCK is designed as an alternative 'hybrid' institutional framework to bring the decentralised autonomous Kurdish self-governing communities together, provide political representation to the Kurds and allow them to organise as a nation within the existing state boundaries in the Middle East. In contrast with the PKK's initial vision of uniting Greater Kurdistan under a state, this new approach seeks to weaken the states' control over Kurdish territory and population and create room for the Kurds' autonomous development without challenging the existing state boundaries. Hence, the PKK continues to compete over territory but this competition is based on a strategy of sharing sovereignty with other nations in existing states rather than constructing Kurdistan as a distinct geographical entity.

From May 2004 onwards, citing the lack of any dialogue and initiative to find a peaceful solution to the conflict and the continuation of the PKK leader's solitary confinement, the PKK declared its ceasefire was over. Subsequently, from June 2004 to October 2006, the conflict accelerated and the PKK guerrillas carried out various attacks against Turkish military targets inside Turkey. Following Öcalan's call for a ceasefire via his solicitors in September 2006, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire on 1 October 2006. Even though the ceasefire significantly reduced the surge in violence, in October 2007 a new wave of violence started. On 17 October 2007, the Turkish parliament passed a resolution giving the army authority to conduct a military incursion into Iraq to attack the PKK bases. The PKK responded by carrying out a large-scale attack in Hakkari on 21 October during which 12 soldiers were killed, many more injured and eight more were taken hostage (Gunes 2012, p. 148).

Following the success the pro-Kurdish DTP experienced in the local elections held on 29 March 2009, Öcalan called for another ceasefire and from April 2009 until December 2009 the PKK ceased all armed activity (Gunes 2012, p. 149). After the 22 July 2007 general election, the

pro-Kurdish parliamentary opposition returned with the election of 21 DTP MPs who stood as independent candidates in order to avoid the 10% national election threshold. In the municipal elections held on 29 March 2009, the then pro-Kurdish DTP consolidated its position as a leading political force in the Kurdish majority regions. In total, the DTP won 8 provincial councils and 50 district councils, including the council of Diyarbakir and Van. Being represented in the national assembly and having the experience of running many of the local authorities in the majority Kurdish regions had enabled the pro-Kurdish movement to establish a strong regional and national presence.

Between 2008 and 2011 Turkish state representatives held direct meetings with the PKK representatives, mediated by Norway. In August 2009, the government announced that it was preparing a 'Democratic Initiative' to accelerate the process of political reform and offer greater recognition to Kurdish cultural rights. However, talks did not result in a productive conclusion, and thus broke down following the general election in June 2011. As an act of goodwill and in order to increase the trust between the parties, the PKK sent a 'peace group' of 34 people in October 2010 that included eight PKK guerrillas. The commencement in October 2010 of the trial of the Kurdish political activists accused of being members of KCK was interpreted by the PKK as a sign of the government's insincerity in solving the conflict through political means. Overall, the government's 'democratic initiative' has been interpreted by the PKK as an attempt to marginalise the Kurdish national movement and depoliticise Kurdish identity (Gunes 2014, p. 271).

In line with the state's long-established security discourse, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government set out to devise a more comprehensive and sophisticated policy to destroy the PKK's presence in the region, which led to a period of escalation in the conflict and an increase in the PKK's attacks, especially in the summer of 2012. Additionally, a hunger strike was started by PKK members in Turkish prisons on 12 September 2012, which attracted widespread international attention. The hunger strike came to a halt after Öcalan appealed for its end on 17 November 2012, which led to a significant reduction in the growing tension in Turkey. This development was followed by a new attempt to revive the dialogue to resolve the conflict. To that end, on 3 January 2013, two MPs from the BDP, Ayla Akat Ata and Ahmet Türk visited Öcalan. The ongoing dialogue resulted in the PKK declaring a ceasefire on 23 March 2013 and this was followed on 25 April 2013 with

an announcement that it was pulling its guerrilla forces from Turkey to its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. This announcement created a new sense of optimism and was widely seen as a new chance for a peace process to end the conflict.

Even though very little progress was made in solving the conflict during the 2000s, the significant decline in violence and the search for peace created the conditions for the pro-Kurdish movement to become a more effective political actor in Turkey. The legal reforms the government carried out to meet the EU accession conditions have increased the democratic space for the pro-Kurdish political movement that it used to broaden its activities and become a more effective political actor. Reforms carried out in the subsequent years, such as in the area of Kurdish language broadcasting and tuition enhanced the legitimacy of Kurdish demands in Turkey. The past two decades witnessed a significant reduction in the violent incidents between the PKK and the state security forces in Turkey and although the violence returned after 2004, its intensity was far less than the violence of the 1990s. This transformation in the conflict created space for the pro-Kurdish political parties to promote reconciliation and a democratic solution to the Kurdish question. Their efforts received a significant impetus with the return of Kurdish representation to parliament in 2007.

The BDP contested the 12 June 2011 elections as part of the pro-democracy 'Labour, Peace and Democracy Bloc' and it too supported independent candidates and in total 35 of the independent candidates that it supported were elected. At the local elections held on 30 March 2014, the BDP established itself as the main representative of the Kurdish voters by winning ten provincial councils, including the metropolitan municipalities of Diyarbakır and Van. Being represented in the national assembly and having the experience of running many of the local authorities in the majority Kurdish regions had enabled the pro-Kurdish movement to establish a strong regional and national presence. This allowed for the establishment and sustenance of links with various other social and political groups and foster better understanding and more cooperative relations between the different pro-democracy political groups in Turkey.

Although the AKP toyed with the idea of peace with the Kurds and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan often indicated that he was willing to carry reforms to broaden Kurdish rights in Turkey, in practice, very little effort was put into developing policies to address

the rights of the Kurds or end the insurgency. A framework on future negotiations was agreed upon and made public in February 2015, which came to be known as the Dolmabahçe Agreement. However, the signs of tense times ahead appeared soon after when President Erdoğan stated that he did not approve of a negotiated end to the conflict with the PKK. Subsequently, President Erdoğan declared that the so-called 'Dolmabahçe Agreement' did not exist (Bianet 2016).

Despite the main Kurdish political actors framing the accommodation of Kurdish rights within the unity of Turkey, the state's approach to the Kurdish question did not show any substantial changes, with Kurdish national demands such as education in the Kurdish language, continued to be rejected on grounds that they promote separatism. AKP's foreign policy choices in the Syrian conflict also increased the tension between the Kurds and the government (Gunes and Lowe 2015). The government's refusal to aid the Kurdish fighters in Kobani was met with widespread protest by Kurds across Turkey on 6–8 October 2014 that resulted in the death of 46 people. This event symbolised the government's unwillingness to accommodate the Kurds and further eroded the trust between the parties (Gunes 2017b, p. 24). In the subsequent weeks, several statements by high ranking AKP politicians made the disarmament of the PKK a precondition for the peace process. The PKK indicated its willingness to disarm as part of a negotiated end to the conflict but before the negotiation phase begins.

Strong performance of the HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas at the presidential election held in August 2014, where he obtained 9.8% of the vote persuaded the HDP to take part in the general elections scheduled for June 2015 as a party rather than through independent candidates (Gunes 2017b, p. 20; 2018). The AKP based its election strategy on preventing the HDP from entering the parliament, and portrayed it as a threat to Turkey's democracy and a supporter of violence and terrorism, which further damaged the trust between the parties. The HDP's decision paid dividends as it got the backing of 6 million voters to secure 80 seats in the parliament. Turkey's descent into authoritarianism that accelerated after the AKP lost its parliamentary majority in the June 2015 election. This period witnessed a process of re-securitisation of Turkey's Kurdish question and the government's reliance on the use of the force on a massive scale to dismantle the pro-Kurdish opposition and repress any form of Kurdish dissent.

3.3 A New Violent Phase in the Conflict

A bomb attack by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Suruç, Şanlıurfa Province, on 20 July 2015 killed 33 and injured more than 100 young socialist activists on route to Kobani, Syria and triggered a set of events that resulted in the end of the ceasefire (BBC 2015a). On 22 July 2015, two police officers were killed during the night at their home and initially the PKK indicated that the murders were carried out by its youth activists but it later retracted the statement and said that it had no connection to the murders. As a response and soon after the murders, the state security forces started a major operation targeting the PKK bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as well as arresting many people across Turkey on grounds that they were linked to the PKK. However, the trial of 9 suspects for the murder of the police officers did not find any evidence to convict them (Cumhuriyet 2018).

On 12 August 2015, the KCK Executive Council published a declaration calling Kurdish communities in the towns of Silopi, Cizre, Nusaybin and Şırnak that was experiencing tension with state authorities to create self-governments to administer their own affairs and break their dependence on state institutions (T24 2015). In the following days, unilateral declarations of autonomy were made by bodies established to represent the people in the above-mentioned towns and others and these declarations were followed by organisation of self-defence forces in the local area to defend Kurdish communities against possible state intervention (Uğantaş 2015).

On 6 September 2015, the PKK attacked an army post in Dağlıca, Hakkari Province and killed 16 soldiers and wounded 6 (BBC 2015b). Following this incident, during 6–8 September 2015, Turkish nationalist groups organised protests that lead to attacks against the HDP offices across the country, including its headquarters in Ankara, which resulted in large-scale destruction (HDP 2015). A twin suicide bomb attack by ISIS on 10 October 2015 targeted a peace rally and killed 102 (Letsch and Khomami 2015). The AKP's harsh approach to Kurdish movement has also enabled it to extend and consolidate its Turkish nationalist base in the November 2015 elections and further marginalise the HDP. The state repression coupled with ISIS attacks made running a campaign for the November election very difficult for the HDP and as a result, there was a reduction in the HDP's vote in the November election, where it obtained 10.75% of the popular vote and 59 seats in the parliament.

The policies and actions the AKP government has applied to the repression of the pro-Kurdish movement has been the bedrock of its close alliance with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) since summer 2015. In the first half of 2016, Turkish army and security forces have targeted the PKK's urban strongholds in the Southeast of Turkey, which has led to huge destruction in Diyarbakır's old city, Şırnak, Cizre and Nusaybin and resulted in many civilian casualties, widespread human rights violations and forced displacement of an estimated half a million Kurds (Yeginsu 2015). In addition, a number of other ISIS attacks targeting the Kurds and the pro-Kurdish networks in Turkey have occurred. The suicide bomb attack on 20 August 2016 in Gaziantep targeted a Kurdish wedding party and killed 50 people, with the majority of the victims being children.

A number of suicide bomb attacks targeting the police, soldiers and civilians carried out by the shadowy group TAK (The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) in 2016 in a number of locations in Turkey have further increased the tensions. On 10 December 2016, the TAK carried out an attack in Beşiktaş, Istanbul killing 36 police officers and 8 civilians (Al Jazeera 2016). A week later in Kayseri, it targeted a bus carrying soldiers, killing 14 and wounding more than 50. The relation between the PKK and the TAK has been a subject of discussion with the Turkish state describing the two linked but the PKK denies it has any connections with the TAK (Gunes 2017b, p. 27).

The government also took steps to destroy the institutional base the HDP has managed to construct at the local and national levels. On 20 May 2016, the Turkish parliament passed legislation to lift the immunity of MPs, which is a measure designed to end or at least significantly weaken the HDP representation in Turkey's parliament. Legal proceedings began against a number of HDP MPs and on 4 November 2016, 11 HDP MPs were detained and currently 9 are remanded in custody, including the co-presidents of the party Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. Several other HDP MPs were detained on numerous occasions but released after questioning (Bianet 2017). The MPs and co-presidents are charged with offences ranging from 'carrying out propaganda for a terror organisation' and 'being a member of an armed terror organisation' and the prosecutors are demanding long sentences for all of them. On 6 October 2017, Burcu Çelik, the HDP MP for Muş province received a 6 year sentence for 'aiding and abetting a terror organisation' and the HDP MP for Diyarbakir province, İdris Baluken,

received a sentence of 16 years 8 months on 4 January 2018 for 'membership of a terror organisation' and 'carrying propaganda for a terror organisation' (Kamer 2018).

The government targeted the local level representation of the pro-Kurdish parties and on 15 August 2016 passed a decree that enabled the government to remove the elected mayors from office and replace them with appointed trustees. This measure targeted the pro-Kurdish political representation in particular and on 11 September 2016, the mayors were removed from their office and replaced by the provincial governor or their deputy and the district governor. At the local elections held on 30 March 2014, the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP) won the following 11 municipal councils: Ağrı, Batman, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Iğdır, Mardin, Şırnak, Siirt, Tunceli and Van and currently all but the Iğdır municipality remain in their control and almost all of co-mayors are remanded in custody awaiting trial. In addition, 72 districts councils and 12 town councils that the DBP controlled have been taken over. In total, 94 of the 102 councils have been taken over by the government-appointed trustees. 93 of the DBP co-mayors have been detained since September 2016 and in December 2017, a total of 70 remained under arrest. 11 have been convicted and are serving jail sentences (DBP 2017, pp. 30–35).

The cultural programmes and projects that the municipalities organised have been one of the main areas that have been targeted by the trustees. The use of community languages in the activities of the municipal councils was ended and the signs and nameplates that were in the Kurdish language were removed. Schools and nurseries that provided a Kurdish language education were closed and the monuments symbolising important dates and events in Kurdish history that the municipal councils have built were removed by the orders of the trustee (DBP 2017, pp. 44–50). Activities that municipalities organised to empower women and address their needs in the past decade, such as the legal advice projects for women and those that aimed at raising awareness of issues that women face such as domestic violence, have also been abolished. Women's rights groups that worked closely with the municipal councils were closed down. In total around 2000 employees of the DBP councils were removed from their posts by the trustees (DBP 2017, pp. 59–60). The government decrees also closed down many Kurdish civil society associations, especially those that work in the area of culture and language, such as the Kurdish Institute in Istanbul. The charity

organisations that were established by the municipal councils and worked in the area of poverty alleviation were also closed down by government decrees.

In addition, the pro-Kurdish media network has also become the target of state repression in the past two years. The pro-HDP İMC TV's broadcasts via the state's satellite television network were blocked on 24 February 2016 and the channel was closed down on 30 September 2016 on grounds that it carried out 'terror propaganda' (Aras 2016). A number of other TV channels and radio stations have also been closed down. The pro-Kurdish daily newspaper Özgür Gündem was closed down on 16 August 2016 on grounds that it acted as the 'de facto news outlet' of the PKK (Reuters 2016). On 8 September 2016, the government announced that it had started the process to remove around 11,000 mainly Kurdish and socialist teachers that belong to the Education and Science Workers Union (Eğitim-Sen) from their posts on suspicion that they are supporters or sympathisers of the PKK (Letsch 2016). Many academics who signed a petition in January 2016 urging the government to pursue a peaceful approach in its management of the Kurdish conflict and investigate the human rights violations carried out by the state security forces became the targets of widespread intimidation, persecution and administrative investigations (Butler and Ertür 2017).

The violent turn in the conflict that began in the summer of 2015 continued during 2016 and 2017, with regular operations targeting the PKK guerrillas in Turkey and the KRI territory conducted. However, in contrast with the previous year, the number of attacks by the PKK guerrillas or other groups has decreased significantly. Throughout 2017, there were several large-scale operations in Turkey and airstrikes targeting the PKK bases in the KRI. Drones were also extensively used for surveillance and attacks as were curfews in rural areas. In October 2017, a cross-border operation into the KRI was carried out by the Turkish army (Milliyet 2017b). The government argued that it has devised a comprehensive and integrated military approach that will eliminate the PKK by the end of the year, with the Turkish Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, vowing on several occasions that 'no-one will anymore mention the PKK's name' (Milliyet 2017a). Part of the Turkish state strategy involved killing the PKK's senior leadership in the Qandil Mountains, Iraq. On 23 August 2017, two Turkish intelligence agents who were involved in planning an operation to assassinate or abduct Cemil Bayık, a senior figure in the PKK, were caught by the PKK guerrillas in KRI (Gunes

2017b, p. 26). There were several PKK attacks on the Turkish military in 2017, which mainly involved improvised explosive devises (IEDs).

The political focus in 2017 turned on the referendum on the executive style presidency that President Erdoğan has been craving since 2014. The AKP's proposed reform was supported by the ultranationalist MHP to pass through the parliament. The constitutional amendment was put to a referendum on 16 April 2017, which narrowly won amidst widespread intimidation and irregularities. The AKP has deepened its close association with the MHP since then and both parties will take part in the forthcoming local, parliamentary and presidential elections together as a nationalist block. The government's management of the Kurdish conflict has been the key to the creation and continuation of this nationalist block and has continued during the presidential and parliamentary elections. At the most recent parliamentary and presidential elections held on 24 June 2018, the HDP maintained its support base both in the Kurdish majority regions and in the major cities in the west of Turkey. It managed to obtain 11.7% of the votes and win 67 seats at the parliament and its presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, who conducted his election campaign while under pre-trial detention managed to obtain 8.4% of the vote (BBC 2018).

The securitisation of the Kurdish question is continuing and the government has expanded the conflict into Syria in January 2018 when it started an offensive against the Kurdish forces in Afrin. Since Turkey's capture of Afrin in March 2018, a large part of the Kurdish population was displaced and ethnic Arabs close to the Turkish backed Syrian groups have been settled there (Reuters 2018). In addition, Turkish army has increased its presence in the KRI territory during 2018 and the possibility of a large-scale ground operation targeting the PKK bases in the Qandil Mountain in 2018 has been touted (Hürriyet Daily News 2018).

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CHAPTER 4

The Syrian Conflict and Kurdish Ascendency

Abstract The developments taking place in Kurdish regions of Syria since 2012 have been attracting much media and academic attention and have become a source of optimism for the Kurdish communities across the region. The withdrawal of state forces in July 2012 left the Kurds in control of the Kurdish majority regions and they have lost little time in building political and military organisations to manage their de facto autonomy. This chapter firstly provides an overview of the Kurdish political activism in Syria to explore the context of these significant recent developments. Secondly, it discusses the emergence and evolution of the Kurdish-led de facto autonomous region and highlights the type of autonomy that has been practiced there since 2012. The final section assesses the Kurdish prospects in Syria in light of the developments connected to the ongoing Syrian conflict and the wider region.

Keywords DFNS · KNC · PYD · SDF · Syrian Conflict · YPG

Kurdish populated regions in Syria have been the site of significant political developments since the Syrian conflict broke out in 2011. The withdrawal of state forces in July 2012 left the Kurds in control of much of the majority Kurdish regions of Syria and created the conditions for the development of Kurdish political and military organisations. The Kurds established the Cantons of Rojava in January 2014 as an administrative structure to manage their de facto autonomy. In March 2016, the

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entity's name was changed to Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) and the current objective of this Kurdish-led entity is to be a territorially contagious but multicultural self-governing region within a democratic and federal Syrian state. Although still in its infancy, the DFNS offers important insights into how a new institutional framework based on decentralisation, and ethnocultural pluralism and cooperation can be developed and implemented. Ending the marginalisation of the Kurds and other minorities in Syria through organising them at the local and regional levels and thereby breaking the state's dominance and hegemony is at the core of this system. It does not involve a complete and total rejection of the state authority but a significant rollback of it to open political space for ethnocultural groups to develop their self-governments.

The developments are being headed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which was established in 2003 and shares similar political programme and ideology to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PYD's ascendency has met opposition from other Kurdish political parties as well as the regional powers on the grounds that it has close ties with the PKK. The other Kurdish political parties have a much longer history and are affiliated to the Iraqi Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). They came together under the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in 2011 to strengthen their position and counter the PYD's dominance. The relations between the PYD and the KNC has been tense and attempts to establish a Kurdish political organisation that is inclusive of the representatives of the Kurdish political parties in Syria have proved difficult.

Both the state and the Syrian Arab opposition remains opposed to autonomous Kurdish-led entity in northern Syria, as they fear that such a move will lead to Syria's division and also they remain Arab nationalist in their political outlook (Gunes and Lowe 2015, pp. 13–14). From 2013 onwards, the attacks by Islamists groups, particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been the main threat the Kurds faced but the Kurdish armed forces, the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ, established in 2011), have managed to defend the communities of the Kurdish-controlled areas. Since, October 2015, the YPG with some of the other opposition groups founded the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) strengthening the Kurds' commitment to a democratic and united Syria. They have been receiving military aid

and air cover from the US-led anti-ISIS coalition since the end of 2014 and have established themselves as a central pillar in the international attempt to destroy ISIS in Syria, which in turn has strengthened their position and enabled them to expand the territories that they control in north-eastern Syria from 2016 onwards.

4.1 The Kurdish Conflict in Syria: Background and the Main Developments

Syria emerged as a state in 1920 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and was under a French Mandate until 1946. Syria and Lebanon became the centres of pan-Kurdish political and cultural activities during the 1920s and 1930s, which were spearheaded by the Kurdish intellectuals and nationalist leadership exiled from Turkey, such as Celadet Bedir Khan, Nureddin Zaza, Ekrem Cemilpaşa and Memduh Selim. The political and cultural activities of the exiled Kurdish intellectuals made important contributions to the development of Kurdish nationalism in the region and they were involved in the establishment of the Xoybûn (Being Oneself). Important work on the grammatical development and standardisation of the Kurmanji Kurdish was produced by the exiled intellectuals during the 1930s and 1940s.

The majority Kurdish areas in Syria do not constitute a continuous enclave, and areas populated by Arabs and other ethnic groups divide the Kurds' population centres. Also prior to the outbreak of the conflict, a significant number of Kurds resided in Aleppo and the surrounding region and Damascus. Due to the absence of any official statistics, it is impossible to provide an exact number of the Kurds in Syria but they are estimated to be between 1.5 and 3 million and constitute roughly around ten percent of Syria's pre-war population (Allsopp 2015, p. 18). In addition to the Kurdish and Arab population in northern Syria, there are other smaller ethnic groups such as the Armenian and Syriac Christians and Chechens and Turkmens. The population of the Syriac community is estimated to be 166,000 and that of the Armenian community to be 60,000 (Joshua Project 2017).

The first Kurdish political party in Syria, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) was established in 1957 under the leadership of Nureddin Zaza. The party advocated a similar political programme to the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan and the origins of most of the current Kurdish political parties in Syria are traced to the KDPS. However, the party

was engulfed in a leadership struggle soon after its establishment with the modernist and traditional sections vying for control (Allsopp 2015, p. 77). In 1964, an internal struggle between the party's left and right wings took place leading to the party's division in 1965. These developments closely mirrored the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan and the leadership struggle that took place within the KDP between Ibrahim Ahmad and Mustafa Barzani. The issue of whether the Kurdish demands in Syria should be framed as a national or a minority issue—that is whether the Kurds of Syria were represented as part of the Kurdish nation or only an ethnic minority within Syria—constituted another source of conflict and disagreement and caused division of the Kurdish political parties in the subsequent decades. The personal conflicts and disagreements among the leadership of these parties also contributed to the divisions the political parties experienced (Allsopp 2015, p. 84). From the 1970s onwards, numerous other divisions emerged with several groups breaking away to form new parties to further fragment the Kurdish national movement in Syria.

There were several incidents that took place in Kurdish regions of Syria in the 1960s that symbolised the vulnerability and repression of Syria's Kurds. The fire in a cinema in Amude in 1960 that killed 200 children left a huge mark on the Kurds' collective memory. Furthermore, as part of the Arabisation policy of Syrian state, following the population census of 1962, Syrian citizenship of around 120,000 Kurds was revoked, on grounds that they were not native to Syria (HRW 1996, p. 12). This meant that nearly 20% of the Kurdish population in Syria was left stateless and described as either *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktumiin* (unregistered people) and the population of stateless Kurds in Syria was estimated to be 300,000 in 2011 (Allsopp 2015, p. 24). Other Arabisation policies that the government pursued during the 1960s and 1970s included taking away agricultural land from Kurds and redistributing to ethnic Arabs in the Jazira region, north-eastern Syria. The government's aim was to create an 'Arab belt' along the Turkey-Syria border as a protection against future Kurdish unrest in neighbouring Turkey (Gunter 2014, p. 23). Syria and began implementing the policy from 1973 onwards when it settled ethnic Arabs displaced by the construction of the Tabqa Dam on lands that the Kurds owned (Tejel 2009, p. 61). However, the policy was abandoned in 1976 but the Arabs settled in Kurdish land were not removed from the region (McDowall 2004, p. 475).

The Kurdish political parties in Syria were illegal and conducted their activities clandestinely. Given the political parties had to conduct their activities in an environment of authoritarian rule, the high risks for engaging in political mobilisation dissuaded people from engaging in politics or the parties from confronting the Syrian state. Consequently, the Kurdish political parties could not develop a popular base or initiate the types of struggles we have seen develop in Iraq or Turkey. The unsuitability of geography was another factor behind the low levels of mass political mobilisation in Syria. The Kurdish political parties framed their demands around ending the discrimination the Kurds faced and 'securing political, cultural and social rights for Kurds and the democratic reform of the Syrian state' (Allsopp 2015, p. 28). While the Kurdish grievances in Syria were not given a voice to, the sudden periodic bursts of Kurdish demands, particularly in 2004 and 2005 in Qamislo, showed their potential impact.

While the Syrian state kept a close eye on the activities of its native Kurdish political parties, it tolerated the activities of the Kurdish movements from Iraq and Turkey in Syria. This created a paradoxical situation during the 1980s and 1990s in which Kurds were politicised and radicalised through Kurdish political organisations, most notably, the PKK, but the oppression of the Kurds in Syria was not at the centre of the Kurdish political activism in Syria. The view that Kurdish rights in Syria would be achieved only if the Kurdish movements in Iraq or Turkey were successful was popularly accepted among the Kurdish political parties in Syria (Allsopp 2015, p. 91). Even though the Syrian Kurdish political parties were not able to generate notable political mobilisation in Syria, the support that the Kurdish political parties from Iraq and Turkey drew from Syria's Kurds during the 1980s and 1990s was instrumental for their success and has meant that in that period the Kurds of Syria were, once again, making significant contributions to the pan-Kurdish political developments. Also, from the 1980s onwards, cultural production by Kurdish individuals from Syria, such as the poetry of Cigerxwin (Sheikhmous Hasan) and the music of Ciwan Haco, made significant contributions to the wider Kurdish cultural renewal.

According to Allsopp (2015, pp. iix–xi) there were 21 Kurdish political parties in Syria in March 2014 and many of these political parties were brought together under the umbrella of the KNC in 2011 but some withdrew their support from the KNC in the subsequent years. The KNC is a part of the Syrian opposition group, the Syrian National

Council (SNC) and a fighting force affiliated to it was trained in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) by the Turkish army and the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces. However, they have not been allowed to enter the Kurdish-led autonomous region because of their refusal to accept the command of the YPG or the SDF. Consequently, without the military presence on the ground, they have been unable to establish themselves as an effective political force. Also, the SNC's unenthusiastic approach to Kurdish rights in Syria has further eroded the KNC's political credibility and compounded the doubts on the effectiveness of its political strategy.

Hence, since 2011 the PYD has been the dominant political force in the Kurdish majority regions of Syria and it has been spearheading the political developments there. The PYD was established by the former Syrian Kurdish members of the PKK in 2003 (Gunes and Lowe 2015, p. 4). The PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan was based in Syria or Syrian controlled territories of Lebanon from 1979 to 1998 and from the early 1980s onwards, the PKK began to organise among the Kurdish population in Syria and in the subsequent years managed to win their popular support (Gunes 2012, p. 99). As I discuss in more detail below, a number of other Kurdish representative organisations have been established in Syria since 2011 including the Movement for Democratic Society (Tev-Dem) and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (MGRK). These organisations act as umbrella bodies for the local and district councils and have been involved in the development of Kurdish-led autonomy in Syria. One of the main factors behind the PYD's success is due to the YPG's effectiveness in defending the communities of the Kurdish-led entity against the attacks of ISIS, particularly since 2013.

Intra-Kurdish relations since 2011 in Syria have not always been cordial but the tensions have not resulted in an armed conflict. The PYD has been accused of suppressing the activities of the political parties linked to the KNC and generally being intolerant to dissent (Gunes and Lowe 2015, p. 5). Such political disagreements have continued despite the attempts at securing an agreement among the Syrian Kurdish political parties. In July 2012, the KRG brokered an agreement that led to the creation of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, an umbrella organisation bringing together the PYD and the KNC, and the establishment of a form of power-sharing in the administration of Kurdish-controlled areas, including the coordination of the activities of the YPG. This agreement was not implemented and the continuation of tensions has resulted in a

new round of talks that were held in Duhok, KRI and produced another power-sharing agreement (Gunes and Lowe 2015, p. 11).

The main threat to the Kurdish-led autonomous entity has come from the Islamist groups in Syria. The growing influence of the jihadist groups in Syria since 2013 coincided with a significant increase in attacks against the Kurdish-controlled areas. One of the first such attacks took place in July 2013, when fighting broke out between the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and the YPG in Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniye), in Hasakah governorate, northeast Syria. The YPG have managed to defend their positions but the attacks clearly showed the danger ahead for the Kurds and since the summer of 2013 onwards, ISIS became the Kurds' main enemy. In Syria, ISIS and the Kurds are rivals for the same territory and the conflict can also be interpreted as an ideological one propelled by antagonisms based on ethnic difference. ISIS's goal of establishing a state run according to Islamist fundamentalist ideology is in stark contrast with the Kurds' vision of a democratic, secular, gender-egalitarian and plural Syria. ISIS's rhetoric increasingly targets the secularism of the main Kurdish political party PYD and its views on gender equality. The competition over resources and holding strategically important towns need to be also cited as the motives behind ISIS attacks against the Kurdish-controlled areas (Gunes 2013).

After ISIS's capture of large amounts of weapons from the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014, it began to carry out more attacks against the Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria. The town of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) on the Turkey-Syria border became the centre stage in the struggle between the YPG and ISIS during 2014 and 2015. In the end of January 2015, ISIS was totally driven out of Kobani and in June 2015, the Kurdish forces captured the strategic town of Tell Abyad also on the Turkey–Syria border, which had often been described as an ISIS stronghold. Since then, the YPG continued to capture more ISIS held territory. The strategically important Tishrin Dam in Raqqa governorate fell into the control of the SDF in the end of December 2015 (Reuters 2015). Further gains were made in the eastern part of Hasakah governorate and the SDF captured the El-Shaddadi town on 20 February 2016 (Reuters 2016). In 2017, the SDF focused its attention on driving ISIS from its self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa and the Euphrates River valley in the Raqqa and Deir

ez-Zor governorates. With the fall of Raqqa to the SDF in October 2017, almost all of the territories ISIS used to control have been captured either by the SDF or the Syrian Army. Currently, the northeast corner of Syria and the areas east of the Euphrates River are under the control of the SDF.

The YPG and YPJ have been the main Kurdish fighting force in Syria but since October 2015, they have been operating under the banner of the SDF, which also include Arab opposition militia, the *Jaysh al-Thuwar* (Army of Revolutionaries), smaller groups previously affiliated to the Free Syria Army (FSA) and the Syriac Military Council. The current estimate of the number of SDF fighters is in the region of 60,000 (ABC News 2018). The size of the Arab component of the SDF has been steadily increasing since 2015, with new fighters recruited and trained as part of the Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor campaigns. As the Kurdish–ISIS conflict accelerated, many Kurds in Turkey joined the YPG and YPJ. Also in recent years, western fighters, mainly leftist revolutionaries, internationalists and former soldiers, began to join the Kurdish forces and their number has increased steadily and is currently estimated to be 500 (Harp 2018).

The military support that the Kurdish forces got from the US-led anti-ISIS coalition has proved crucial in tipping the balance in favour of the YPG and the SDF. The United States started conducting air strikes against ISIS in Syria in September 2014 as part of its Operation Inherent Resolve to 'degrade and destroy' ISIS's infrastructure and assault capability. The United States increased its engagement with the Kurdish forces during 2015 and in 2016 it started to provide weapons and munitions to the SDF. The close cooperation continued in 2017 and by the end of 2017, it was stated that there are around 2000 US military personnel stationed in Syria (Lamothe 2017). In early January 2018, the US military authorities announced that they were in process of training a 30,000 strong Border Security Force to help prevent the re-emergence of ISIS and aid the stabilisation efforts in the region. This announcement caused a strong reaction from Turkey and even though the United States later retracted its statement, Turkey continued with its plans to invade Afrin Canton in north-west Syria and has vowed to capture all the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led forces (Perry and Coskun 2018).

4.2 The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS)

The Kurdish political parties in Syria do not advocate the creation of their own independent Kurdish state, extensive autonomy for Kurds, pluralist democracy, and recognition of the rights of all the ethnic and religious minorities in Syria is their goal. The Kurds have been managing their own affairs in the areas they control since the withdrawal of Syrian state forces in July 2012. The Kurds' autonomous administration took a more organised form in January 2014 when the Cantons of Rojava, were established. The term 'Rojava' means 'west' in the Kurdish language and refers to the Kurdish areas in Syria which is popularly referred to as *Rojavayê Kurdistanê* (Western Kurdistan). Initially three cantons were established in Jazira, Kobani and Afrin in the north-east, north and north-west of the country, respectively. On March 17, 2016, the Cantons of Rojava were brought together under the umbrella federal administration of the Democratic Federal System of Rojava–Northern Syria but at an organising council meeting held on 28 December 2016, the term 'Rojava' was removed from the federal administration's name and currently it is formally known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). The Kurdish leadership argued that such a step became necessary especially after the capture of territories historically populated by Arabs, such as Tell Abyad, Manbij and Raqqa. Although the Kurds are the main force behind the DFNS, it is not organised along ethnic lines and aspires to be a multi-ethnic entity with decentralised administration and representative bodies to accommodate all of the ethnocultural groups in northern Syria. The DFNS's current highest officials are Hediya Yousef, who is a Kurd and Mansur Selum, who is an Arab from Tell Abyad.

In the recent years, a number of academic accounts of the practice of autonomy in northern Syria have also been published recently (Knapp et al. 2016; Üstündağ 2016; Gunes and Lowe 2015; Knapp and Jongerden 2014). It is worth pointing out that in the Kurdish political circles in Syria and Turkey—as well as in several academic studies—the establishment of Kurdish-led self-government and the wider impact it has had on the society is described as a revolution. Beyond the important role the Kurdish-led autonomous entity is expected to play in the post-conflict governance and stabilisation of Syria, its experience allows

us to assess how a political architecture based on the proposals of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism developed by Turkey's Kurdish movement can operate in practice.

As mentioned previously, the PYD has been the main Kurdish political force in Syria and rather than being the result of a consensus between the different Kurdish political groups, the practice of Kurdish-led autonomy is Syria is guided by the PYD and the other representative organisations that it established to mobilise the Kurdish population. The political demands of the PYD and the representative bodies that are close to it framed the Kurdish demands around the democratic autonomy proposals and territorial decentralisation in Syria, and this view reflected the initial institutional set-up of the Cantons of Rojava. In the post-2011 period, the political parties linked to the KNC have been advocating the idea of the establishment of an ethnic Kurdish federal region within Syria as a way of accommodating Kurdish rights.

The DFNS is designed as a decentralised self-governing entity, which brings together several autonomous entities and it seeks to remain part of a decentralised and federal Syria. The internal territorial decentralisation of the federation is seen as necessary to provide representation to the region's diverse ethnic groups and promote coexistence among them. The DFNS is the higher level representative body and its objective is to strengthen the position of the Democratic Autonomous Administrations (DAA) at the Syrian, regional and international levels. It embodies the principle of decentralisation and grassroots democracy organised at the level of local councils. This structure is seen as essential for involving the local population in the decision-making process and it enables them to elect delegates to represent the local council in higher representative bodies, such as the district, province and regional levels.

The DAAs are the governing body of the cantons and each has a legislative council that elects an executive council headed by co-chairs with overall responsibility of overseeing the work of different ministries of the DAA. The DAAs were initially formed in January 2014 and have continued their evolution since then (Knapp et al. 2016, p. 114). In August 2017, the constituent assembly of the DFNS passed an Administrative Regions Act that created a new structure for the federation, dividing the entire territory into three regions and six cantons (ANF News 2017a). The lowest level administrative body is the commune which is usually comprised of the residents of a village or a street in the urban

context and comprised of around 50 households and currently it is estimated that there are around 3700 communes in the DFNS (ANF News 2017b). The neighbourhood council is the higher level representative body that offers representation to communes as well as people representing different ethnic and political groups, followed by the district council. Each of the cantons had an assembly representing a cross-section of the population where decisions on the matters concerning the cantons are made. Since 2012, a functioning legal and judicial system for personal and communal disputes has also been created as part of the autonomous administration (Duman 2017).

There are a number of other representative organisations such as the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which was established in December 2015 and comprised of representatives of different ethnic and political groups (Knapp et al. 2016, p. 114). Tev-Dem (Democratic Society Movement) is a representative body that has been involved in the development of Kurdish-led self-government. It is made up of mainly the PYD and some other smaller political forces and community organisation in the region, including the representative of other ethnic groups. Another umbrella organisation is the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK), which was founded in 2011 and is the umbrella body of the local and district councils.

Hence, rather than being an ethnic government for the Kurds, the DFNS is designed as a system that provides representation for all the different ethnic groups in the region and aspires to promote recognition of diversity and coexistence of the different ethnic groups. It is designed as a multi-ethnic federation that recognises the rights of all ethnic groups and seeks their participation in the management of the region. In addition to the cultural communities, different occupational groups, associations are also represented in decision-making bodies. The commitment to ethnic-pluralism and decentralisation has been the basis of the administration's Social Contract (SC), which was initially ratified by the representatives of the Cantons on 29 January 2014 (Cantons of Rojava 2014). On 28 December 2016, a new draft constitution for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was adopted. Recognition is extended to many ethnic groups and representation is not based on the numerical majority/minority relationship, which is expressed in the following terms in the 'Preamble' to the SC of the DFNS, which was ratified in December 2016:

> The democratic federalism of northern Syria is based on a geographic concept and an administrative and political decentralization; it is part of the united Syrian democratic federalism. The consensual democratic federal system guarantees the participation of all individuals and groups, on equal levels, in the discussion, decision, and implementation of affairs. It takes ethnic and religious differences into consideration according to the characteristics of each group based on the principles of mutual coexistence and peoples' fraternity. (DFNS 2017)

Every group is empowered with the right to establish its own representative bodies and exercise cultural autonomy over its affairs as well as taking part in the making of common decisions. Article 33 of the SC states: 'Cultural, ethnic and religious groups and components shall have the right to name its self-administrations, preserve their cultures and form their democratic organisations. No one or component shall have the right to impose their own beliefs on others by force'. Rather than being restricted to a particular region, the right to form self-administrations can be enjoyed throughout the territory of the DFNS. This shows that the non-territorial autonomy features are incorporated into territorial decentralisation. A strong commitment to pluralism, decentralisation, secularism and women's rights inform the content of the SC and are seen as the essential political principles that guide the practice of autonomy, which is discussed in more detail in Sect. 4.3.

Moreover, the organisational structure of communes and councils aims to foster the democratisation of society and one important aspect of which is the efforts made to achieve gender equality in society. The promotion of women's rights is an important part of Kurdish politics in Syria and this is carried out through the principle of sharing the elected positions between a man and a woman (the co-chair system). The elected positions at the local, district and regional level are all shared by a man and a woman. For example, Tev-Dem and other representative bodies operate a co-chair system and one of which must be a woman. Women are encouraged to participate in the self-defence units and the police force. There is a separate military organisation for women, Women's Defence Forces (YPJ) and some of the commanders of the YPG are women. In fact, one of the main features of the Kurdish military and political mobilisation in Syria has been the central role women have been playing as part of the fighting force and the local police force, known as the *Asayish*, which is estimated to number 15,000. Women are part of the political representative institutions at the local and regional level

with all of the significant political offices being shared by women and men through the co-chair system. The system is developed to promote gender equality in political representation.

Gender is also becoming part of the education and training that the people holding political office receive and there are a number of other organisations and institutions that work towards raising awareness among the population of gender issues and improving women's position in society (Dirik 2018). Although the Syrian state has indicated its willingness to recognise some form of Kurdish autonomy, it also indicated its determination to take the control of the territory of the DFNS. The relative stability has provided it with a platform to take steps towards increasing its legitimacy. Commune elections were held on 22 September 2017, elections for the local councils were held on 1 December 2017 and the elections for the highest representative body of the DFNS, the Democratic People's Council of Northern Syria, are scheduled for 2018. The officials of the DFNS often emphasise that the Kurdish-led autonomy is a model that can be implemented across Syria as its institutional framework enables the diverse ethnocultural groups to take part in the collective decisions and retain the right to organise their community's self-government.

4.3 The Challenges Facing the DFNS

Since its establishment, the Kurdish-led autonomous administration took significant strides but the uncertainty about its long-term future continues. Its prospects are connected to and conditional upon finding a long-term durable political solution to the ongoing conflict in Syria. So far, the Kurdish representatives have not been included in the international attempts to find a solution to the conflict, such as the UN-sponsored Geneva talks, due to the opposition of Turkey and the Syrian opposition groups. The military and diplomatic support the DFNS has been getting from the US-led coalition is yet to change Turkey's stance and end its determination to exclude the main Kurdish groups from being represented in the peace negotiations. In addition, the Astana Process led by Russia, Iran and Turkey has the potential to sideline the Kurds altogether (Wintour 2017). However, it is difficult to see the DFNS representatives being excluded from the UN-sponsored Geneva Process in the long run as it is a significant political actor in Syria and its inclusion would make a significant contribution to the efforts to end the conflict. The

US-led intervention targeting the military facilities in Syria in April 2018 and similar attacks in future can aid the Kurdish-led DFNS by weakening the Syrian state militarily, which in turn will make it more vulnerable and likely to negotiate. It also means the Kurds can rely on the leverage that the United States and other western powers such as France have to secure a better deal for the DFNS.

The population of northern Syria is mixed and the DFNS's decentralised vision internally increases its ability to accommodate the different groups and respond to their specific needs and demands. One of the key difficulties that the DFNS has been facing is the refusal of some of the actors involved in the Syrian conflict to recognise it as a legitimate actor. Despite the claims by the Kurdish representatives and the officials that the DFNS is designed as a system that will preserve the region's multi-ethnic character, it is seen as a form of ethnic government for the Kurds. This is despite the fact that after the areas under the control of ISIS were captured, such as Tell Abyad in July 2015 and Manbij in August 2016, a civilian council composed of the representatives of the region's population took charge of the administration and governance of the town. A similar structure was established in Raqqa city in April 2017 and it began to govern the region after the city was captured by the SDF in November 2017 (Reuters 2017).

A key factor why the DFNS has been able to win the support of the population is the popularity of the PYD among a significant section of the Syrian Kurdish population. The success the SDF had against ISIS increased the DFNS's legitimacy among the population as having the relative peace and stability it offers. While this eases the task of including the region's other ethnocultural groups, the long-term success of the DFNS depends on its ability to generate popular political support from the cross-section of the population. Various principles it is built upon, such as promotion of gender equality, can face challenges on cultural grounds and it may not be possible to find consensus over such differences. Much of the agricultural land in Syria falls within the territories controlled by the DFNS and in addition, in 2017 the SDF took control of the oil-producing regions of Deir ez-Zor (Francis 2017). These resources could prove crucial for the long-term economic security and stability of the region and also can be used to increase the DFNS's leverage in future negotiations to reach a political solution to the conflict.

Also, autonomy in northern Syria did not come about as a result of an agreement with the Syrian state but because of state failure caused

by a popular uprising. A new form of political organisation has been set up to fill the void left by the Syrian state's disappearance in the region. Currently, the Syrian state opposes extensive Kurdish autonomy and the accommodation of Kurdish rights within Syria on terms proposed by the DFNS. Although at times, the Syrian state has indicated its willingness to recognise some form of Kurdish autonomy, it also indicated its determination to take the control of the territory of the DFNS (Perry et al. 2017). There were occasions when tensions between the Syrian army and the Kurdish-led forces flared but this has not lead to a large-scale conflict between the two forces.

For much of the past five years, the threat posed by the jihadists groups has been the main issue that they had to deal with. While the threat has not been completely eliminated but the Kurdish-led forces have achieved decisive victories against ISIS in 2016 and 2017. This has created opportunities for the Kurds as the fight against ISIS and the DFNS's ability to provide security, maintain the law and order and include the representatives of local communities within its structures has enhanced its legitimacy within Syria and internationally. The role the SDF played in defeating ISIS has been welcomed by the international community and the locals but the recent debate has focussed on the DFNS's long-term role in Syria.

However, despite the positive role the DFNS's military forces have been playing in defeating ISIS threat, the Syrian state and other regional powers continue to view the DFNS with suspicion and as a threat to the political stability of the whole region. The regional powers, such as Turkey and Iran, remain opposed to the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and the DFNS's existence is seen as a threat to their national security. For Iran, in addition to Kurdish autonomy being seen as a destabilising development, the presence of US forces in the DFNS controlled areas has also raised deep suspicions. For Turkey, Kurdish autonomy is seen as a development that will empower the PKK, Turkey's primary nemesis. Since 2014, Turkish official often made statements that they will not allow the creation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria and will carry out military attacks to prevent it, if needed. Turkey frames its policy towards Syria's Kurds within its overall policy on management of its Kurdish conflict.

In April 2016, Turkish Air Force carried out attacks against several YPG positions and in November 2016, Turkish army supported by FSA and Islamist militias started an operation in al-Bab in northern Aleppo to

prevent the SDF capturing more territory and establishing a land connection to the Kurdish territory of Afrin. Turkey's antagonistic attitude to the DFNS continued throughout 2017 and it increased its diplomatic efforts to persuade the new Trump administration to end the United States military support to the Kurdish-led forces. On 8 October 2017, the Turkish army began its deployment of troops in Syria's Idlib governorate as part of the de-escalation plan that Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed on in Astana in September 2017. 19 January 2018, Turkish army began shelling the Afrin Canton and on the following day carried out an intensive air bombardment. On 21 January 2018, Turkish troops and FSA units loyal to Turkey have begun a ground offensive with the stated aim of clearing the YPG presence in Afrin.

The support of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition is an important factor in the long-term survival and security of the DFNS. The US officials have indicated their continual military support for the SDF and in December 2017, the army chief Joseph Votel announced the US's intention to train a 30,000 strong force to protect the DFNS borders (Stocker 2018). Subsequently, after the Turkish opposition, the US officials distanced themselves from the statement. Questions about whether the United States is willing to politically recognise the DFNS remain and in the past, the United States supported the YPG and SDF in their fight against ISIS but it did not press for the inclusion of the Kurdish representatives in the UN-sponsored Geneva conferences for ending the civil war in order to avoid antagonising the Arab opposition or Turkey. Turkey's persistent opposition to the DFNS makes it difficult for the United States to formally recognise Kurdish-led autonomous region in Syria but the US's desire to balance Iran's rising influence in Syria may compel it to recognise and develop denser relations with the DFNS.

Russia is another key player in the Syrian conflict and previously it was sympathetic to Kurdish demands in Syria but Russia's close relations with the Syrian state, the Kurds' close ties to the US and Russian-US rivalry in Syria places significant barriers on Russian–Kurdish relations. Also, during the past two years it forged close ties with Turkey and has indirectly supported Turkey's offensive in Afrin to dislodge the Kurdish forces in January 2018, which was completed in mid-March 2018 (Al Jazeera 2018a). As a result of the Turkish and FSA offensive, according to the United Nations, an estimated 183,500 Kurds in Afrin have been displaced and sought refuge in Tal Refaat (UN 2018). In a number of

speeches during the operation, Turkey's president suggested that the operation will be extended to Manbij and then to rest of the territories that the DFNS controls (Al Jazeera 2018b). The Turkish invasion of Afrin dents the hopes for the consolidation of a territorially contagious Kurdish-led autonomous region in northern Syria.

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CHAPTER 5

The Transformation of Iran's Kurdish Conflict

Abstract This chapter focuses on the resurgence of Iran's Kurdish movement and the transformation in conflict it is engendering. It starts with an account of the conflict's historical background and examines the domestic and regional factors behind the recent increase in violence in the conflict. It details the political developments taking place domestically in Iran and within the Kurdish society there before moving on to examine the regional factors and developments taking place in the pan-Kurdish political space in the Middle East. Overall, the chapter provides an up-to-date empirical account of Kurdish politics in Iran and contributes to the growing literatures on the accommodation of the rights and demands of Iran's ethnic minorities and the rise of Kurdish movements and entities in the Middle East.

Keywords Kurdish question in Iran · Minority rights · KDPI · Komala · PJAK

The Kurdish conflict in Iran has undergone a number of significant transformations since the mid-twentieth century. The Kurds managed to obtain political power when a short-lived Kurdish republic was established in Mahabad in 1946, which is considered an historic moment for the Kurds in the region. However, the Kurdish forces came under attack soon after and experienced a defeat that heralded a period of brutal oppression for Iran's Kurdish population. The subsequent attempts

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during the 1960s to revive the movement and organise a military challenge against the Shah's regime did not lead to much success. As the anti-Shah momentum gathered pace during the second half of the 1970s, Kurds also began to stake a claim by participating in large numbers in the revolution of 1979. The failure to establish a democratic pluralist system that accommodated Kurdish rights in the post-revolutionary period exacerbated the conflict in the subsequent years. Until 1983, Kurdish forces actively resisted the new Islamist government that took power in Iran.

The defeat of the insurgency was followed by a period in which Kurdish political activism has significantly declined. In this period, there was a notable decline in the popular appeal of the dominant Kurdish political parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Organisation of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala). During the mid-1980s, Iran's Kurdish movement experienced internal fragmentation as well as armed conflict between the military forces of the KDPI and Komala. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the movement was fatally weakened when its leaders were assassinated by the Islamic regime. However, the past decade has witnessed increasing levels of Kurdish cultural and political activism at the grassroots level, occasional protests and riots by Kurds in predominantly Kurdish populated towns and cities and the resurgence of Kurdish political/military movements in Iran. This period witnessed the rise of the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) and its sporadic attacks against Iranian soldiers in Kurdish majority regions of northwest Iran. Also, there have been renewed attempts by the KDPI and Komala to re-establish their presence in Kurdish majority areas of Iran. These parties maintain an armed force currently based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and in the past year have carried out armed attacks against Iranian forces.

5.1 Historical Overview of Iran's Kurdish Conflict

The absence of reliable statistics makes it impossible to state with certainty the exact size of the Kurdish population in Iran but estimates range from seven and a half millions to twelve millions (Vali 2016, p. 285). The majority—perhaps as much as 60%—of the Kurds in Iran are Sunni Muslims with the remainder following Shia Islam and Yarsanism, which is also known as *Ahl-e Haqq*, 'the People of Truth' (Izady 1992, pp. 132–133). Historically, Iran's Kurdish majority areas

have lagged behind in terms of socio-economic development and Kurds continue to face widespread discrimination (Amnesty International 2008, p. 8). Previously, Kurdish political activism tended to concentrate geographically on the northwest of Iran but in the past decade the Kurds in the Khorasan region in the northeast have also begun to organise and increase their engagement in Kurdish cultural and political activism.

From its foundation in the early 1940s onwards, the contemporary Kurdish national movement in Iran has been mainly left-wing and secular. Currently the Kurdish movement in Iran is being represented by a number of political parties, historically the KDPI has been the main Kurdish political party in Iran. The origin of the KDPI dates back to the *Komalay Jiyanaway Kurdistan* (the Society for the Revival of Kurdistan, Komalay J. K.), which was established as a clandestine organisation in September 1942 in Mahabad. It was organised in small cells and one of its main activities was the publication of its newspaper *Nishtiman* (Fatherland). *Nishtiman* had a reformist orientation and published articles that criticised the religious and feudal elites of the Kurdish society and made 'frequent references to social inequality between "haves and have-nots" in Kurdish society, and the poverty and ignorance of the Kurdish masses, especially the peasantry, contrasted with the accumulation of wealth among the landowners and merchants' (Vali 2011, p. 21). However, Komalay J. K. was abolished and integrated into the KDPI when the party was formally established on 16 August 1945 (Vali 2011 p. 25; Ghassemlou 1993, pp. 18–121; Koohi-Kamali 2003, p. 104). The KDPI's main demand was the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region within Iran (Ahmadi 2018, p. 211).

One of the main developments that the KDPI initiated was its involvement in the formation of the Kurdish republic in Mahabad, which came about as a result of the Soviet occupation of northern Iran during the Second World War. The Kurdish Republic was formally established on 22 January 1946 and it continued its existence for almost a year. In May 1946 when the Soviet forces withdraw from Iran, the existence of the Republic came under threat and soon after in the significantly changed domestic context in Iran, numerous Kurdish tribes began to withdraw their support from the KDPI and its leader Qazi Mohammed. On 15 December 1946, Iranian troops entered Mahabad and recaptured the city from the Kurdish forces. On 31 March 1947, Qazi Mohammed, his brother and cousin were executed by hanging in Mahabad (McDowall 2004, p. 245).

During the mid-1960s under its new leader Abd-Allah Ishaqi, the KDPI began moving towards the right ideologically and closer to Mullah Mustafa Barzani's line within the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (McDowall 2004, p. 253). As part of the conditions of military aid the KDP was getting from Iran, Mullah Mustafa Barzani 'demanded that the KDPI suspend all activities hostile to Tehran' (McDowall 2004, p. 253). This decision was not received obediently by some of the leaders and supporters of the KDPI, who formed a Revolutionary Committee and in March 1967, launched an armed campaign against Iran. The insurgency lasted for 18 months but eventually the Kurdish forces did not manage to survive the assault from the Iranian army whose task was eased by the help provided by the KDP. During this period, many of the KDPI members, including one of its leaders, Suleiman Mueini, were killed by the KDP *peshmerga* and his body was handed over to the Iranian authorities (Koohi-Kamali 2003, p. 170). In 1971, during the third conference of the KDPI, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou was elected as the party's leader replacing Ahmed Tawfiq who supported the conservative faction of the party and was a close associate of the KDP leader Mustafa Barzani. The party's third congress also adopted the slogan 'Democracy for Iran, Autonomy for Kurdistan' and committed itself to armed struggle (Vali 2016, p. 310).

The Komala was the other main Kurdish political party in Iran and is claimed to be formed in 1969 in Tabriz by a group of students but its existence was declared publicly only in 1979 (Ahmadi 2018, p. 212; McDowall 2004, p. 265). It was not openly Kurdish nationalist and advocated a more social liberationist programme—administrative decentralisation and working with other communities in Iran to defeat the central government were its main objectives. The Komala was particularly strong in the Sanandaj and Mariwan regions and its formulation of Kurdish autonomy demands were similar to that of the KDPI, with the greater emphasis on 'workers' rights and agrarian policies' in its political programme being the main difference (Koohi-Kamali 2003, p. 181). With some other Iranian leftist political groups it formed the Iranian Communist Party (ICP) in 1982. However, gradually its members drifted away from the ICP and Komala re-appeared under its own name again in 1991. The Komala's existence challenged the KDPI's claim to be the sole leader of the Kurdish people in Iran.

As the protests and upheaval in Iran intensified during the autumn of 1978, Kurds seized large quantities of weapons and were the main force

on the ground in the majority Kurdish regions. The Kurds took part in the revolution in large numbers and soon after in April 1979, the KDPI established control in Kurdish areas and the main towns of the region, including Sanandaj, Marivan, Naqadeh and Saqiz. However, instead of the recognition of their autonomy that the Kurds demanded, their rule came under military attack once the hardliners consolidated their rule following the resignation of the interim Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan in November 1979 (Malek 1989, p. 85; Stansfield 2014, pp. 74–75). Kurds took part in the parliamentary elections held in the summer of 1979 and elected candidates from the Kurdish political parties but the elected Kurdish representatives were never allowed to attend the parliament (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield 2010, p. 19).

The KDPI's demands for extensive autonomy and the creation of a Kurdish administrative region in Iran were not met by the newly established Islamist government. Until 1983, there were fighting between the Kurdish forces and regime forces with the rural areas under Kurdish control and the towns under regime control. In the summer of 1982, Iranian army began a large-scale assault against the Kurdish held territories and by the end of 1983 almost all of Kurdish held territory was captured. In total 10,000 Kurds died in the conflict during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of the fighting between the Kurdish forces and Iranian army and as a result of the summary executions of Kurdish civilians and political activists by the Iranian army (McDowall 2004, p. 262).

Since 1982, the KDPI has been operating inside Iraq and getting assistance from the Iraqi Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Between 1981 and 1982, the KDPI and Komala cooperated militarily and managed to re-launch an armed struggle against Iran. The Iran-Iraq war opened opportunities for the Kurdish political parties and the military aid the Kurdish parties received from Iraqi government led to the decision to restart the armed struggle against Iran (Ahmadi 2018, p. 213; Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 14). However, in November 1984, they faced each other in an internal conflict that lasted until 1988. In the late 1980s, both the KDPI and Komala faced multiple internal divisions and currently they remain fragmented with a number of different fractions in existence.

Due to the strict restrictions on Kurdish political activism for long periods of time the leadership of these parties was based outside of Iran, mainly in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Europe. KDPI split into two factions in 1988 and its leader, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, was assassinated

in Vienna on 13 July 1989. A senior Komala leader was assassinated in Larnaca, Cyprus in 1989 and on 17 September 1992 two of the KDPI's senior leaders and its secretary general, Sadegh Sharafkandi, were assassinated in Berlin (McDowall 2004, p. 277). There were many other victims of Iran's murderous campaign against the politically active Kurds and according to some estimates Iranian agents murdered more than 200 Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan during the early 1990s (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield 2010, p. 21). These assassinations significantly weakened Iran's Kurdish movement. As a reaction against the assassination of its leaders, the KDPI intensified its armed campaign against Iran in 1991 and its forces remained active until 1996 when the KDPI agreed to pull its fighters out of Iran. Since then it has mainly been based in the KRI.

5.2 The Re-emergence of Kurdish Political Activism in Iran During 2000s and 2010s

In recent years, we can identify two separate forms of activism taking place with increasing regularity among the Kurdish population in Iran: one, the spontaneous popular forms of mobilisation at the grassroots level, including the occasional protests and riots that have taken place on a number of occasions during the past decade; and two, the return of the organised and armed oppositional movements. As well as the PJAK's military campaign against Iran, the KDPI has also occasionally carried out armed attacks against Iranian security forces in 2016.

In recent years, the different factions of the KDPI and Komala have made a stronger attempt to revive the Kurdish struggle in Iran. This desire to re-establish themselves and preserve their status as important actors in Kurdish politics in Iran can be seen as a reaction against the PJAK's recent resurgence and dominance, as discussed below in more details. At the same time they have been framing a solution to the Iran's Kurdish question in new terms; for example, from 2004 onwards, the KDPI have been calling for a solution for the Kurdish question in Iran on the basis of 'federalist framework' that involves the establishment of a federal Kurdish region 'within a democratic federalist Iran'. This is in contrast to its previous autonomist programme and the Komala has also experienced a similar ideological transformation towards a federalist solution (Vali 2016, p. 310). In August 2012, an agreement was reached between KDPI and Komala that called for federalism in Iran 'based on a national-geographic definition in order to undo the national oppression

of the Kurds. Among other things, they ask for separation between religion and the state, gender equality, and the solving of all issues through peace, dialogue and social justice' (Eliassi 2013a).

In addition, as mentioned above, we have witnessed the emergence of the PJAK in 2004 and subsequently it has established itself as a significant force in Kurdish politics in Iran. The PJAK is considered as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and has been involved in an insurgency and occasional clashes with the Iranian forces since its establishment. PJAK advocates 'democratic autonomy' which is a framework that the PKK has developed to accommodate Kurdish demands within the existing state boundaries in the Middle East (Gunes and Lowe 2015, p. 3). This framework involves decentralisation of political power, an end of restrictions on the Kurds associational life and culture, recognition of the Kurds as a nation and their linguistic rights in education and broadcasting and the political representation of the Kurds in Iran. Additionally, gender equality and equal political representation for women is also part of the demands the PJAK articulates. The PJAK has involved in a number of fierce clashes with the Iranian security forces and during the summers of 2007 and 2011, Iran carried out large-scale offensives targeting the PJAK camps inside Iran and in the territory controlled by the KRI. Headquartered in the remote Qandil Mountains, the PJAK has demonstrated a significant degree of resilience and consequently the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) have been unable to end its presence inside Iran and in the Iran–KRI border regions. PJAK's military wing is organised under the East Kurdistan Defence Units (YRK in Kurdish acronym) but it is difficult to verify its strength at the moment.

The PJAK's attacks against Iran and the operations Iran carried out in response has been raising tensions between Iran and KRI and the KRI authorities have been concerned with Iran's frequent violation of its sovereignty in pursuit of PJAK guerrillas (Howard 2007). In addition, PJAK's close affinity to the PKK and the tense relations between the PKK and the KDP—the dominant party in the KRI—is also a factor in the KRI's constraining approach. In the past decade, there have been occasional clashes between the PJAK guerrillas and the IRGC which often resulted in casualties. One of the biggest operations Iran carried out against the PJAK guerrillas was in summer of 2011, which according to the commander of the IRGC resulted in the death of over 180 PJAK guerrillas (Jamestown Foundation 2011, p. 2). Since then a ceasefire

between the PJAK and Iran has been in place brokered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (Enders 2011). Consequently the violence in the conflict has declined substantially but it has not been completely eliminated as occasional clashes between the PJAK guerrillas and the IRGC continue to take place (Renard 2008). In addition to the occasional military clashes between the PJAK guerrillas and the IRGC, more recently during the summer of 2016, the KDPI fighters have carried out attacks against the Revolutionary Guards in Oshnavieh resulting in fatalities (Andrea 2016). The tensions continued for a few weeks but it did not lead to escalation of the conflict into a larger area. It is estimated that the KDPI's military force number around 2000 and are based in camps near the Iran–KRI border (Bar'el 2016).

In 2006, the KDPI split into three factions. These attacks are carried out by the dominant faction of the KDPI led by Mustafa Hijri, who has been the leading figure in the party after the assassination of Sharafkandi in 1992. A minority wing of the KDPI has been led by Abdullah Hasanzadeh as a separate organisation in 2006 and more members have deserted the KDPI in late 2006 and regrouped themselves as the KDP removing 'Iran' from the name of the party. The Komala has had a similar experience of fragmentation in 2007 and currently there are two distinct branches that are active (Ahmedzadeh 2010, pp. 187–188). The Komala-CPI is led by Ebrahim Alizadeh and retains a stronger affinity to the Communist Party of Iran, and the Komala-PIK (Party of Iranian Kurdistan) is led by Abdullah Mohtadi and has a stronger Kurdish rights focus. The historically dominant Kurdish political parties in Iran remain divided and disunited and as their previous experience demonstrates, they are susceptible to fragmentation. Hence, it is difficult to see the KDPI's armed campaign to evolve into a full insurgency in the current conditions.

Mass protests and civil unrest by Kurds has been frequently taking place in Iran during the recent years. These have diverse specific causes but by and large reflect the growing discontent amongst the Kurds. One of the last major incident of protest occurred in May 2015 in the city of Mahabad and the events were triggered by the death of a 25 years old Kurdish woman, Farinaz Khosrawani, who fell from the fourth floor of the hotel she was working at as she tried to escape sexual assault from a security guard (Buchanan 2015). The protests spread to the city of Sardasht where clashes between the police and Kurdish protesters also took place (Rudaw 2015). Previously in 2005, Kurds in Iran took part in

widespread demonstration that lasted for three weeks and were triggered by the shooting of a Kurdish rights activist by the Iranian security forces. On 11 July 2005, large-scale demonstrations took place after the death of Shavaneh Qaderi in Mahabad (Entessar 2014, p. 217). The protests left 20 protestors dead and around 200 people were injured (Howard 2005). Kurds in Iran also took part in the protests against the election results that took place nationally after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected for a second term in office. The continuation of discriminatory practices against the Kurdish minority and the failure by successive governments to address Kurdish grievances has resulted in growing widespread anti-establishment feelings amongst the Kurds, which was reflected in large numbers of Kurds participating in the anti-government protests that took place in Iran during the end of December 2017 and beginning of January 2018.

Also in the past decade, Kurdish deputies have organised to raise the Kurdish demands through the Assembly in Tehran (Entessar 2014, p. 221). The Kurdish United Front (KUF) was established in 2005 by a group of Kurdish parliamentarians to campaign for reform and accommodation of Kurdish rights in Iran but so far it has been quite ineffective (Haqiqi 2013). Iran's current political and constitutional order places strict restrictions on the establishment of political parties that do not strictly adhere to the state's strict Islamist doctrine (*velayet-e faqih*) and these restrictions continue to prevent the emergence of legal political parties that advocate Kurdish political rights in Iran. However, the protests and the resurgence in the more organised forms of Kurdish political activism in Iran are clear reflections of the Kurds deeply felt grievances, which are examined more fully below.

5.3 The Factors Behind the Revival of Iran's Kurdish Movement and Its Future Prospects

Despite the various setbacks the Kurdish movement in Iran experienced in the 1980s, the appeal of Kurdish nationalism has continued and the idea of Kurdish rights in Iran has been kept alive. By and large, the conditions that led to the formation of the Kurdish conflict in Iran—identity demands, autonomy, national and cultural oppression of the Kurds, discrimination and economic inequality—have continued to be present after the defeat of the insurgency in the early 1980s. The popular political demands of Iran's Kurdish minority have not been addressed by

the state nor have they been fully incorporated into other oppositional movements' political programme or discourse leaving the Kurdish political parties as the only forces willing or capable of articulating them.

Kurdish resentment in Iran has a long history and many dimensions: the dominance of Shia and Persians in Iran led to Kurdish marginalisation over a long period of time. Iran's Kurds have remained a restless one because Iran has not managed to fully accommodate their demands and the Kurds have been subjected to continual oppression and discrimination. Iran's Kurdish policy is conceptualised within its overall policy on the management of its minorities and in addition to a sizeable Kurdish population, Iran is home to a significant Azeri, Baluchi and Arab population. Iran's ethnic minorities constitute around 49% of its total population and historically minority demands have been viewed by the state with a high degree of suspicion and suppressed on grounds of protecting Iran's territorial integrity, which have turned the minorities question into a national security issue (Saleh 2013, p. 59). Political, social and economic arrangements in Iran favours Persian and Shia 'privilege' and cultural hegemony, and lead to the subordination of non-Persian and non-Shia groups (Eliassi 2013b). A report published by the Amnesty International in 2008 summarises the situation of the Kurds in Iran in the following way:

> Kurds in Iran have long suffered deep-rooted discrimination. Their social, political and cultural rights have been repressed, as have their economic aspirations. Kurdish regions have been economically neglected, resulting in entrenched poverty. Forced evictions and destruction of homes have left Kurds with restricted access to adequate housing. (Amnesty International 2008, p. 1)

Little positive developments took place in the situation of the Kurds since the publication of the report. In fact, the situation has worsened as a result of the suppressive practices the regime pursued. Throughout the modern period, Iran has maintained a centralised state structure and the national identity is constructed around Persian and Shia dominance. Construction of the national identity on such a base brings the Kurds into conflict because they are one of the main and biggest non-Persian minorities. This is underpinned by a fear of division of Iran and secession of its minorities and in the contemporary period the state has maintained its policy of suppression of Kurdish opposition: 'Tehran's view

of the Kurds was immovable: separatists they were and separatists they remained' (McDowall 2004, p. 269). Because of being Sunnis, the Kurds are viewed with added suspicion. Hence, the Kurdish challenge to the Persian and Shia dominance in Iran is suppressed and continues to be regarded as a threat to its territorial and national unity, which it has forcefully maintained. Moreover, Iran's policy has been quite stiff when it comes to carrying reform that would broaden the remit of Kurdish rights.

The tensions between Iran and its Kurdish minority over the past decade have been rising also because of the regular execution of Kurdish political activist on the grounds that they are members of a 'terrorist' organisation or linked to its activities. It is often the case that Kurdish political activists are prosecuted under the charges of 'enmity to God'. Some of the recent executions include that of the 32 years old teacher and Kurdish rights activist Farzad Kamangar who was executed on 9 May 2010 after 4 years of being in detention in various prisons. More recently, another Kurdish rights activist Behrouz Alkhani was executed while awaiting the outcome of his appeal to the Supreme Court of Iran (Amnesty International 2015).

Throughout the past two decades, reformists and hardliners have alternated in the presidency making it difficult for a consistent policy towards accommodating Kurdish demands and a gradual liberalisation in the area of minority rights to be pursued. During Khatami's two terms as the president from 1997 to 2005, we can highlight a softening attitude. Khatami was a moderate on many issues and framed his election campaign under the banner 'An Iran for all Iranians'. Examples of softening of harsh policies targeting the Kurds include increase in Kurdish cultural practices. In the February 2000 parliamentary elections the conservatives were defeated in Iran and subsequently 'Khatami's policies opened up cultural and political space in a way that many Kurds could not remember in their lifetimes' (Stansfield 2014, p. 76). The Kurds engaged in cultural activities such as publishing journals and establishing literary and cultural societies and these activities were taking place in the grassroots levels. However, Khatami was ultimately not able to push through a wider scale of reforms in Iran as the ultimate power lied with the clerics and the Supreme Leader in Iran.

Hence, the extent Iran under moderates is willing or able to accommodate difference or recognise cultural and political pluralism remains to be seen. Although Iran experienced a freer cultural and political

environment during moderate presidencies, the steps taken were limited by the fact that many in the reform movement share the similar ideas as the hardliners. This is because many people in the reformist camp were in the revolutionary guards and in bureaucracy of the Islamic republic and took part in the suppression of Kurdish demands in Iran. These include prominent individuals who were involved in the suppression and gross human rights violations against the Kurds during the insurgency, such as Hamid Reza Jalaipour who gave the order to execute 59 Kurdish youth during the insurgency in the early 1980s (Entessar 2014, p. 215). Moreover, the limited democratic gains made under the moderates began to be reversed when a hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as the President in 2005 (Vali 2016, p. 299). In the 2005 presidential election, the moderate candidate Ali Akbar Hashimi Rafsanjani was defeated by the conservative candidate Ahmadinejad, who was responsible for the military operations against the Kurds during the 1980s and was also involved in imposing state authority in Kurdish majority regions of Iran. He was re-elected in 2009 for another four years.

Hence, the period 2005–2013 witnessed much less space for Kurdish political expression as well as cultural production. Kurdish language newspapers were closed down—Ashti and Asou—and several Kurdish activists received death sentences in mid-2008. Sirwan and Hawar magazines were also closed down (Entessar 2014, pp. 217–218). The restrictions on Kurdish language publication continue as a number of Kurdish cultural and political magazines were closed down by the authorities (WKI 2016). The momentum for reform and addressing the demands of the diverse ethnic groups in Iran seems to have accelerated after the presidential election in 2013, which resulted in the moderate reformist Hassan Rouhani gaining power. The voter turnout in Kurdish majority regions of Iran has been lower than the national average indicating that Rouhani's reformist agenda has not successfully appealed to the Kurds (Jun 2013).

In addition, the slow pace of reforms under President Khatami's rule and their reversal under Ahmadinejad has increased the sense of scepticism that many Kurds in Iran feels towards the promises of reforms for betterment of their political conditions. The various officials appointed by Rouhani have emphasised the need to introduce a new approach to managing the ethnic questions and improve the Kurds' situation (Entessar 2014, pp. 220–221). So far nothing concrete has

taken place. In a visit to Mahabad in May 2016, Rouhani promised to improve Kurdish language rights in Iran as part of his attempts to provide equal opportunities for all ethnic groups (Rudaw 2016). While the pace of reforms has been frustrating for the Kurdish minority, the fact that the need to broaden the rights of the ethnic minorities has become part of the public debate indicates a willingness on the part of the state authorities to engage with the demands raised by the Kurdish minority. However, so far Iran has been keen to maintain the *status qua* and a far-reaching reform programme needed to address demands and grievances of the Kurds is yet to emerge.

In the past three decades, the Kurds' rise as a new regional actor in the Middle East has been gaining momentum. Kurdish political activism has reached a new height in the beginning of the twenty-first century with Kurdish movements in Iraq, Turkey and Syria establishing themselves as a significant force in the domestic politics of these states as well as important political actors in the region. The revival of Kurdish movement in Iran in the past decade fits well with the established trend of Kurdish resurgence in the Middle East and is connected to the political developments taking place in the majority Kurdish populated regions of Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The political developments in the pan-Kurdish space are providing the Kurds of Iran with opportunities to pursue their political demands and increase their activism.

The establishment and existence of the KRI has also had a tremendous impact on the fortunes of the Kurdish political parties in Iran. The KRI has made significant progress in the past 25 years in terms of building state institutions and strengthening its legitimacy internationally to become the most significant Kurdish actor. The transformation in the discourse of the KDPI and Komala towards conceiving the solution of the Kurdish question in Iran in terms of a federalist solution also indicates the ideological influence of the KRI and the role it plays as a role model for the Kurdish political parties in Iran. Currently, these parties have bases on the Iran-KRI border areas and have been training their fighters there. This is a significant resource to have because being based in the territory of the KRI provides them relative security and protection from the Iranian armed forces and so far has proved crucial for the parties in their attempts to re-launch their political and military activities.

In addition, the PJAK has also been based in the KRI and has used the space and opportunities provided to carry out its military campaign against Iran. As mentioned above, the KDPI fighters carried

out a number of attacks against the Iranian security forces in summer 2016 from their headquarters and bases in the KRI. While being based at the KRI has been beneficial until now, it is doubtful that the KDPI will engage in a prolonged war as it does not currently have the military capability and resources to challenge Iran. Also an insurgency against Iran using the KRI territory will increase the tensions in the KRI–Iran relations and as such will not be supported by the Kurdish authorities in Erbil. This is because for its security, stability and future ambitions of independence, the KRI needs to maintain good relations with Iran and will likely take action to constrain the actions of Iranian Kurdish political parties in its territory.

The existence of the PKK, its activities in Turkey during the 1990s and its influence over the Kurds of Iran needs to be also emphasised. The PKK's active struggle has meant that Iran's Kurds could still engage in political activities connected with securing Kurdish rights even though their own political parties were experiencing serious difficulties in their struggle against Iran. The PKK is generally associated with the Kurds of Turkey but continues to harbour pan-Kurdish ambitions and has established itself as an important non-state actor in the region during the past three decades. It has managed to survive and grow as a movement despite Turkish army's ongoing attempts to destroy it (Gunes 2012). The military defeat of the Kurdish insurgency in Iran in 1983, the subsequent fragmentation of the Iranian Kurdish movement and its failure to re-establish a strong presence inside Iran has made the PKK as an attractive actor for the Kurds in Iran (Stansfield 2014, p. 77).

The decline of Kurdish movement in Iran has opened a space for the PKK to mobilise the Kurds of Iran. Having established bases and a strong presence especially in the mountainous regions where the borders of Iraq, Iran and Turkey meets during the 1990s and 2000s, has enabled the PKK to connect with Kurds populations living in the rural areas of Iran and even managed to recruit them into its ranks. Since the early 2000s, the PKK has been based in the Qandil Mountains near the Iran-KRI border and has been able to establish and build links with the Kurdish communities on the Iranian side of the border. The popularity of the PKK amongst the Kurds of Iran was visible as early as the late 1990s and especially during the large-scale demonstrations in many of the Kurdish populated towns in Iran after the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was caught by the Turkish intelligence services and brought to Turkey in 1999.

The developments taking place in the KRI and the Kurdish majority regions of Syria have also created opportunities for the Kurds of Iran to be more actively engaged in pan-Kurdish forms of political activism leading to a strengthening of a common Kurdish identity and struggle for rights. The Kurds of Iran have been increasingly taking part in instances of pan-Kurdish mobilisation, particularly in the Kurdish campaign against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in Syria since 2013. In addition, Kurdish forces from Iran have been participating in the Kurdish military campaign against ISIS in Iraq with the Party of Freedom of Kurdistan (PAK) fighting alongside the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces since the summer of 2014 (Bakker 2016). The party was established by Kurds from Iran in the KRI in 1991 but took its current name in 2007.

The existence of an Iranian Kurdish Diaspora in many of the European states is also an important factor as it too increased the opportunities and resources that the Iranian Kurdish political parties have at their disposal. The political parties have been able to establish a visible presence amongst Kurdish communities in Europe and cultivate relations with organisations and social movements there to increase the international awareness of their struggle. Representatives of the KDPI branch led by Mustafa Hijri are active in numerous European countries and conducts diplomacy and lobbying activities to draw attention to the situation of the Kurds in Iran. Being based in Europe has also enabled Kurdish political parties to establish and manage their media and information network that they use to channel their discourse and party political broadcasts to their target audience in Iran. In the past decade, the political parties have established and are operating their TV stations in Europe to broadcast to Iran and they include the following: Tishk TV belonging to the KDPI, Kurd Channel belonging to another faction of the KDPI, Rojhelat TV belonging to the Komala, Komala TV belonging to another faction of the Komala known as the Kurdistan Branch of Iranian Communist Party, and the Newroz TV belonging to the PJAK (Ahmedzadeh and Stansfield 2010, p. 24; Ghazi 2016). Programmes about the parties' political history, their political struggle and commentary about the current affairs are offered in these TV channels.

During the past decade, Kurdish political parties have not been able to connect with the popular masses sufficiently as their access was cut-off. At the same time, Iran has not been able to destroy the Kurdish political parties who have been able to regroup and restart their activities in the KRI. The widespread state oppression has meant the leading cadres of

the Kurdish political parties had to leave Iran and continue their activities in the KRI and in the Diaspora in Europe, which has created further difficulties for the political parties to connect with the Kurds in Iran. The existence of widespread grievances among the Kurds in Iran means the potential for discord and nationalist agitation is very much present. A number of popular protests and riots in Kurdish majority regions of Iran during the past decade have drawn attention to the plight of the Kurds. The Iranian state's inflexible attitude to the accommodation of the demands of the Kurds has been challenged and loosened by the reformist President Khatami but the progress was reversed under Ahmadinejad's presidency. Reforms to widen the remits of Kurdish rights in Iran have been raised by the Rouhani administration but so far few steps have been taken. It is early to say what future steps Iran will be taken but the continuation of Kurdish grievances and the rise of Kurdish political parties in Iran, including the occasional military conflict with the Iranian forces, indicate that Kurdish dissent and discontent is likely to continue into future.

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CHAPTER 6

Kurdish Prospects in a Volatile Middle East

Abstract This chapter assesses the impact Kurdish political actors and entities are having on regional politics and their prospects in light of the changing national and regional political contexts. Undoubtedly, the military and political reach of Kurdish actors in the region is much greater than before but their ability to exploit the opportunities available to them is constrained by the actions of the regional powers, most notably Turkey and Iran, who remain deeply opposed to Kurdish aspirations. While the highly volatile contexts within which Kurdish movements and entities are operating create difficulties for academic observers to evaluate Kurdish prospects, situating the state-level developments in different Kurdish conflicts within the developments at the regional level will nevertheless enable us to identify the factors that will affect the future course of Kurdish conflicts in the Middle East.

Keywords Kurdish resurgence · Kurdish question in the Middle East · Iraq · Iran · Turkey · Syria

In a comment published by the *Financial Times*, Henri Barkey, a renowned US expert on the politics of the Middle East, states: 'The Kurds have never been as influential in the Middle East as they are today' (Barkey 2016). Similar sentiments are echoed by Ofra Bengio, an Israeli expert of the politics and history of the Middle East, who argues that

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the old Iraqi, Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian 'state consensus on forcefully repressing Kurdish aspirations appears fatally weakened' (Bengio 2014, p. 279). The developments in Syria since 2011 and Iraq since 2014 have brought the long-term viability of the existing state system in the Middle East under the spotlight (Fawcett 2017; Zartman 2017). Historically, one of the main challenges to the existing state order in the Middle East has come from the Kurds and Kurdish resurgence in the past decade has raised questions about the long-term viability of the existing states and international borders. While the developments in the region have created the conditions for the Kurds to play a more active role in the politics of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the Kurds are located in a region characterised by an enduring conflict formation and throughout the twentieth century had to contend with deep-rooted and more powerful nationalisms. Therefore, it is possible that the dominant regional powers will, once again, unite in their opposition to Kurdish aspirations and to keep the status qua in the region intact.

Historically, the policies of the states with a Kurdish population have been shaped around repression and denial of Kurdish rights and such a framework still dominates the thinking of the policymakers. For Iran and Turkey—the two regional powers that have a significant Kurdish population—Kurdish resurgence in the Middle East is seen as a domestic and regional level security threat as well as a barrier to their ambitions to extend their political influence in the region. The regional level perceptions of security constraint Kurdish actors' ability to reap the benefits of their decades-long political struggle. They also influence the options of the global powers in their attempts to shape the regional developments. The positions of Kurdish actors and entities are strengthened by the stronger ties they have managed to build with the international powers involved in the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria. Also, individual Kurdish conflicts have become incorporated into the existing patterns of conflict and cooperation in the region and their evolution has a significant impact on the course of the conflicts in both Syria and Iraq.

In Iraq and Syria, Kurdish resurgence has been aided by US protection and support and the Kurds' future success is strongly tied to its continuation. However, the United States does not have a 'grand foreign policy strategy towards the Kurds' and it is difficult to envision that such a strategy will emerge soon (Gunter 2015, p. 108). Despite the

absence of an overall grand strategy, the view that the Kurds are playing an important role in combating ISIS has gained widespread acceptance within the international security circles: 'The West came to see the Kurds as reliable allies in the battle against ISIS, and a bulwark against religious extremism, a fact that should lend them significant political capital as regional crises reach their denouement and eventual resolution' (Gourlay 2016, p. 122). Regional security practices can be transformed and the change in the way security is perceived internationally can pave the way towards a transformation of the security perception of the regional powers. However, this change in the international security perceptions is yet to be translated into the regional perceptions of security, which continue to frame the Kurds as a threat. Whether the Kurds' involvement in the international campaign against ISIS and the support they receive from international powers will lead to de-securitisation of the Kurdish question in the region remains to be seen.

As the analysis presented in the preceding chapters demonstrated, the Kurdish question in the Middle East is a historic conflict and it has been a major source of tension and instability in the region. The involvement of multiple actors and the persistence of violence make the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East one of the most complex ethno-political problems in the world. The opportunities that emerged for Kurdish movements and entities as a result of the changing regional and global developments are of prime importance when assessing the prospects of different Kurdish movements and entities. The idea of Kurdish independence receives strong opposition from the neighbouring states, particularly Turkey and Iran and the international powers also opposed the KRI's independence referendum in September 2017. Kurdish demands can be accommodated within the existing state boundaries if the current centralised structure of the existing states in the region is decentralised and a new political culture that recognises diversity and political pluralism takes root. For this to be realised, a new regional level framework for the accommodation of Kurdish rights is needed. More broadly, the transformation and peaceful resolution of Kurdish conflicts in the region needs to be incorporated into the international community's efforts to build peace and stability in the wider region. A new regional consensus on the accommodation of Kurdish demands for autonomy within the existing state boundaries needs to be built.

6.1 Opposition to Kurdish Aspirations

Currently, the view that the realisation of Kurdish aspirations will increase political instability in the Middle East and possibly threaten the territorial integrity of states remains popular and Kurdish demands for independence, autonomy or self-government continue to face strong opposition from the regional powers. One of the main objections to Kurdish ambitions in the region comes from Turkey, which has doubled its efforts in recent years to repress its Kurdish movement and prevent Kurdish ascendency in Syria. Turkey has a long history of suppressing Kurdish rights and demands and such a position shapes its attitude towards the Kurds in Syria. As discussed in Chapter 3, the AKP government started a dialogue with the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in January 2013 but the talks collapsed in April 2015. Furthermore, despite the dialogue process continuing for more than two years, it did not bring about any significant transformation in the way Kurdish question is conceptualised by the state and main political actors in Turkey. In fact, very little progress was made from the mid-2000s onwards in terms of developing policies to address the core Kurdish political demands, such as education in the Kurdish language (Gunes 2012a, p. 146; b, 2014). Additionally, throughout the recent years, the AKP government continued to rely on the anti-terror discourse to marginalise the Kurdish movement in Turkey and prevent the rising international legitimacy of the Kurdish-led autonomous entity in Syria.

Both the pro-Kurdish movement in Turkey and the Kurdish forces in Syria have been represented as extensions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which has been involved in an insurgency against Turkey since 1984. The view that the pro-Kurdish movement is an extension of the PKK is a long established one and has been used by the state to close-down several pro-Kurdish political parties during the 1990s and 2000s. Turkey has the biggest Kurdish population and there are also close cultural ties between the Kurdish communities in Turkey and Syria. The dominant Kurdish political party in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), was established by the former Syrian Kurdish members of the PKK and its political demands have been influenced by the PKK's ideology. However, it is worth mentioning that both parties reject the claim and argue that their connection does not go beyond sharing the same ideological outlook (Khalil 2017). The US authorities have also rejected the Turkish claim that the Syrian Kurdish forces

are linked to the PKK (Hürriyet Daily News 2017a). Turkey fears that the consolidation of Kurdish-led autonomy as a threat to its interests and security because it will increase the power of the PKK as a regional actor. Consequently, preventing the Kurds from establishing themselves as an important actor in Syria has become a key objective of Turkey's foreign policy.

Initially Turkey sought to achieve this objective through supporting the Syrian opposition's efforts to overthrow Assad's rule and in its place install a government with close ideological affiliation to AKP's brand of conservative Islamism. In line with such a position, it disregarded the activities of Sunni militants who used Turkey as a transit route for its recruits to enter Syria: 'From 2011, when its foreign policy outlook assumed a staunchly pro-Sunni hue and its antipathy toward Assad increased, Turkey allowed the free movement of Sunni militants across the Turkey-Syria border' (Gourlay 2016, p. 121; *see also* Gunter 2015, p. 103). After the Russian military intervention in Syria, Turkey realised that it was unlikely to shape the post-conflict Syria in its own image and began to pursue a policy that had keeping the existing status quo as its main objective.

The US–Kurdish cooperation in Syria has become a significant concern for Turkey and much diplomatic effort during the past few years has gone into convincing the United States to sever its ties with the Kurdish-led de facto autonomous administration in northern Syria. With tacit support from both Russia and the United States, Turkey militarily interfered in northwest Syria in November 2016 in order to stop the Kurdish forces join together the Afrin region in north-west with the other areas they control in the north and northeast of Syria. It increased its military presence in January 2018 with a military offensive in Afrin region to dislodge the Kurdish forces and the region's political administration, which it completed on 24 March 2018. Turkish government officials have frequently threatened to invade all of the territories of the Kurdish-led autonomous entity in Syria (Cockburn 2018). In June 2018, Turkish pressure paid some dividends when the US and Turkey agreed on a joint plan for the future administration of Manbij city (Associated Press 2018). As part of the plan, the Kurdish forces have withdrawn from the city and a Turkish-US joint security framework is expected to be implemented in future but its exact details have not been made public.

Also, in order to increase its leverage in the post-conflict Syria and influence the shape of future peace process, Turkey began to work closer with Russia and Iran. As part of this policy from January 2017 onwards, Turkey began to engage in the Astana process with Russia and Iran, which seeks to exclude the Kurds from becoming part of the negotiations to end the conflict in Syria. As a result, Turkey has increased its military presence in the Idlip province controlled by the Islamist and opposition forces and set up observation points as part of the de-confliction efforts. In addition, Turkey began to adopt a highly securitised regime in its management of Turkey–Syria border from mid-2015 onwards (Okyay 2017). This policy is exemplified by the building of a 3 metres high concrete border wall along the Turkey–Syria border, which was completed in 2018 (Hürriyet Daily News 2017b).

While Turkey has not managed to bring about a peaceful solution to its own Kurdish conflict and remains opposed to the Kurdish autonomy in Syria, it has been developing in the past decade strong political and economic ties with the KRI. In fact, Turkey's relations with the Iraqi Kurds date back to the 1990s but we have seen a deepening of this relationship in the past decade. This has come about as a result of the deterioration of relations between the AKP in Turkey and Iraq's Shia dominated government and Turkey's desire to counter Iran's growing influence in Iraq as a result of political instability and its Shia political allies coming to power after 2005. Turkey had a historical claim to Mosul and the existence of the Turkmen minority in Kirkuk has been another issue that Turkey has concerned itself with and used it its opposition to the Kurds gaining control of the disputed city of Kirkuk. Turkey's relationship with the KRI has occasionally been strained by the tensions arising from the PKK's presence in the Qandil Mountains in the KRI and it cultivated closer ties with Iraqi Kurdish political parties as a way of managing the PKK threat (Bengio 2012, pp. 252–253). The KRI has however, been careful about protecting its relationship with Turkey from the impact of developments in Syria's Kurdish regions (Gunes and Lowe 2015, p. 10). In early 2018, the presence of PKK guerrillas in the Sinjar Mountains in Iraq became a source of tension, with Turkey threatening to carry out a military operation. The PKK withdrew its guerrillas in March 2018 in order to prevent a Turkish operation (Toksabay and Jalabi 2018).

Turkey has deeply penetrated the KRI and Turkish military and intelligence bases have been in existence since the early 1990s.

Turkey has conducted military operations inside the territory controlled by the Kurdish political parties since the late 1980s and carried out joint operations with the KDP and PUK *peshmerga* forces against the PKK guerrillas in autumn 1992 (Gunes 2012a, p. 130). In recent years, it has increased its military presence in the KRI and according to the then Turkish prime minister Binali Yıldırım, in June 2018, Turkey had 11 military bases inside the KRI territory in order to prevent the movement of the PKK guerrillas and prevent them entering Turkey (Munyar 2018). The KRI and the Kurdish forces in Syria controlled part of the Iraq–Syria border but Turkey exerted much pressure on the KRI to restrict the movements of people and goods between the two Kurdish entities. However, despite being a close ally of the KRI and having deep economic and political ties, Turkey remained a vocal opponent of Kurdish independence.

Iran is another regional power that remains opposed to the Kurdish aspirations in the region and similar to Turkey, the Kurdish question is both a domestic and foreign policy issue for Iran. Iran is a regional power that has established strong ties with a number of state and non-state actors in the region and it is indirectly involved in sectarian conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Iran had a close relation with Iraq's Shia opposition and these relations deepened after the Iraq War and the establishment of a Shia dominated government in Bagdad, leading to an increase in Iran's influence in Iraqi domestic politics. In recent years, Iran's influence in Iraq increased because of its involvement in the battle against ISIS (Lister 2015).

The Iran-Syria alliance dates back to the 1980s when Assad backed Iran in the Iran-Iraq war and the defence of the Syrian state became one of the key objectives of Iran after the conflict broke out in 2011: 'Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war can be seen as part of a larger regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran and the Western powers on the other who are pressuring Iran to dismantle its nuclear programme' (Kirmanj and Sadq 2018, p. 154). Iran is directly involved in the Syrian conflict through its *al-Quds* force that operate alongside the Syrian Army and also through the groups that it funds and supports, such as the Lebanese *Hezbollah* (Kirmanj and Sadq 2018, p. 164).

Consequently, Kurdish resurgence has the potential to diminish the power and influence of two of Iran's regional allies. In fact, the

establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq has been a major concern for Iran: 'Iran, aiming to stem minority agitation within its own borders, has traditionally been wary of Kurdish attempts at autonomy, especially in Iraq' (Gourlay 2016, p. 112). However, with time and similar to the actions of Turkey, Iran too managed to forge close cultural, political and economic relations with the KRI and these relations have been growing in the past decade. The volume of trade between the KRI and Iran grew significantly 'over the past fifteen years from US$100 million in 2000 to over $4 billion in 2014' (Laoutides 2016, p. 100). Iran was one of the first states to provide military aid to KRI during ISIS attacks in August 2014 and there was a dialogue between KRI and Iran for offering financial aid to manage the financial crisis the KRI was facing because of Iraqi federal government stopping its allocated budget payments (Hussein and Muhammed 2016). However, like Turkey, Iran too remains opposed to Kurdish independence but it has not been affected by the developments in Syria and Iraq as much as Turkey, which explains its somewhat calmer attitude to the developments in Kurdish regions (Moradi 2016). The close ties between the Kurds and the US in both Iraq and Syria also is a concern for Iran as diminishing the US's power and influence in the region has been a key foreign policy issue for Iran. Iran opposed to KRI's independence from Iraq on grounds that it will destabilise the region. Furthermore, it views Kurdish nationalist aspirations in Iran as well as regionally and Kurdish demand for an independent Kurdish state in Iraq as part of a 'Zionist plot' and strongly opposes it on grounds that it will only serve Israel's interest (Ahronheim 2016).

The KRI has sought to improve its ties with other regional powers in recent years. On 1 December 2015, the KRI's President Barzani visited Saudi Arabia and in February 2016 a Saudi Consulate General in Erbil was opened (Rudaw 2016). Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states don't have direct relations with the Kurds other than the KRI but generally speaking opposes Kurdish autonomy in the region because of fears that it will lead to greater regional instability. Given Turkey's strong opposition to the Kurdish gains an also the ideological differences between the Kurds in Syria and Saudi Arabia means that the likelihood of the development of Kurdish-Saudi relations are minor. The image of a decentralised democratic and secular Middle East that the Kurds advocate is in stark contrast with the Sunni regime that Saudi Arabia works towards achieving in Syria.

While both Turkey and Iran remain opposed to Kurdish aspirations in the Middle East, their options are constrained by the involvement of the international powers in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Iran's growing presence and influence in Syria has become key concern for the other states in the region, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, and consequently reducing it has become a key objective of the US policy. Additionally, the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran and imposing sanctions is likely to further reduce Iran's ability to shape the course of developments in Syria. Similarly, Turkey's possible future actions in Syria are constrained by the US and Russian objectives and depends on whether both parties will be willing to accommodate Turkish requests. Hence, whether Turkey will be able to maintain its presence in the long-term in north-west of Syria remains to be seen but it is possible that these areas may become a site of a conflict between the state forces backed by Russia and the Turkish backed militias. Calls for Turkish withdrawal from Syria are likely to be made as both Russia and Syria view Turkish presence in northwest Syria as temporary. Also, a large section of the Sunni militants that control Idlib are considered as terrorist and it is highly likely that a military offensive by the Syrian state forces and Russia to take the control of governorate will be conducted in the coming months.

6.2 Kurdish Prospects in the Middle East

In Iraq since 1991 and Syria since 2012, the sovereign control of the states over the territories of the Kurdish entities has significantly weakened but the existing state order in the region remains intact and attempts at a new configuration of it that reflects the ethno-political divisions face strong regional and international opposition (Zartman 2017). The KRI's independence bid demonstrated that there are significant barriers to the establishment of a Kurdish state as it will not secure the necessary recognition by other states and the international community. Therefore, forms of autonomy and self-governance within the existing states to address the popular Kurdish demands remains a more realisable option for the Kurds. The prospects for Kurdish autonomy is closely tied to the transformation and eventually finding a political settlement for the numerous Kurdish conflicts.

Each Kurdish actor has a different level of engagement with the regional and international powers. Among all of the Kurdish actors,

the KRI is the most recognised and internationally supported actor. As Chapter 2 has discussed in detail, the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq has not been totally satisfactory and the need for further reform has become clear in recent years. So far, however, further reform to address the Kurdish demands in Iraq has not been possible due to political difficulties the country faces. For the dominant Kurdish actors in the KRI, autonomy is seen as an insufficient outcome of a temporary compromise and the first step towards an independent Kurdish state. The Kurdish political elites have been quite open about their desire to secede from Iraq, but given the widespread opposition from the regional powers to Kurdish independence, secession through unilateral action does not seem like a realistic approach in the current political environment. Also, the mechanism designed to resolve the issue of the disputed territories has not functioned as intended and autonomy has not totally ended the Kurds' marginalisation in Iraq, which became more manifest particularly during the Premiership of Nouri al-Maliki (2010–2014) and has heightened the Kurds' secessionist desires. For the federal government and other dominant Arab actors, attempts to reform autonomy and resolve the final status of the disputed territories is seen as a concession to the Kurds that would strengthen them in their eventual attempt to secede from Iraq. Hence, so far the debate had a polarising effect on inter-ethnic relations and increased conflict and competition.

In the past decade, the KRI put much effort on developing international relations but this was done at the expense of developing ties with the domestic actors in Iraq (Natali 2012, p. 111). It had hoped to use its relations with the US and other western powers to increase its leverage within Iraq but despite the KRI's intensive diplomacy the international support was not forthcoming when the independence referendum was carried out. The support the KRI receives from the US and its other western allies is crucial to its long-term stability and security but their support depends on the KRI remaining a part of a united Iraqi state. Following the failed independence bid, remaining within Iraq and addressing the problems through dialogue with the Iraqi government remains the only choice in the short and medium term. In fact, in the post-referendum period, both the KDP and the PUK have been building their ties with the other Iraqi political actors and they are expected to participate in the negotiations to form a new government in Iraq, which could provide the political actors in the KRI with an avenue to re-establish themselves as important partners to the Arab Iraqi political

actors in Iraq. However, much depends on their ability to develop constructive relations with the new government in Baghdad but their relatively weaker position reduces their ability to safeguard the gains the Kurds have made in the post-Saddam era. For the future stability and security of the KRI, widespread reform and democratic progress is needed. Stronger institutions and greater transparency can set the KRI on a path to progress and democratic consolidation. The issue of political reform is pushed forward by the popular bases as well as the disgruntled elites but it is too early to see if the KDP and PUK—the dominant parties in the KRI—would be willing to initiate widespread democratic reforms.

The most challenging issue to address is the final status of the Kirkuk governorate. In fact, the final status of Kirkuk has been a bone of contention between the Kurdish parties and the government of Iraq since the first autonomy agreement in 1970. An administrative framework based on decentralisation and power-sharing suitable for Kirkuk's multi-ethnic character, as has been suggested by existing studies, would contribute to the development of a more positive debate and dialogue. Regardless of whether Kirkuk becomes part of the KRI or remains under the control of the federal government, extensive autonomy needs to be granted to the governorate in order to reduce inter-ethnic tensions. Focusing on a power-sharing arrangement rather than territorial control and competition over who will 'own' Kirkuk can eliminate the impasse and open up possibilities for improving the KRI-Iraq relations.

Furthermore, greater effort to address the rights of smaller minorities via forms of self-government based on cultural autonomy can be incorporated into the overall arrangements to offer greater representation and protection of all ethnic and religious groups within the KRI and Iraq, such as the Syriacs, Turkmens and Yazidis. A similar discussion is advanced by Barkey and Gavrilis (2016, p. 38) who argue that because of the dispersal of the population of minorities, Iraq offers an excellent context for developing a framework derived from the Ottoman *Millet* System, if practical difficulties can be resolved. Hence, a more inclusive approach to autonomy that takes into account the heterogeneity of the region and addresses the rights of all ethno-cultural groups has a higher possibility of success. The idea of the KRI remaining part of Iraq but obtaining a greater degree of autonomy has also been floated in the debate recently, with a

recent commentary by Falah Mustafa Bakir—the foreign minister of the KRI—arguing for institutional reform in Iraq towards a confederal political framework (Bakir 2018). Although currently there is little support for such a framework among the dominant Arab actors in Iraq, the idea will retain its relevance, as it can address the demands of the Kurds for greater representation and keep the unity of Iraq as a state intact.

Assessing the Kurdish prospects in Syria is a more difficult task because of the fluidity of the situation there and the involvement of numerous regional and international actors with diverging objectives in the conflict. Since the Russian military intervention in Syria began in September 2015, the Syrian army and affiliated militias have been making steady progress towards re-establishing the state's control in areas previously controlled by the Islamist and opposition groups. Since the beginning of 2015, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has also increased the territory they control by capturing the areas under the control of ISIS. Since August 2016, Turkey has increased its military presence in northern and north-western Syria and as discussed above, Turkish military intervention has increasingly targeted the Kurdish controlled regions and is primarily based on empowering its Turkmens and Arab allies. It remains to be seen whether these three distinct zones of influence will lead to de facto federalisation of Syria or the Syrian army will attempt to bring all of Syria under its control through military means. The likelihood of reuniting Syria as a state under a single unitary government in the short and medium term remains low and reconstructing Syria as a decentralised political entity can significantly aid the stabilisation process. However, under which terms will the Kurdish-led autonomous entity and the Turkish controlled regions of Syria will be re-integrated back into the Syrian state remains to be seen. The achievements of Kurds in Syria so far have been nothing short of remarkable but their prospects depend on the future trajectory of the conflict and whether an agreement with the Syrian state can be found.

Being one of the few forces that has the military power and know-how to defeat ISIS reinforces the importance of the SDF for the ongoing international campaign against ISIS and similar groups. In fact, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) managed to manoeuvre out of a very tricky situation because it managed to establish itself as an integral part of the campaign against ISIS and the leverage they obtained as a result of it enabled them to pursue their objective

of building a decentralised administrative framework. In recent years, DFNS has taken steps towards consolidating its authority by creating local administrative bodies that offer representation to all of the region's communities.

The DFNS has been strengthening its position via cultivating stronger political and military relations with the international powers involved in the region, such as the US and France. At the present, the US is committed to the protection of the DFNS territory east of the Euphrates River and the US policy has been shaped around the need to combat ISIS and prevent its re-emergence in the Iraq-Syria border regions. In the course of the Syrian civil war, the US provided military and political support to other Syrian opposition groups but in recent years it withdrew its support. Hence, while the US ending its commitment and support to the DFNS is within the bounds of possibility, recent statements by US military officials indicate that it is likely to continue (Borger et al. 2018). Unlike the case for the Syrian opposition, the US support for the Kurdish-led forces is provided as part of its efforts to defeat ISIS and prevent its re-emergence in Syria and Iraq. In addition, Iran's increased influence and military presence in Syria has began to be seen as a threat to the peace and the balance of power in the region and consequently pushing back Iran has become another policy objective of the US, which increases the likelihood of continual US presence in Syria (Brave 2018). While the US's long-term policy is uncertain at the moment, it is likely that it will maintain a military presence in Syria in the medium term to influence the political settlement in Syria (Fawcett 2017, p. 793).

The international powers involved in the conflict in Syria, such as the US and Russia, are more receptive to the idea of the accommodation of Kurdish rights within the framework of a united Syria. The Kurd's relations with the international powers affect the approach the regional powers are taking towards the Kurds. The US has been working with the Kurdish-led forces in Syria despite the protestations from Turkey, which is a long-term ally and fellow NATO member state. So far, various factors have prevented the Kurds from participating in the efforts by the UN to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria, such as the Geneva process. The exclusion of the Kurdish-led administration was seen as necessary in order to secure the participation of Turkey and the Syrian opposition groups that it supports. As a result of the significant change in the balance of power in the conflict following the Russian military intervention in 2015, Turkey currently does not have the power or

influence to shape the outcome of the conflict but it still has the potential to spoil any settlement that it deems against its interests. The Syrian state is also unlikely to recognise the level of autonomy demanded by the Kurds and it remains committed to retaking the control of all Syrian territory but its actions will be determined by the facts on the ground and whether the US and its allies are willing to protect the DFNS against a possible military assault by the Syrian army. So far, there has not been any significant military confrontation between the Kurdish-led military forces and Syrian army but this has been mainly due to the fact that the conflict severely reduced the ability of Syrian army to fight on a number of fronts.

The situation of Kurds in Turkey is also rather precarious and the positive developments that took place in the conflict during the 2000s and the first half of 2010s have all been reversed in a short space of time. In the past decade, despite the existence of significant opportunities to resolve the conflict, Turkey has failed to develop a new policy framework to transform and eventually end it. The recognition of Kurdish identity, and associated rights, requires major changes in Turkey's identity as a state but the public debate so far reveals the ideological rigidity of Turkish nationalism and its hesitation in accepting the legitimacy of Kurdish political demands and rights. Kurdish demands and group rights continue to be rejected by the state and government in Turkey on grounds that they promote separatism. The lack of recent historical precedents for Kurdish autonomy, the ongoing violent conflict and the continued hegemony of Turkish nationalism makes constitutional reform to accommodate the demands of the Kurds in Turkey more difficult (Bayır 2013a, b).

In the past decade, the main political parties and organisations that represent the Kurds in Turkey began to develop 'Democratic Autonomy' as a framework to address the Kurdish demands, which proposes the constitutional recognition of the Kurds as a nation and decentralisation of Turkey's political structure (Gunes 2013). Taking into account the geographic dispersion of the Kurds, it seeks to develop self-governing Kurdish communities that are able to develop their identity and culture. An approach based on territorial decentralisation has greater chance of acceptance by the state in Turkey and would be seen less of a separatist step. However, such a comprehensive reform process can only be initiated by a new constitutional framework that recognises the country's national pluralism and promotes decentralisation of political power, which is unlikely in the current political environment in Turkey.

The domestic level developments in Turkey indicate that the ongoing militarization and acceleration being experienced in the conflict since 2015 will continue. In the past year, Turkey's counter-insurgency has spread to the KRI territory and Syria and the possibility of conducting a large-scale ground operation to the PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains, with support from Iraq and Iran, has been mentioned. As part of its new counter-insurgency strategy, Turkish army has been conducting regular air strikes in the KRI against the PKK bases and increasingly uses military drones for surveillance and to carry attacks. This may weaken the PKK's ability to carry out attacks against Turkish military inside Turkey but over the years, the PKK has proved to be a very resilient organisation and its military activities take place in a very large mountainous region. In addition, as a military organisation, it has demonstrated a surprising level of adaptability and capacity to change its tactics in line with the changing circumstances and Turkey's military operations are unlikely to totally eliminate the PKK's presence in the region. Previously during the 2000s, the transformation in the conflict was achieved as a result of the interventions by the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan through his lawyers. His communication with the outside world has been severely restricted and the requests by his lawyers to visit him have been rejected repeatedly by the Justice Ministry, which has deprived him the chance to intervene.

The AKP has been relying on conflict acceleration to mobilise Turkish nationalist votes and pacify the HDP as a centre of opposition to its authoritarianism and currently there are very little incentives to de-escalate the conflict and re-start the peace process with the PKK. The HDP's ability to influence the political developments in Turkey and campaign for a peaceful solution for the Kurdish conflict has been significantly reduced because of the ongoing securitisation of the Kurdish question. The results of the last general election held in Turkey on 24 June 2018 showed that the HDP is keeping its electoral support base and it managed to win 67 seats in the parliament but due to centralisation of power in the office of the presidency in Turkey's new presidential system, the parliament's ability to influence decisions and provide oversight to the executive branch has been reduced greatly. President Erdoğan has continued to rely on Turkish nationalism to mobilise popular support for the executive style presidency and the nationalist alliance between the AKP and MHP has led to the adoption of harsher measures to deal with the Kurdish opposition. The current indications suggest that Erdoğan's nationalist approach will continue during the process

of regime consolidation. The previous reforms carried out in Turkey in the area of Kurdish rights were done in accordance with meeting the EU accession conditions but since 2013, Turkey's accession talks with the EU have stalled. Currently, there is very little enthusiasm remains for reviving Turkey's EU accession negotiations, which further reduce the possibility of developing policies to address Kurdish rights and demands.

The current situation of the Kurds in Iran seems likely to continue in the short and medium term. The Kurdish movement in Iran has faced many setbacks throughout its history but the Kurdish political parties have managed to re-group and continue their activities. Iran has been very effective in dealing with the Kurdish resistance and managed to prevent the emergence of a popular resistance inside Iran despite the recent signs of revival. Although Iran's Islamic regime has been very resilient and managed to consolidate its authority, it continues to face a number of domestic challenges as well as the continuing international pressure. The US's policy to keep the balance of power in the region in favour of its allies and to safeguard their interests suggests that this pressure is likely to increase. The US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear deal and re-imposing economic sanctions has the potential to destabilise Iran, which in turn can create more opportunities for the Kurdish political parties to organise stronger forms of resistance. On the other hand, it may also incentivise Iran to pursue a harsher more violent policy towards the Kurdish political activists and even attempt to assassinate the leaders of the Kurdish political parties, particularly those that are based in the neighbouring KRI, in order to deter them from engaging in activities that can destabilise Iran.

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