

INSTITUT
KURDE
DE PARIS

Information and liaison bulletin

N° 392

NOVEMBER 2017

*The publication of this Bulletin enjoys a subsidy
from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Ministry of Culture*

This bulletin is issued in French and English

Price per issue : France: 6 € — Abroad : 7,5 €
Annual subscribtion (12 issues) France : 60 € — Elsewhere : 75 €

Monthly review
Directeur de la publication : Mohamad HASSAN
Misen en page et maquette : Şerefettin
ISBN 0761 1285

INSTITUT KURDE, 106, rue La Fayette - 75010 PARIS
Tel. : 01-48 24 64 64 - Fax : 01-48 24 64 66

www.fikp.org
E-mail: bulletin@fikp.org

- **ROJAVA: PREPARING MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE**
- **TURKEY: THE REPRESSION EXPANDS TO LIBERAL CIRCLES; THE VIOLENCE IS INCREASING**
- **IRAQI KURDISTAN: UNCONSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS FROM BAGHDAD, ARABISATION OF KIRKUK RESTARTED**

ROJAVA: PREPARING MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE.

A broad the “World Day for Kobani” was celebrated on 1st November largely as a symbol of this Syrian Kurdish town’s unremitting resistance to the attack launched by ISIS in 2014 with Turkish connivance. In London it was celebrated on the 10th, attended by thousands were also attending the funeral of the Kurdish film director Mehmet Aksoy, who was killed on 26th September in a jihadist attack on the SDF Press Centre near Raqqa, to which he had come to work from England.

In the field, the SDF continued to reduce the area controlled by ISIS as a few hundreds of inhabitants were

beginning to return to Raqqa, liberated on 17th October. Regarding Deir Ezzor, the SDF fighters from the “Jezirah Storm” operation, launched on 9th September, liberated 7 villages near the town and about fifteen km from the Iraqi borders, even discovering there a landmine workshop. On the 9th, they took control of the Khabur river, liberating 25 villages, and on the 12th another 12 in the attack on the last ISIS enclave East of the Euphrates. On the 13th they began fighting the Jihadists near the Tanaq oil fields, repelling a counter-attack on the 14th before continuing their advance to the East of Mayadin province, eliminating 34 jihadists. Unable to repel them, ISIS targeted civilians on

the 17th with a suicide attack on a checkpoint that caused at least 35 victims in the Northeast of Deir Ezzor Province, between the hydrocarbon fields of Conoco and Jafra. It was, nevertheless, not able to prevent the SDF from reaching the Iraqi border on the 28th.

These remarkable advances were strained in mid-November by rising doubts about the agreement that had allowed the taking of Raqqa. While the coalition had received assurances from the SDF that the foreign jihadists would not be allowed to leave the city, the BBC broadcast on the 13th testimony from several of the drivers of the evacuation convoy that several hun-

dreds of heavily armed fighters, including foreigners, could have been able to go to Turkey. The latter, who consider the SDF as “terrorists” claimed that this “very serious” news justified their warning to Washington. Questioned about this, the coalition’s spokesman, Colonel Ryan Dillon, stated that less than “300 of the 3,500 civilians having left Raqqa [...] were identified as possibly ISIS fighters” thus admitting that several hundreds of fighters might have been able to escape.

These doubts have arisen at a particularly bad time for the SDF, when the probable elimination of ISIS could mean the end of the US presence and of the coalition’s military support. Indeed, on the 30th, the departure of 400 Marines was announced, and the passive American attitude to the re-occupation by Iraq of the disputed territories claimed by “its” Kurds was not a good omen for Rojava — especially as the Pentagon has always limited its support to the purely military level, refusing any political commitment. Moreover, if SDF and the Syrian government have been for the last few years very busy fighting other more powerful enemies, they find now themselves face to face. While a compromise is not impossible, a confrontation is to be feared — especially over oil. However, faced with the expansion of Iranian influence, the US might continue its support of the SDF to deny Teheran access to the Mediterranean corridor that it started to establish ...

The international negotiations on the future of Syria are still stalemated. Damascus rejects any discussion involving the departure of al-Assad, which was still required by the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, at the end of October. The opposition, for its part makes this a precondition for discussion and its spokesman, Ahmed Ramadan, accused the Russians, on 1st November, of “seeking to impose [in the negotiations] opposition factions

created by the regime”, with reference to parties claiming belonging to the opposition created in Damascus after 2011. Despite the creation of de-escalation zones, the regime is still besieging the East Damascus suburbs where some 400.000 civilians are trapped (on the 12th, the World Health Organisation demanded a humanitarian access). Several meetings between leaders have failed to make any progress: the Trump-Putin meeting in Vietnam on the 14th during the Asia-Pacific summit, the Assad-Putin meeting in Sochi on the 20th, then again at Sochi on the 22nd between the Russian, Iranian and Turkish Presidents. At least the last meeting resulted in an agreement for Russia to organise on its own soil a “Syrian National Dialogue Congress” (the date for which has yet to be decided) between the Syrian regime and the opposition, despite Ankara’s reservations about the presence of the Kurdish militia. As for the Geneva discussions organised under the aegis of UNO, its 8th session started on the 28th without, once again, the SDF being invited and so failed to produce any tangible results.

In this turning point phase Damascus and its Russian and Iranian allies switched between conciliatory and threatening words towards the SDF and the “Federal Region”. On the 7th Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran Supreme Guide’s adviser, declared that Damascus would take control of Raqqa from the SDF, adding that the Syrian Army also wanted to control the area East of the Euphrates ... For their part, the SDF leaders were clearly seeking a political compromise: on the 17th a PYD cadre declared: “*In Syria only two forces in the field remain that count — ourselves and the Syrian regime. Either there will be a clash between them and the result will be chaos or we start a dialogue aiming at a political solution. We prefer the dialogue*”. On the 26th Riad Darar, a member of the Syrian Democratic Council, declared that the SDF were

ready to join a future Syrian Federal Army (*Rûdaw*). It is true that the Russians had already proposed a future Federal Syria and that on the 17th Ziyad Sabsabi, representing the Foreign Relations Commission of the Russian Senate, declared that, in the event of conflict between the Damascus regime and the SDF, Russia would remain neutral. However Vassili Nebenzia, the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, still accused on the 29th the coalition of following a policy of partitioning Syria because the SDF had set up a local government in Raqqa without consulting Damascus...

However the Russians have maintained continuous political contacts with the SDF and their self-declared Federal Region, inviting the PYD to the Sochi Congress. Yet, partly because of Turkish opposition (the Turkish President’s spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, described this invitation as “unacceptable”), the Congress was continuously postponed: it was first announced for the 18th, then “another date” remained to be chosen, after an initial list of participants including the PYD was removed on the 5th November from the Russian Foreign affairs ministry website... For its part the rival Kurdish grouping, the Kurdish National Council (*Encumena Niştîmaniya Kurd li Sûriyê*, ENKS) announced, on the 27th, it was taking part in the Geneva talks in an official communiqué from its president Ibrahim Biro. According to Arab diplomatic sources (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* of the 29th), the United States unsuccessfully tried to secure the participation of the SDF.

Another source of concern for the SDF is the growing tension between it and the Turkish Army and the jihadist militia it supports round Afrin, where the Turkish Army is gradually sending considerable quantities of heavy weaponry. After several weeks of clashes, these “islamist” shelled the district of

Sherava, then on the 7th Shera with heavy artillery. The YPD retaliated with light weapons. On the same day other Turkish troops fired from the South of Jerablous late in the evening Sheyokh Tahtani, West of Kobané (*Hawar*), some villages in the Manbij region being also targeted. Other fighting between the SDF and Turkish troops broke out on the 12th, when the latter entered Syria near the village of Meydan Ikbis. After the Turkish President threatened Afrin several times, the official Turkish news Agency *Anatolia* announced on the 20th that the Turkish Army had retaliated to some mortar fire from Idlib, aimed at its observation posts, which proved to be areas held by the YPG. The next day a quantity of SDF fighters left Raqqa to reinforce Afrin. According to figures published by the YPG, Turkish troops and their auxiliaries have launched not less than 576 attacks against Afrin, mainly with both light and heavy weapons (machine guns and mortars), causing the death of 12 civilians, including a boy of 14 and a pregnant woman. The Turks also led an “information-seeking war” according to the daily paper *Hürriyet* of 17th. Talal Sello, an SDF spokesman of Turkmen origin is said to have “surrendered” to pro-Ankara Syrian rebels and to have been transferred to Turkey for interrogation by the MIT regarding the arms and defence positions of the YPG in Afrin. The

SDF indicated that this was a “*Turkish special intelligence operation*”, since Mr. Sello had been subjected to blackmail regarding his children who live in Turkey.

Turkey has not given up either its attempts to obtain the end of US support to the SDF. On the 24th the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced that Mr. Erdoğan had received assurances of the US President that the supply of weapons to the SDF would cease. A Kurdish leader confirmed that an “adjustment” would take place once ISIS eliminated, but that the partnership with the international coalition would continue. The “adjustment” was confirmed by the Pentagon on the 27th, but on the same day as the SDF received over 100 *Humvee* vehicles ...

On the 28th, following a meeting of the Turkish National Security Council (MGK), led by President Erdogan, the Turkish Presidency announced that it wished to extend the observation mission set up at Idlib up to Afrin and to the West of Aleppo. On the same day *CNN Turk* announced that firing by the PYD from Afrin had wounded a Turkish soldier in a customs post while the TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society) an organisation from the PKK network, announced further Turkish attacks on villages in the Sherawa area, accusing Russia and Iran of letting them take place.

On the 20th the SDF announced a recent intensification of attacks, which was confirmed by the journalist Chris Thomson, who described incessant shelling (*Al-Masdar News*): “With Turkish reconnaissance aircrafts observing the region 24 hours a day the Turkish Army and its allied rebel groups bombed the villages held by the Kurds in the Bilbile district. [...] Some of the shells came from inside Turkey itself. The SDF came under fire in the villages of Dikmedash, Maranaz, Ain Daqna, Yazibax, Basufane, Bedirxan, Barin, Bashur and Iki Dame. For a while in the afternoon artillery could be heard for 40 minutes. The SDF retaliated by shelling some groups supported by Turkey in the countryside North of Aleppo, but refrained from riposting towards [...]Turkey”.

In anticipation of the second phase of elections for the Federal Region of North Syria, the selection for the municipal Councils due on Monday 1st December, a delegation of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region arrived in Rojava on the 29th, invited by the authorities. It included, *inter alia*, a KDP Member of Parliament, Amina Zikri, Zana Abdulrahman (PUK) and Sherko Hama Amin (*Gorran*). At the end of the month there were contradictory rumours about the participation in these elections of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), who had boycotted their first phase.

TURKEY:

THE REPRESSION EXPANDS TO LIBERAL CIRCLES; THE VIOLENCE IS INCREASING

The month of November began with the remand of Osman Kavala, on the 1st... He is the co-founder of the *Iletişim* Publishing house, president of the NGO *Anadolu Kültür*, sponsor and a public figure enjoying respect in cultural circles. He was arrested on 17 October and charged with “*trying to overthrow the Turkish State*”, links with Gülen and the PKK. By arresting this man Mr.

Erdoğan widens still further the extent of his judicial proceedings, truly opening a fresh “judicial front”.

In parallel to this the cases under way are continuing. Thus also on the 1st the press published the first accounts of the hearings (held the day before) of the trial of 17 staff members of the daily paper *Cumhuriyet* — managers, journalists and other employees. Accused of

“terrorist activity” and simultaneous support to 3 different “armed terrorist organisations” (the PKK, the extreme left DHKP-C and the movement led by the preacher Fethullah Gülen), they face the risk of 43 years in prison. Some have been in custody for a year already and a book-keeper for 7 months! The Court has ordered that the 4 of them already in custody remain in jail, and decided the next hearing would be held on December 25th.

Also on the 1st the trial of the Kurdish paper *Özgür Gündem* resumed. Among the accused are Inan Kizilkaya, the chief editor and Kemal Sancili, the publication manager, but also the novelist Aslı Erdoğan, who has preferred, for the time being, to remain abroad. All are accused of “terrorist propaganda” for the PKK. The Court ordered that Kizilkaya and Sancili remain on bail but they are forbidden to leave Turkish territory. The novelist denounced the implausibility of the charges in an interview with *L’Humanité* on the 22nd: “I have several times lived under regimes of military dictatorship. It was simple, everything was either all black or all white. The junta eliminated all opponents. The present regime is completely outside any law — we cannot predict who will be arrested next not for what reason [...]. A journalist was arrested for complicity with DHKP-C, Fetö, and the PKK. How can anyone be member of three such different organisations unless they are completely schizophrenic?”.

On the 2nd, according to *Hürriyet*, 10 people were incarcerated on suspicion of membership in an “armed terrorist organisation” during a raid on their home ordered by the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Ardahan Province, including Özcan Yilmazine of the two HDP provincial co-presidents. Two suspects were finally released under judicial control. In Osmaniye, 3 HDP officials were arrested and at Hakkari 40 people (*Washington Kurdish Institute*). On the 3rd, the HDP Member of Parliament Selma Irmak was sentenced to 10 years jail by a Diyarbakir Court for “membership in a terrorist group” because of speeches made during election meetings. Irmak is the 9th HDP Member of Parliament to be sentenced. On the 4th, on the anniversary of the jailing of its two co-presidents and 10 of its M.P.s, the HDP published a declaration denouncing as illegal a confidential circular issued by the Minister of Justice ordering all the courts to

prevent Selahattin Demirtaş from testifying during his hearings.

On the 13th the HDP spokesman, Osman Baydemir, was briefly detained at Istanbul Airport. Several warrants had been issued for his arrest, including one for “terrorist propaganda” in a speech made during the Newroz celebrations of 2016. On the 14th, the Public Prosecutor of the city of Diyarbakir (Amed) demanded an 18-year prison sentence for the HDP M.P. Imam Tascier for “terrorist propaganda”. On the same day the police, in a series of raids in Ankara and Izmir, arrested several people for publications critical of the government on social media. These included Evren Celik, of the HDP’s external relations office and Öztürk Türkoğlu, co-president of the Association for Human Rights (IHD). On the same day the M.P. for Kars and former HDP spokesman Ayhan Bilgen announced that the HDP offices in the Esenler quarter of Istanbul had been targeted by shots in the early hours of the morning without causing any casualties. Bilgen also recalled that the HDP parliamentary group, in addition to losing its two co-presidents, has 11,000 of its members arrested, including 750 officials of several towns, and 10 M.P.s. On the 15th, Abdullah Öcalan’s lawyers announced that their demand to see their client had been rejected for the 704th time. The last authorised visit was on 27th July 2016.

On the 21st, while new arrests targeting the HDP and the Congress for a Democratic Society (DTK) took place at Ankara, Antalya and Diyarbakir, the chief editor of the online edition of *Cumhuriyet*, Oğuz Güven, was sentenced to 3 years and one month’s imprisonment for a Tweet he had shared on the paper’s account about the death in a car accident of the Denizli Prosecutor Mustafa Alper. At first threatened of 12 years jail, he was sentenced for

links with both the Gulénist organisation and the PKK... In his defence he recalled that journalists’ work was after all still to spread news... On the same day a parliamentary commission agreed to deprive Leyla Zana, a HDP Member of Parliament elected in 2015, of her Parliamentary immunity. This decision was justified by Zana’s absences and the fact that she had altered the text of her oath when taking office. The final decision against Zana has to be voted in Parliament. On the 27th, according to the *Anatolia* press agency, the police in a raid and anti-PKK searches early in the morning incarcerated 10 people including a 77-year old academic and member of the HDP, Fikret Baskaya, charged with “pro-PKK propaganda” on the social networks. Several students were also arrested in Ankara and Adana.

Abroad Turkey described as “ridiculous and unfounded” a *Wall Street Journal* report dated 10 November that Turkish representatives had tried to obtain the kidnapping in the United States of the preacher Fethullah Gülen, who had sought asylum in Pennsylvania, by proposing 15 million dollars to the former security adviser of the US President, Michael Flynn, and to his son. The journal had mentioned that the special prosecutor, Robert Mueller, had used this lead in his enquiry. In parallel, the trial in the case of the Turco-iranian businessman Reza Zarrab and the Turkish banker Mehmet Hakan Atilla, former assistant general manager of the public bank *Halkbank*, which is continuing in the United States, is embarrassing the Turkish President. Zarrab, a gold magnate, had already been at the heart of a sensational corruption case in 2013 that involved some ministers close to the power and had provoked the breach between Gülen and Erdoğan. The political leaders of the country continue to follow the same line of defence as in 2013: they repeat to whoever wants to listen, that the scandal is a plot by

the preacher. This might not be enough to prevent American sanctions against the Turkish banking sector...

The month of November has seen a particularly high number of violent events. Guerrilla operations against the security forces, arrests giving rise to armed confrontations and air strikes have followed one another throughout the month. Thus on the 3rd at Diyarbakir, right in the town centre a police action aiming to arrest a presumed member of the PKK degenerated into an armed clash. Result: one policeman and a suspect killed, nine other police wounded. According to an AFP correspondent the police began shooting on the top floor of a block of flats, then the Kurdish insurgents triggered off a home-made bomb. However most of the clashes took place in the mountains and near Şemdinli (Hakkari Province) in the extreme South of Turkey, near the most mountainous regions of Iraq and Iran, where on the 2nd fighting broke out between PKK members coming from Iraq and Turkish troops. Result: 5 Kurdish fighters and 6 Turkish soldiers as well as 2

“village protectors” killed. The Army then announced it had eliminated in the same area 12 other fighters in an operation supported by helicopters. The total of kill of both camps would be about 25, including 19 Kurdish fighters, according to the Ministry of the Interior, which also then claimed 9 other Kurdish fighters had been eliminated in Tunceli (Dersim) Province and 3 others at Şırnak. On the 4th the PKK launched another attack at Şemdinli, near the village of Adilbeg, killing 3 Turkish soldiers by hitting their armoured vehicle with an anti-tank missile (the PKK broadcast on the 30th on its *Gerîla* TV channel a video purporting to show the moment of the strike). On the same day another attack aimed at a hill near Çukurca, further to the West, killed at least one other soldier. On the 16th another skirmish occurred at Tunceli in which 4 Kurdish fighters were killed and on the 19th the *Anatolia* agency announced the previous day’s “neutralisation” of 14 Kurdish fighters and the capture of 2 others near Kulp (Diyarbakir).

The Turkish Army was also

involved in fighting in Iraqi Kurdistan as shown by its announcing on the 16th that 2 soldiers had died near Avashin-Basyan in Dohuk Province. The Turkish Air Force also carried out many air strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan: on the 3rd against the village of Geli Sargale (Amêdî district) and slightly to the East in the Rekan region (directly opposite Şemdinli) then on the 4th, according to *Daily Sabah*, against other PKK targets, especially at Qandil and Avashin-Basyan. On the 12th according to *Rûdaw*, the Piramagrun mountains North of Suleimaniyah were bombed for the second time in a week, especially Mount Asos, near the town of Mawat, facing the Iranian border, then on the 13th, further North, the Bradost region near Soran — a raid that killed a civilian. On the 29th the Army announced that fresh strikes on Mount Asos, on the previous Monday (27th), carried out in cooperation with the Iraqi and Iranian Intelligence services, had killed over 80 “terrorists” and destroyed an ammunition dump, two military vehicles and several shelters. These last raids have not been confirmed from independent sources.

IRAQI KURDISTAN: UNCONSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS FROM BAGHDAD, ARABISATION OF KIRKUK RESTARTED

Following the postponement of the parliamentary and Presidential elections, originally planned for 1st November, the Kurdish Parliament on the 24th extended its term of office for a further eight months. The 1st also took effect Masud Barzani’s resignation from the presidency, his powers being from this time on shared between the Kurdish Parliament and the Regional Government (KRG) led by the Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. Meeting on the 6th the KRG decided on consultations with the political parties on the means of renewing the dialogue with Baghdad.

Nechirvan Barzani invited the Ministers of the Movement for Change (Gorran) whom he had suspended in 2015 to return to their posts, but Gorran refused, repeating its demand that the KRG dissolve to create an “*interim Government of national salvation*” that would have to negotiate with Baghdad and prepare the elections (*Rûdaw*). On the 18th the Islamic Union (*Yekgirtû*) adopted a very similar position demanding a transition government. On the 7th, the High Electoral Commission called on the KRG and Parliament to set a date for Parliamentary and Presidential elections. For its part the PUK, faced with the death of its founder Jalal

Talabani, and the loss of Kirkuk, its stronghold, held a meeting of its leaders on the 4th and envisaged dissolving its Political Committee without making any decision. Kosrat Rassoul, its interim leader, had to be brought to hospital in emergency on the 11th. Transferred to Berlin for intensive care on the 16th he came out on the 20th and is due to return to Kurdistan after his convalescence.

On the evening of the 12th a 7.3 magnitude earthquake centred at Derbandikhan hit Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, causing 300 deaths and 2,500 injured in the Iranian side and 8 deaths and 300 injured on the Iraqi side. Followed by about a hundred

“repeats”, some as high as 4.7 degrees Richter, it provoked fissures in the Derbandikhan dam. On the 18th a second quake of 4.4 degree hit Garmiyan.

On the 21st Nechirvan Barzani and Qubad Talabani, Deputy Prime Minister, met several political parties to discuss the elections and the eventuality of an interim government, then on the 25th a second round of discussions with the PUK, Gorran and the Islamic League covered the possibility of a joint delegation in the event of negotiations with Baghdad. The tense relations with Baghdad indeed require unity: still refusing any dialogue, Mr. Abadi has launched a number of measures against the Region while approving, in the disputed regions taken back by Bagdad in October, an Arabisation policy worthy of the former Ba’athist regime. The calls by the KRG for negotiations have remained without any effect till the end of the month, a time at which the Kurdish Airports remained blocked...

On the 1st Abadi accused the KRG of “going back on the agreements” of the 29th October between the Kurdish troops and the Iraqis, which provided for the withdrawal of the Peshmergas from the Pêsh Khabur and Ibrahim Khalil border crossings. Refusing any joint administration he threatened: “If they do not observe (the agreement ...), if they fire on our forces we will show them the strength of the law”. The KRG denied any agreement, stating that the Iraqi commanders had proposed two successive and different texts, to which Kurdish negotiators had responded, and the Peshmergas Ministry describing these demands as “unconstitutional”, replied that his troops were on defensive positions, which they were ready to hold. Nothing has changed since then, as Mr. Abadi repeated on the 14th that he “would shortly go into action” about the border posts “but without using force”...

He has, indeed, launched many measures against the Kurdistan Region, some to strangle it economically. About forty Kurdish Ambassadors could lose their jobs under the pretext of “restructuring” (*Bas News*). The *Iraqi Central Bank* has ordered, on the 9th, the closing, before the 14th, of all Kurdistan branch banks, local or foreign — an order cancelled on the 15th. Concerning the budget, Abadi had declared on the 31 October that he was ready to pay the salaries of civil servants and Peshmergas, then challenged their number, telling he approved only 680,000 of the 1,480,000 counted by the KRG. While the KRG reduced the number to 1.249.481 thanks to its “biometric” system of paying, Abadi demanded a preliminary audit. For the Peshmergas, Ahmed Hamah, a member of the Iraqi Parliament’s Finance Commission, indicated on the 10th that Baghdad would agree to pay 50,000 of them whereas their official number is 266,000 (*Spoutnik*). Moreover, supplementary conditions for payment kept appearing: Kurdistan must confine all its oil exports to the State company SOMO (SOMO Director); payment will only be made once Baghdad has regained control of the oil wells (Abadi on the 4th). In Parallel, Baghdad starting discussing with Ankara SOMO’s direct sales of Kurdish oil arriving at Ceyhan, thus “short-circuiting” the KRG and announced (on the 10th) an agreement with Iran on refining about 30-60,000 barrels per day of oil from Kirkuk at Kermanshah, sent there at first by tankers, then by a pipeline once it is ready. For having accused Abadi on *FaceBook* of having “used the country’s armed forces to take back Kirkuk so that the foreign oil companies, which helped him become Prime Minister, could take control of the oil fields” the Iraqi journalist Samir Obeid was arrested for “spreading rumours and false news to mislead public opinion”...

The Iraqi Prime Minister has also tried to “short-circuit” the KRG

“from below” by proposing to the Kurdish provinces to pay their civil servants directly. The Provincial Councils refused, calling on Baghdad the 5th to use the KRG-created “biometric system”. Perhaps thanks to this refusal, the 2018 budget draft still mentioned the “Kurdistan Region”, although Iraqi leaders had started systematically to talk about “North Iraq”. Internationally the German paper *Spiegel* revealed on the 23rd that Abadi had forbidden the German Foreign Minister, who was planning to visit Baghdad at the beginning of November, to visit Erbil, and that even an appeal by Angela Merkel was unable to unblock the situation. Faced with this refusal the German Foreign Minister cancelled his visit to Iraq.

On the 6th the Kurdistan Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani, declared that Kurdistan was “ready to hand over the oil, the airports and all customs duties to Baghdad if the Central Government paid [KRG civil servants] salaries and the Constitutional 17% of the Federal Budget [...]” However, after several shuttles between the Council of Ministers and the Iraqi Parliament and some promises to restore the 17%, Kurdistan’s share remained, on the 30th, at 12.67%. The population of Kurdistan is however estimated at 7-8 million, that is about 17-20% of that of Iraq...

The Shi’ite coalition “The State of Law” has also demanded the Supreme Federal Court criminal sanctions against 14 Kurdish members of the Iraqi Parliament who had voted “YES” in the referendum: Article 156 of the Criminal Code, inherited from the Saddam Hussein period, provides the Death sentence for any person having “intentionally threatened the sovereignty of the State”. Having returned to sit in Parliament the Kurdish ‘M.P.s left the session on the 16th when the question was put to the vote. The Court however, refused to give a

ruling, considering the question outside its terms of reference.

Besides, worrying news are coming from the territories taken back by Baghdad. Following the sacking of the Governor of Kirkuk, Najmaddine Karim (who had unsuccessfully appealed against it to the Supreme Court) and the taking back of the Province, Baghdad appointed as interim governor a Sunni Arab, Rakan al-Jabouri. However, on the 20th, 6 Members of the Iraqi Parliament from Kirkuk demanded he be sacked for “*abuse of authority*” and “*racist policy*”. On the 12th Baghdad sacked 47 police officers, from the quota allocated to the KDP, giving their posts to Arabs and Turcmen. Then, in mid-November a Chief of Security for Kirkuk was appointed, Major-General Maan al-Saadi, whose Ba’athist past was recently revealed by a video: he had received 4 medals from Saddam following several operations against the Kurds. On the 29th the city’s Chief of Police and 12 officers were brought to trial, charged under Article 4 of the ant-terrorist law.

Constitutionally, Baghdad’s taking over of the disputed territories does not change their status, as was recalled on 20th October by the US State Department and on 27th November by the President of Iraq, Fuad Massoum, during his visit to the town: they remain subjected to Article 140 of the Constitution, which provides for the restoration of their original population then a referendum to decide their future. On the 7th the Iraqi Vice-President, Osama al-Nujaifi, a Sunni Arab, declared, from Washington that these territories could, on the basis of the Constitution, pass under “Confederal” control. In the field, however, these declarations sound more like pious hopes: according to Mahdi Mubarak, Director of Kirkuk’s Department of Agriculture, who has sought refuge in Erbil, many Arab

families settled by Saddam Hussein on land confiscated from Kurds and who left after his fall in 2003 with compensation, are now returning under the protection of the Iraqi Army and *Hashd al-Shaabi*. According to Majid Mahmoud, member of the Provincial Council, at least 120,000 hectares (300,000 acres) of land belonging to Kurds have been taken back, particularly in the rich regions of Dubiz, Daquq et Yaichi... Furthermore the security conditions are not such as to encourage Kurds to return. On the 10th the Kurdish Parliament closed its offices in Kirkuk to protect the security of its employees.

Moreover it is to the South of Kirkuk Province, at Tuz Khurmatu, that anti-Kurdish abuses have been the greatest. According to the United Nations 35,000 people have been displaced. On the 3rd UNESCO’s General Manageress demanded an enquiry into the assassination of the Kurdish journalist Arkan Sharifi, killed by stabbing in his home at Daquq (between Kirkuk and Tuz Khourmatou) by 8 masked men wearing battle-dress, speaking Turcoman and introducing themselves as *Hashd al-Shaabi* members. On the 8th Abadi did indeed mention an enquiry... into dozens of complaints from Arab families regarding relatives from whom they say they are without news since their arrest by the Kurdish Security. On the 14th the head of Tuz Khurmatu’s Security estimated at 1,500 the number of Kurdish homes pillaged and destroyed. On the 28th a video broadcast by *Rûdaw* revealed that 2,000 houses had been pillaged and 3,000 confiscated and tagged with Turcoman slogans.

All this is far from the Constitution with which Abadi has been cloaking himself. The ex-President of Kurdistan, Massud Barzani, has, moreover, accused the “Supreme Court” of having “*shut its eyes to the*

breaches of 55 Articles of the Constitution committed by the Iraqi Government” and has questioned its legitimacy: “*Everyone must know that the (Supreme) Court was established before the approval of the Constitution and that it should have been annulled after (the latter) and another Court established on the basis and provisions of Article 92*”.

At the beginning of the month, the Court declared that because of its absence of contact with one of the two parties, the KRG, it could not rule on the Constitutionality of the 25 September referendum. However on the 6th at the government’s request it issued a ruling based on Article 1 of the Constitution mentioning “*the unity of Iraq*”, whereby no Iraqi region or province could secede — then on the 20th, still on the basis of Article 1, it declared, in contradiction with its previous ruling, that it declared the referendum unconstitutional. The decision provides, moreover, for “*the annulment of all the consequences and results*” of the referendum.

On the 27th the Kurdish Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani, denounced an “unilateral” decision taken without input from the KRG, but declared that the latter would observe it and said he was “*ready for a dialogue*”. He also demanded, on the basis of the annulment mentioned in the ruling the annulment of all punitive measures taken since the referendum and called for “*the full application of the Constitution*” (by implication not only those articles selected by Mr. Abadi to justify the anti-Kurdish sanctions...). He finally stated: “*They are asking us to transfer control of the border crossing post and the Airports. [...] We have no problem with a supervision [by Baghdad]. However does this mean that Kurds working at border posts and airports are not Iraqis or else that Baghdad only want to employ Arabic-speaking people?*”.

Why the Kurds Are Paying for Trump's Gift to Iran

PETER W. GALBRAITH

November 2, 2017

www.nybooks.com

Najmaldin Karim, the governor of the Kirkuk governorate, was at his official residence on October 16 when American special forces showed up. They warned him that the Popular Mobilization Forces, an Iraqi Shiite militia controlled by Iran, was on its way to the building. Karim, an ethnic Kurd who had twice been elected governor of this ethnically mixed province, understood that they were not coming to oust him or even to arrest him. They were coming to kill him.

The Americans knew there would be an attack on Kirkuk because their special forces were embedded with the Iraqi army outside the city of Kirkuk and with Kurdish troops, known as peshmerga, within the city. While US soldiers gave Karim the warning that enabled him to escape, the Trump administration did nothing to prevent an attack in which the Iraqi army and the Iranian-commanded militias used American weapons, including Abrams tanks.

The Kurds have long claimed Kirkuk—with its ancient citadel and adjacent oil field—as an integral part of Kurdistan. With no lack of hyperbole, Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish guerrilla leader who became Iraq's first ever elected president, called the city "Kurdistan's Jerusalem." The Kurds first took full control of Kirkuk in 2003 as Saddam Hussein's army collapsed. At the request of the Bush administration, the Kurds withdrew from the city in exchange for the promise of a referendum that would determine the status of the city and the surrounding province. Although Iraq's 2005 constitution required the Iraqi government to hold a referendum no later than December 31, 2007, it was never held.

But the Kurds ended up in full control of Kirkuk anyway. At 10 AM on June 10, 2014, the commander of the Twelfth Division of the Iraqi army, Major General Mohammed Khalaf al-Fahdawi, called on Karim. ISIS had just taken Mosul and the general wanted to assure the governor that his division would defend the city. Exactly twenty-four hours later, he was back in Karim's office asking for civilian clothes and transport out of Kirkuk. A Kurdish brigade was already in the city and, unlike the Iraqi division, it was willing to fight. ISIS never took Kirkuk.

On October 6, Iraqis gathered in Sulaymaniyah, about sixty miles east of Kirkuk, to bury Jalal Talabani. Although Talabani was the Iraqi leader most supportive of American goals in the country, the United States was represented only by its local ambassador. Iran sent its foreign minister, Mohammad Javed Zarif, and the commander of the elite al-Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qassem Soleimani. Zarif returned



Shiite militiamen celebrating their advance into Kurdish-held Iraqi territory near Kirkuk, October 17, 2017

Alaa Al-Marjani/Reuters

to Iran but Soleimani stayed on.

Soleimani is credited with saving Baghdad in July 2014. The US-trained and -equipped Iraqi army had collapsed and ISIS was approaching the capital. Armed with a fatwa from Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, the Ayatollah Sistani (himself an Iranian), calling on Iraqi Shiites to fight terrorists, Soleimani organized tens of thousands of volunteers to defend the capital and the Shiite holy places. Although Iraq's constitution expressly prohibits militias outside the Iraqi army, Iraq's Shiite-controlled parliament legalized the militias under the name Popular Mobilization Forces (or PMF). In the early days of the anti-ISIS campaign, the PMF—still under the effective control of Soleimani—pushed ISIS out of Tikrit, Saddam's home town. Afterward, they burned Sunni homes, massacred prisoners, and killed civilians thought to have collaborated. Fearful of initiating a new cycle of anger and rebellion among Iraq's Sunni population, the US prevailed on Iraq's prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, to keep the PMF out of Mosul. The PMF did, however, participate in the campaigns to take villages around Mosul, with adverse consequences for civilians.

After leaving Talabani's funeral last month, Soleimani met with PMF commanders and the Iraqi army to plan how Iraq might reassert its authority in Kirkuk. The Iraqis were particularly keen to get rid of Governor Karim. Karim, who had won a measure of support from Kirkuk's Arab and Turkmen communities, had angered Baghdad by supporting Kurdistan's recent independence referendum. In retaliation, the Shiite bloc in the Iraqi parliament voted to remove Karim from office, even though Iraq's high degree of decentralized governance under the country's constitution does not permit the national parliament to remove an elected governor. Since the Kurdish peshmerga controlled Kirkuk, Karim stayed in office. Soleimani had an additional reason to want Karim gone. Not only was he pro-American, he is an American.

As a young doctor in the 1970s, Najmaldin Karim joined Mullah Mustafa Barzani's Kurdish insurrection against Iraq's Baathist regime in which Saddam Hussein was a rising force. When the revolt collapsed, after it was double-crossed by the Shah of Iran and Henry Kissinger, Karim accompanied Barzani into exile in Iran and the Washington suburbs. After Barzani died in 1979, Karim qualified as a neurosurgeon and was on duty at George Washington Hospital on March 30, 1980 when John Hinckley Jr. shot Ronald Reagan and James Brady. He tended to both men in the emergency room and then managed Brady's care. He briefed Reagan on Brady's progress—and the Kurds', though Karim made little headway there. The Reagan administration opposed congressional efforts to cut US aid to Saddam even after he attacked the Kurds with chemical weapons.

Karim discovered, though, that he liked US politics. He became a one-man volunteer lobby for the Kurds—then an almost unknown people in Washington—and made many friends on Capitol Hill, myself included. After the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Karim put his medical practice on hold to return to his native Kirkuk. He proved so popular as governor that his party's list in the 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections won a majority of the Kirkuk MPs.

On October 16, two important PMF commanders raced to reach Najmaldin Karim's office. Qais al-Khazali commands the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, an especially violent component of the militias. In 2007, he helped plan the kidnapping and execution of four US soldiers in Karbala. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandes, the deputy commander of the PMF, was sentenced to death in absentia by a Kuwaiti court for his part in the 1983 bombing of the US embassy there. The US government has considered both men to be terrorists.

The Trump administration, which had been careful to keep the PMF out of ISIS-held Mosul, did nothing to stop these two Iranian-backed

► terrorists from using American weapons to attack an American ally. But for the action of US soldiers in the area, they would almost certainly have killed another American citizen. After the PMF takeover of Kirkuk, the Pentagon attempted ineffectually to hide its embarrassment by calling the Kurdish-Iraqi fighting a “misunderstanding.” The administration’s complaisant attitude to the Iranian-led action was even more puzzling since it followed Donald Trump’s decision three days earlier to decertify the Iran nuclear deal—justified as a response to Iran’s malign activities in the region, including in Iraq.

Pique toward the Kurds partially explains the administration’s indifference. In February, the Kurdistan Regional Government’s president, Masoud Barzani, wrote a letter to President Trump announcing his intention to hold an independence referendum and explaining the reasons for it. On June 7, the KRG set the date for vote as September 25. The only US reaction came from a State Department spokesman who said the timing was inopportune and mischaracterized the vote as non-binding. (The referendum was binding on the KRG but, as Barzani explained, the Kurds would allow up to two years for negotiations with Baghdad on the divorce before actually declaring independence.)

The Kurds were then caught by surprise when, just two weeks before the vote, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the special presidential envoy to Iraq, Brett McGurk, launched a full-scale diplomatic effort to get the Kurds to postpone it. Even that initiative was bungled: a US-sponsored UN Security Council statement directly contradicted private promises made to the Kurds. It was also too late.

Along with former foreign ministers from France and Croatia, I traveled to polling places in various parts of Kurdistan on referendum day. The enthusiasm was palpable. Women came to vote dressed as if they were going to a wedding and many brought their children—usually dressed in traditional Kurdish clothes and carrying Kurdistan flags—so that the children could later say that they were there when their country was born. More than one voter told me that their people had waited for this moment for a century, recalling Sykes-Picot, the Anglo-French secret agreement of 1916 that carved up the region and ultimately led to the Kurds’ involuntary inclusion in the new state of Iraq. There is no doubt that the referendum, which took place without a single violent incident, reflected the long-held desire of almost every Iraqi Kurd for independence. In an election with a strong 72 percent turnout, the people of Kurdistan voted by 93 percent for independence.

Even had he wanted to, it would have been impossible for Masoud Barzani to cancel the referendum days before it took place. But Barzani had no desire to cancel the vote. Already, after ISIS had conquered Mosul and most Iraq’s Sunni areas in June 2014, he was on the verge of declaring independence. As he told me at the time, “Iraq no longer exists. We have a thousand-kilometer border with Daesh [the Islamic State] and thirty kilometers with Iraq.”

When US Secretary of State John Kerry visited in Erbil in July 2014, he asked Barzani to postpone the referendum until the defeat of ISIS. Barzani agreed. Having done as they were asked in 2014, the Kurdish leaders felt that the

Americans should respect their decision to go ahead now that ISIS was largely defeated. But Tillerson and McGurk had a new request—to postpone until after the Iraqi parliamentary elections scheduled for the spring of 2018.

The American motives were transparent. The US strategy in Iraq is built around Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. US diplomats see Abadi as a moderate who reversed the sectarian policies of his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki. Today, Maliki is blamed for so alienating the Sunnis that he had made possible the rise of ISIS in western Iraq. What is forgotten is that Maliki, too, was once our man in Baghdad, in effect handpicked to be prime minister by Bush’s ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad.

In order for Abadi to prevail against his more extreme Shiite rivals, US diplomats calculated he needed the votes of the Kurdish parliamentarians who hold about a fifth of the seats in the Iraqi parliament. The Kurds, however, were never persuaded that Abadi was much different from his predecessor; indeed, he is a member of the same Shiite religious party that is headed by Maliki. Moreover, Abadi failed to restore Kurdistan’s constitutionally-mandated share of the Iraqi budget, which Maliki had cut. He also successfully blocked the US from supplying the peshmerga with sophisticated weapons like the Abrams tank, even when the Kurds were the only ground force stopping ISIS from taking the entire north of Iraq. To explain why he could not accept the American request to postpone, Barzani told me: “Iraq is not what was on offer in 2003. Iraq is a theocratic, autocratic state. The intention is clear. The faces are different [from Saddam’s time] but the goal is the same. As long as we wait, they get stronger and we get weaker.”

There is now no chance that Kurdish MPs will support a prime minister who ordered an attack on the Kurds. And Abadi has now demonstrated sufficient hard-line credentials with Iraq’s Shiite majority that he may no longer need Kurdish votes to secure a second term.

Trump’s decision to decertify the nuclear deal followed an extensive policy review to come up with an Iran strategy that, in his words, would “counter the regime’s destabilizing activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region.” By supporting Abadi and the Iraqi military, the administration hopes to counter Iran’s regional ambitions. There is a logic to this approach. Saddam’s Iraq checked the spread of the Iranian revolution through the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. An independent Iraq today could block Iran’s access to its ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad, and from there to the territory in Lebanon controlled by its proxy, Hezbollah. With this larger strategic picture in mind, sacrificing the Kurds may be an acceptable price to pay—especially as they had declined to follow US advice on the referendum.

There is, however, an obvious flaw in this approach. Saddam Hussein was a Sunni who viewed Iran as the national enemy. In 2003, the United States toppled Saddam, ending ninety years of uninterrupted Sunni rule in Iraq and paving the way for Shiite religious parties to take power through democratic elections. Dawa, the party of Maliki and Abadi, was supported by Iran for decades. One of its coalition partners, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, was founded in Tehran in 1982. Neither Iraq nor Iran has hidden

Iran’s involvement in the country. Abadi’s spokesman confirmed Qassem Soleimani’s presence in Iraq, explaining that Iraq had both American and Iranian military advisers. Iran’s army chief of staff, Mohamadi Gulpaigani, was even more direct. According to the Fars news agency, he told a Tehran gathering that “the instructions of the Supreme Leader and the sacrifices of General Soleimani spoiled their plots [US and Israel to divide Iraq], and Kirkuk was liberated.”

As a result of the US invasion, Iraq went from being Iran’s most bitter enemy to its closest ally. Far from blocking Iran’s expanding influence in the region, Iraq has facilitated it. Even as ISIS approached Baghdad in July 2014, the Iraqi government was sending Shiite militiamen to fight for Assad in Syria.

Until very recently, Iran’s access to Syrian government territory was blocked by ISIS-controlled territory in both Iraq and Syria and by Kurdish-controlled territory in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq. When the last ISIS-held towns in the Euphrates valley are cleared, Iran will be able to send military equipment directly through Iraq and Syria to the borders of Israel.

Since 2014, the US has been arming and serving as the air force to Syrian Kurdish fighters known as the People’s Protection Units, or YPG. The YPG now controls about a quarter of Syria’s territory, including the Islamic State’s former self-declared capital of Raqqa. In the rest of Syria, Assad—backed by Iran and Russia—has largely defeated the opposition. In essence, Syria is now divided between a zone controlled by the Assad government allied with Iran and Russia and a large area in the north held by American-supported forces.

The Trump administration is presently brokering a deal between Iraq and the Iraqi Kurds that would place Iraqi troops at Fishkhabour, where two pontoon bridges connect Iraqi Kurdistan with YPG-controlled territory. Because Turkey considers the YPG to be a terrorist organization and the Syrian government aspires to retake its territory, Fishkhabour is the YPG’s only link to the outside world and the only land route for its US military supplies.

The success of Trump’s strategy for containing Iran now depends entirely on an Iraqi government and military that is closely allied with Iran. In a day, the same Iraqi government that already sent forces to fight for Assad can close the Fishkhabour crossing and thus facilitate Assad’s victory against the most substantial portion of Syrian territory not under his control. The Kurdistan Region in Iraq—much diminished in territory and economic resources, and no longer in control of its borders—does not now have the capacity to counter Baghdad or Tehran. If the US objects to Iraq’s pro-Iran policies, the Iraqis always have the option of asking the US to leave. But that is not in Iran’s interest right now. Speaking as an American, the ousted governor of Kirkuk Najmaldin Karim observed: “The US has already spent trillions to accomplish Iran’s objectives in Iraq. As long as we keep doing it, why would Iran want us to leave?” ♦

Democracy in Kurdistan and Catalonia: Does the People's Will Matter?

Separatist movements expose flaws - elected officials not doing jobs, failure to explain governance and neglect of minority rights

Humphrey Hawksley
Thursday, November 2, 2017
<https://yaleglobal.yale.edu>

LONDON: In the early 1990s, as remnants of the Berlin Wall were transformed into a tourist attraction, there was a near-unchallenged presumption that governance, through the democratic will of the people, would underpin our future. Germany, once divided by two opposing ideologies, united under the democratic banner and countries that had mostly lived under Soviet control quickly became new democracies. American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama summed up the prevailing atmosphere in his 1989 essay "The End of History," suggesting that the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution had been reached. Western liberal democracy was universal, the final form of human government.

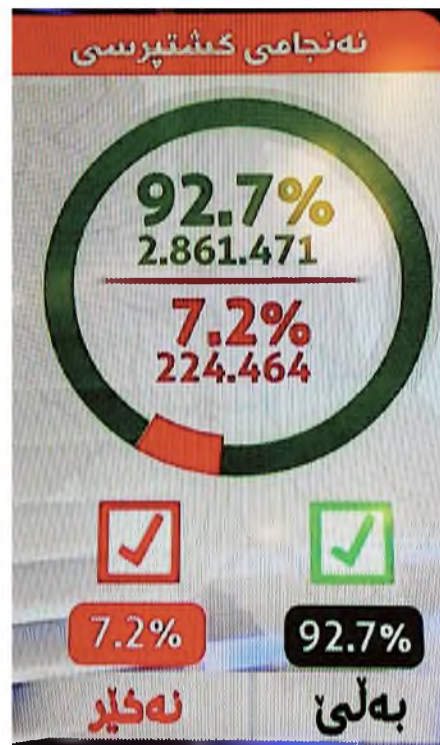
Historians may come to view October 2017 as a turning point unseating this argument, when the concept of designing policy through the "people's will" had been stretched as far as it could. The markers are referenda in two different parts of the world where voters in semiautonomous regions chose to break from central governments to form independent nations.

One is the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. With a population of about 5.5 million out of Iraq's total of 40 million, Kurdistan has been relatively well-run and peaceful while insurgency raged elsewhere. On September 25th, in a referendum not authorized by Baghdad, Kurds voted by more than 90 percent to break away. The other is Spain's wealthy province of Catalonia which comprises 16 percent of Spain's 46 million people, but contributes 20 percent of its wealth. Catalonia's semiautonomous government held a similarly unauthorized referendum on October 1st. Despite a turnout of 42 percent, more than 2 million, 90 percent, voted for independence from Spain.

In both cases, central governments swiftly intervened. Iraqi troops took Kurdish positions and the government implemented measures to isolate Kurdistan. Within hours of Catalonia making a formal declaration of



Independence through ballot: Catalan nationalists vote for independence, right, as do the Kurds in Iraq.



independence on October 27th, Madrid installed direct rule and sought sedition charges against separatist leaders.

The swift crushing of both results raises the question about the stage at which the "will of the people" as determined by the ballot box should be constrained.

Neither Catalonia nor Kurdistan received support from neighbors or the international community which firmly favors holding together the status quo despite a strong sense among the Kurds and Catalans of being a distinctive people with their own languages, cultures and histories. Their sense, real or not, that their identities are misunderstood or neglected by their central governments is a main driver toward separatism.

All of this is a far cry from the momentum of the 1990s when Western democracies actively

encouraged the creation of smaller states from larger ones, often based on ethnic or cultural lines. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush, hailed the move by three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – to sever ties with the disintegrating Soviet Union, saying that their "democratically elected governments have declared their independence and are moving now to control their own national territories and their own destinies." In those heady days, independence often took place against a violent backdrop. Croatia's 1991 declaration, recognized quickly by Germany, was among the prompts triggering the breakup of Yugoslavia. In 2008, as the Yugoslav conflict was drawing to a close, the United States pushed through the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, creating a lasting international rift. Kosovo still has no seat in the United Nations.

In all, during this period, 34 new nations, ranging from East Timor to Moldova and Namibia, were created in processes mostly overseen by the United States, the United Nations and the European Union. In most cases, a newly-democratized nation broke away from a failed authoritarian one. But, a generation on, Catalonia and Kurdistan are attempting to separate from other democracies, thus risking regional and global stability and revealing two specific flaws in the system as it stands.

The first flaw is that the need to hold a referendum comes largely because elected legislatures are not doing their jobs. If they were, a critical mass of citizens would not feel the need to go outside the system. The second is that Western governments have failed to explain fully the pieces that slot together to form their democracies, how the global order is a delicate balance among local sentiments, the nation state and regional power blocs.

Western leaders, therefore, would be wise to roll back the increasingly messianic use of slogans such as "the peoples' will." When emotional sentiment comes face to face with political pragmatism, failure and resentment are bound to follow. This happened after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the West's botched spon-

↳ sorship of the abortive Arab Spring in 2011. Similar disappointments now run through Catalonia and Kurdistan.

As former US President Woodrow Wilson succinctly said: "Democracy is not so much a form of government as a set of principles."

While democratic principle might have fired Kurdistan's referendum, the result, if implemented, risked creating more turmoil in the Middle East. Iran and Turkey would not tolerate an independent Kurdistan. Kurdistan also advocates the division of Iraq into three independent, confederated nations, Kurds to the north, Sunnis in the center and Shias in the south. Many areas are mixed and, given Iraq's history, such a division would lead to further bloodshed. With Catalonia, the European Union is wary of enflaming similar separatist sentiments embedded throughout the continent. If the EU condones Catalanian separatism, nationalism would increase elsewhere, compounding Europe's already worrying rise of right-wing xenophobic political movements.

The EU's future has already been put into

question by Britain's 2016 surprise Brexit referendum result to separate from the regional power bloc. The 51.9 percent vote in favor of leaving was a wafer-thin majority, yet the "will of the people" is constantly used to justify arguments for an EU exit already damaging the economy. Central to the Brexit debate is Britain's future trading relationship with the EU indicating that if sophisticated negotiations between highly developed institutions are facing problems, neither Catalonia nor Kurdistan have much chance of operating as successful independent nations. The same applies to other places such as 2014 Donetsk in Ukraine and 2011 South Sudan, where independence referenda have been advocated as a means to address longstanding problems but have prompted or failed to end conflict.

In 1947, the United Nations agreed to a referendum for Kashmir, the divided and disputed territory straddling India and Pakistan, but it was never held. Now, such an election would enflame already heated tensions, risking regional a war. A similar situation is in place for the renegade Chinese province of Taiwan whose 24 million people live as if in an independent nation. The United States has

made clear to the Taiwanese government that American support would diminish if any move is made toward an official declaration of independence.

Catalonia and Kurdistan are warnings that the West must smarten up its act. Democracy, as practiced during the past two decades, has been filled with so many failures and contradictions that few who line up at the polling stations know exactly how it works. Too often, democracy has been used as a lever to open the floodgates of nationalism, racism and religious and ethnic divisions.

"The people's will" as championed in voting booths cannot be taken raw. The ballot box might legitimize a system. It does not design it.

Humphrey Hawksley has written extensively on democracy. His next book Asian Waters: Chinese Expansion and the Shifting Balance of Power will be published in April 2018. ♦



Irak: six morts dans un attentat à Kirkouk, reprise par Bagdad aux Kurdes

KIRKOUK (IRAK), 5 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

AU MOINS SIX personnes ont été tuées dimanche dans une double attaque suicide dans le centre de Kirkouk, ville que les forces fédérales irakiennes ont reprise il y a moins de trois semaines aux Kurdes, a indiqué un responsable des services de sécurité.

En outre, 12 personnes ont été blessées dans ces deux explosions menées à un quart d'heure d'intervalle, a-t-il précisé à l'AFP sous le couvert de l'anonymat.

La première a été perpétrée par un kamikaze conduisant une voiture piégée et la seconde par un autre portant une ceinture d'explosif, a-t-il détaillé.

Cette attaque a eu lieu près d'un ancien poste de police désormais utilisé par Saraya al-Salam ("Brigades de la paix" en arabe), des unités paramilitaires du puissant chef chiite Moqtada Sadr, a indiqué le responsable.

Saraya al-Salam fait partie du Hachd al-Chaabî, force armée qui a joué un rôle aux côtés des troupes irakiennes dans la reprise des zones disputées avec le Kurdistan.

La double attaque a eu lieu sur le boulevard Atlas, une importante artère de la ville de près d'un million d'habitants, où se trouvent de nombreux commerces et administrations.

Kirkouk a été au cœur des tensions entre Bagdad et Erbil depuis la tenue le 25 septembre d'un référendum d'indépendance organisé contre l'avis de Bagdad dans la région autonome et au-delà, notamment dans la province disputée de Kirkouk.

Moins d'un mois plus tard, le 16 octobre, les forces gouvernementales et paramilitaires irakiennes entraient en mouvement et reprenaient la quasi-totalité des zones disputées, c'est-à-dire réclamées à la fois par le gouvernement régional kurde et Bagdad.

Ces zones dépendent, selon la Constitution, du pouvoir central de Bagdad mais leur statut doit encore être discuté au cours de négociations à venir. Depuis l'invasion américaine de 2003 et dans le sillage du chaos créé en 2014 par la percée jihadiste, les peshmergas en avaient de fait pris le contrôle. ●



L'Irak veut plus que doubler la production de pétrole à Kirkouk

KIRKOUK (IRAK), 13 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

LE MINISTRE IRAKIEN du Pétrole Jabbar al-Louaïbi a affirmé lundi vouloir plus que doubler la production de pétrole de Kirkouk, province riche en hydrocarbures tout juste reprise par Bagdad aux Kurdes, pour atteindre un million de barils par jour.

Actuellement, la capacité totale de production dans la province septentrionale de Kirkouk est de "420.000 barils par jour", selon M. Louaïbi.

Mais seulement 120.000 barils par jour sont effectivement produits et les exportations sont à l'arrêt.

Lors d'une visite dans les champs pétroliers de cette région que le Kurdistan dispute aux autorités fédérales, M. Louaïbi a estimé que "la priorité est la reprise de l'exportation du pétrole de Kirkouk via l'oléoduc irako-turc dès qu'il sera réhabilité ou remplacé par un nouveau".

Depuis 2014, dans le chaos créé par la percée du groupe Etat islamique (EI), les Kurdes s'étaient emparés des champs et de l'ensemble des installations

pétrolières de Kirkouk après avoir raccordé peu avant un oléoduc vers la Turquie, pour court-circuiter les exportations irakiennes.

L'oléoduc tenu par les autorités centrales à Bagdad, était alors déjà hors d'usage. Un plan a été lancé en octobre pour le remettre en état mais les experts estiment que cela pourrait prendre jusqu'à deux ans.

Près d'un mois après la reprise par les troupes fédérales du pétrole et des raffineries de Kirkouk aux Kurdes, il faut "mettre au point un plan pour relancer la production des champs de Kirkouk", dont deux sont encore à l'arrêt, a poursuivi le ministre.

Il a également plaidé pour une reprise des exportations.

D'ici là, "30.000 barils par jour seront acheminés par camion-citerne vers l'Iran", pays voisin de l'Irak, a-t-il indiqué.

A terme, "les champs et les puits de Kirkouk seront rénovés et nous ambitionnons d'atteindre une production d'un million de barils par jour, nous en sommes sûrs", a martelé le ministre.

Pour ce faire, il a évoqué la possibilité d'un contrat avec la compagnie British Petroleum (BP).

Cette visite est la première d'un ministre du Pétrole irakien depuis 2003 dans cette zone qui n'est pas incluse dans les frontières de la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien mais où les forces kurdes s'étaient déployées au fil des ans. ●



AVEC LES KURDES, PLUS QUE JAMAIS !

RASSEMBLEMENT DE SOLIDARITÉ AVEC LE KURDISTAN IRAKIEN

CE JEUDI 2 NOVEMBRE À 20H00

AU CINÉMA LE SAINT-GERMAIN

Projection du film *La bataille de Mossoul* de Bernard-Henri Lévy,
suivie de prises de parole par **CAROLINE FOUREST, ANNE HIDALGO, le général HAJAR AUMAR ISMAÏL,
BERNARD KOUCHNER, BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY, KENDAL NEZAN** et **MANUEL VALLS**

#SupportKurdistan

Une soirée sous l'égide de la revue **LA RÈGLE DU JEU, SOS RACISME, L'UEJF,**
L'INSTITUT KURDE DE PARIS et **LA FONDATION DANIELLE-MITERRAND – FRANCE LIBERTÉS.**

Coupable de vouloir être indépendant au terme de cent ans de résistance contre toutes les tyrannies, le Kurdistan, qui fut en première ligne face à Daech, est attaqué et asphyxié par ses puissants voisins: Irak, Iran, Turquie. Il est abandonné à son sort par ses amis d'hier, Etats-Unis en tête, dont les chars Abrams ont permis aux divisions irakiennes et aux milices iraniennes venues de Téhéran de s'emparer de Kirkouk, le poumon du pays. Et l'Europe, quant à elle, assiste sans mot dire à l'écrasement d'un rêve séculaire, au blocus aérien et terrestre d'un petit peuple adepte de ses valeurs, à l'invasion d'une nation où ont trouvé refuge un million et demi de chrétiens, de yézidis et d'Arabes fuyant Daech. Face à cette tragédie qui rappelle les pires abandons de l'histoire européenne du dernier siècle, c'est aux amis du Droit et de la démocratie de se mobiliser pour arrêter la forfaiture. Le peuple français a une longue tradition de solidarité avec le peuple kurde. Plus que jamais, son amitié et son soutien doivent peser dans la bataille de l'opinion et pousser à ce que l'Europe dise stop aux agresseurs.

Entrée libre dans la limite des places disponibles. Il est recommandé de réserver (redaction@laregledujeu.org)

CINÉMA LE SAINT-GERMAIN 22 RUE GUILLAUME-APOLLINAIRE 75006 PARIS



US representatives question State Dept policy in Iraq favoring Iran over Kurds

rudaw.net 2 November, 2017

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Several US congressmen including war veterans gathered in front of the Capitol to slam the presence of Iran-backed militias within the Iraqi Interior Ministry and call for more US State Department and White House support for Kurds.

"A picture is worth 1,000 words. There's the M1 Abrams tank with a Hezbollah flag. I don't care what the State Department says, they can't argue with this. At the best, the State Department has been derelict in its duties," US Congressman Duncan Hunter, while holding up a photo of what he believes were Shiite militias on a US tank. "At worst they've been complicit."

Many of congressmen and advisors who took turns talking on Wednesday emphasized that the State Department policy does not match how they see the facts on the ground.

"We are equipping and training the wrong people. It's time we rose above what the State Department has screwed up over and over. Iraq was a military victory lost by politics in the State Department... The State Department is going to lose us Iraq again in one of the worst ways," added Duncan.

Duncan cautioned that the decision to ignore Iranian influence in Iraq is ignoring a larger regional problem that would be a military corridor from Tehran to Damascus and "on Israel's doorstep."

"It's time that we as Americans choose a side," said Duncan. "And that side is freedom, and allies, and the Kurds."

Duncan claimed that US President Donald Trump isn't being informed by the top levels of Iran's influence, while pointing to the photos of Hezbollah flags on US-made weapons in Iraq.

"I don't think Secretary [James] Mattis has seen this picture of a Hezbollah flag on his M1 Abrams tank," said Duncan.

Rep. Trent Franks asked the Administration of President Donald Trump to re-evaluate Iran's "malicious influence" in Iraq.

"This president has had a tremendously effective instinct in making sure that we did not re-certify the Iranian nuclear deal and I hope now that he listens to his own



US Congressional representatives and others gather in front of the Capitol to support Kurds in Iraq. Photo: Rudaw video

instincts rather than the D.C.'s establishment when it comes to recognizing the insinuation of the Iranian influence in Iraq," said Franks, who is a member of the House Armed Services Committee chairs the Missile Defense Caucus.

There has been speculation that the United States is backing Abadi because it prefers him to hold the prime minister post over other Shiite Alliance leaders like the previous Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

"[Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-] Abadi promised that we would not attack the Kurds weeks ago," said Franks. "For him to break his word to the whole world does not speak well of his leadership."

Others, including Rep. Lee Zeldin, noted that there are people in Iraq's government who are influenced by Iran.

"It's important for Abadi to take more leadership over his own government to reject this Iranian influence. The Iranians can't help themselves, but to meddle all over the Middle East?" questioned Zeldin.

"Whether it's the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] activities, Qassam Soleimani is specifically leading that effort. It's to support Assad in Syria or Hezbollah."

Michael P. Pregent, who is a foreign policy analyst and Hudson Institute fellow, supported that view going so far to say as Abadi has no control of the Iran-backed militias.

"That's because they don't ans-

wer to him [And Hadi al-] Amiri says it better than anybody else. He said that 'The Hashd al-Shaabi do not answer to PM Abadi, they answer to me, and I answer to Qassam Soleimani,'" said Pregent, referring to Quds Force commander Soleimani. The biggest problem I have as a veteran of this war and as former intel, is that these militias are actually under the ministry of interior."

At the height of the war with ISIS, the Iraqi government voted last December to formally bring the paramilitary forces – including the Hashd – formally under the umbrella of the Iraqi government.

Congressmen Franks and others paid their appreciation for the Kurdish-American partnership in the invasion and in the ISIS war.

"The Kurds were the one group that did stand up. They stood up and they protected the Yazidis, they protected the Christians, and they did it without the Obama administration's help," said Franks, referring to when ISIS threatened to overrun all of Iraq. "Now this administration needs to stand by them and do what we can to maintain our commitment to that kind of courage."

The Iraqi central government's incursions into disputed or Kurdistanian areas claimed by Baghdad and Erbil but under the administration of the Kurdistan Regional Government began about three weeks after the Kurdistan Region held a referendum to gauge

support on independence from Iraq.

Nearly 93 percent of ballots indicated 'Yes' for independence.

Since then, the Iraqi forces and Kurdish Peshmerga have had deadly clashes. The Iraqis have pushed the Kurds back to the 1992 line and aim to impose federal authority over the Kurdistan Region, which the KRG maintains is not constitutional under the 2005 Iraqi constitution.

The Kurdish government has since agreed to freeze the outcome of the vote and engage in dialogue with Baghdad within the framework of the 2005 constitution.

Masoud Barzani, who has been criticized for overreaching with the referendum, agreed not to extend his presidential tenure past Nov. 1.

"Tragically the only mistake Barzani has really made is unfortunately overestimating the American commitment to Kurds," said Franks. "And that's our fault, not his."

As the war with ISIS wraps up, leaders have warned of what comes next in a region where power vacuums have bred extremism since the 2003 US invasion.

A former assistant to Trump, Dr. Sebastian Gorka, expressed that "Shiite terrorism" is the next threat in the Middle East after "Sunni terrorism" is defeated. ■

REPORT

Why the Fight for Fishkhabour Is So Important for Iraqi Kurds

A month after its independence referendum, Iraqi Kurdistan is seeing its economic future threatened.



Iraqi security forces launch a rocket toward Kurdish Peshmerga positions near Fishkhabour. (Ahmad al-Rubaye/AFP/Getty Images)

By Rhys Dubin | November 1, 2017
<http://foreignpolicy.com>

The post-independence referendum reality doesn't look bright for Iraqi Kurds, and an ongoing military showdown with Baghdad over control of a key border crossing underscores how fragile Irbil's hold on autonomy really is.

On Wednesday, negotiations reportedly broke down between Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi forces facing off over the Fishkhabour border crossing with Turkey and Syria. Both sides are now back to "square one," according to reports. This comes days after the United States had nudged Kurdish and Iraqi forces to reach an apparent agreement to share control over the critical border crossing — a vital gateway to Turkey and a chokepoint for Iraqi Kurdistan's crude oil exports.

The Iraqi advance all the way north to Fishkhabour marks an escalation in Baghdad's pushback against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Fishkhabour is in clearly undisputed Kurdish territories — unlike the disputed city of Kirkuk, retaken from Kurds by Iraqi federal forces in mid-October. More importantly, Iraqi control of the border crossing and the oil pipeline there represents a serious threat to Kurdish autonomy. Without the billions of dollars generated by exporting oil through that pipeline, the region in northern Iraq could never stand on its own.

"Going forward, Baghdad is trying to erode the military and economic pillars of Kurdish autonomy," said Ben Van Heuvelen, the editor in chief of Iraq Oil Report. "Given the new realities on the ground, the [KRG] doesn't have the luxury of ignoring Baghdad anymore."

Oil was meant to set Irbil free. After years of clashing with Baghdad over revenue sharing

from the country's crude exports, officials in landlocked Kurdistan finally got substantial access to the sea with the completion in 2014 of a crude oil pipeline snaking through Kurdish territory to the Turkish border. That allowed the Kurdish government to export as much as 600,000 barrels of crude per day to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan — worth billions a year even with cheap oil prices.

Baghdad, which under the Iraqi Constitution is meant to export all the nation's oil and then divvy up the proceeds, couldn't physically stop the Kurdish exports — especially because Irbil had the support of Turkey.

"The Kurdish pipeline connects to the ITP [Iraq-Turkey pipeline] downstream of the federal government's metering station," a former manager with an oil field services company active in the Kurdistan region told Foreign Policy — essentially bypassing central government oversight. "The Iraqis couldn't go in and say how much the Kurds could and could not export."

But with the renewed prospect of central government control over Fishkhabour and all the oil infrastructure there, Baghdad has regained the ability to shut down exports from Kurdish fields in the north. That will give the government significant leverage in future budget negotiations and might allow it to force the KRG back into a new revenue-sharing agreement.

"If the federal government controls Fishkhabour and has the ability to turn off the pipeline at its discretion, the KRG actually has to work with Baghdad on the budget," Heuvelen said.

Control over Fishkhabour also gives the Iraqi government insurance against a downturn in its relations with Turkey, which has facilitated the export and payment of Kurdish crude to global markets.

"The Iraqi government knows that if at some point in the future [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan changes his mind and turns

against Baghdad, [as long as the Kurds control Fishkhabour] Turkey can go back to an independent energy relationship with the Kurds," said Michael Knights, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Despite the potential leverage, there are big political and financial reasons why Baghdad would be hesitant to completely cut off Kurdish oil exports at Fishkhabour.

The KRG has racked up debts to international oil companies operating in its region; if exports and revenues dry up because of Baghdad, it's unclear if that would create any legal liability for the Iraqi government.

More to the point, cutting off Kurdish exports entirely would destroy the Kurdish region's economy, already reeling from relatively low oil prices and a huge budget drain that came from accepting displaced people and refugees during the battle against the Islamic State. Since the Islamic State went on a rampage across northern Iraq beginning in 2014, Irbil has struggled to maintain services, pay civil servants, and care for refugees. Cutting off oil exports would make that worse.

"One of the pillars of [Iraqi Prime Minister] Haider al-Abadi's rhetoric has been that he's acting against an irresponsible and corrupt KRG leadership — but on behalf of the Kurdish citizens of Iraq," Heuvelen said.

"If he does something that tanks the Kurdish economy, that talking point becomes hollow," he said. ♦

Rhys Dubin is an editorial fellow at Foreign Policy. Before coming to FP, he worked for The Daily Star in Beirut covering defense, security, and Lebanese politics. His previous work and research includes time spent in Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia.

Iraq's parliament reinstates ban on Israeli flag

By Mustafa Salim and Tamer El-Ghobashy November 1, 2017

<https://www.washingtonpost.com>

BAGHDAD — Iraq's parliament voted unanimously to activate a lapsed law that criminalizes displaying the Israeli flag in public, an unexpected step that comes in response to a Kurdish bid to secede.

The move illustrates both the deep injury Iraq's Arab majority felt when the nation's Kurds held an independence referendum last month — and the resurgent Arab nationalism the vote has provoked.

Israel was the only country to publicly support the referendum for an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq that took place in September. The move had been strenuously opposed by Baghdad, Iran, Turkey and even the Kurds' closest ally, the United States.

In a show of gratitude for Israel's support, Kurds proudly waved large Israeli flags at massive rallies held ahead of the vote. Although it seemed unusual for the blue and white flag to appear so freely in a region largely hostile to Israel, for Kurds it was the continuation of a historic friendship.

Israel had long supported Kurdish uprisings against former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

The open display of the Israeli flag at the Kurdish rallies in their semi-autonomous region grated on Arabs and even led to conspiracy-laden comments by some Iraqi and Iranian officials that the entire independence movement was engineered by Israel to hasten the breakup of Iraq.

Hamid al-Khudary, a lawmaker from a large Shiite bloc in Iraq's parliament, said he introduced a motion in the legislature Tuesday to reactivate a dormant law that imposes a criminal penalty on displaying the Israeli flag.



Israelis mainly of Kurdish origin take part in a gathering outside the American Embassy in Tel Aviv on Oct. 26. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

He said "raising the Zionist entity flag" is a "dangerous phenomenon."

Flying the flag during the Kurdish rallies "insulted the reputation of Iraq and its people considering that Israel is an enemy state to Iraq," he said in a phone interview with The Washington Post.

Iraq doesn't have diplomatic relations with Israel and has not been part of a recent effort by Israel and Arab nations including Egypt and Saudi Arabia to normalize relations.

Khudary said the motion, which also bans promoting Zionism, received a unanimous vote. Iraq's cabinet will decide the appropriate criminal penalty for any breach of the law, he said.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Israel's flag has always been a rare sight in Iraq, except for one day per year. On Quds Day, or Jerusalem Day — which is observed on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan — some Iraqis show support for the Palestinian cause by stomping on and burning Israeli flags.

The practice was adopted from neighboring Iran, which declared the first Quds Day in 1979.

How the reactivated Iraqi law will impact the tradition is not clear. ■

ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

5 November 2017

Kurds Fear 'Arabization' of Iraq's Kirkuk

Al-Sulaimaniya – 5 November, 2017 <https://aawsat.com>

It appears that the Iraqi federal authority's recapturing of Kirkuk from Kurdish control has not ended the disputes that have plagued the oil-rich region since the collapse of the former regime.

Successive governments have failed to resolve differences between the region's population of Turkmen, Kurds and Arabs. Signs of a new crisis erupting began to emerge with Kurds voicing their concern with Arabs and Turkmen seizing public posts at their expense and with the support of the Iraqi government.

Members of the Kurdish council in the region voiced their fears that Iraqi authorities would continue the process of "Arabizing" the province amid the absence of a Kurdish governor and the unlikelihood that the post will be filled any time soon.

The Kurdish governor, Najmeddine Karim, had fled Kirkuk in wake of the Iraqi forces' October operation to regain control of the region.

Council member Ahmed al-Askari told Kurdish media that the absence of this governor is being exploited once again by some sides to once again launch the "Arabization" policy that was adopted by the previous regime of Saddam Hussein.

Asharq Al-Awsat could not confirm his claims of "Arabization."

"Baghdad has started the process and the government issued a decree allowing Arab Shi'ites to transfer their jobs to Kirkuk," Askari said.

They have also been allowed to change their personal status to Kirkuk and allowed Kurds to transfer their status outside the province, he continued.

Turkmen officials in the province agreed with the Kurdish view on the latest developments in Kirkuk despite their opposition to the



A member of Iraqi security forces takes down the Kurdish flag in Kirkuk, Iraq. (Reuters)

actions of Karim.

Turkman official Hassan Touran told Asharq Al-Awsat: "We oppose any demographic change in the province, whether in 'Arabization' as practiced by the old regime or 'Kurdization' as adopted by the former governor."

He instead voiced his support for coexistence in the region, demanding that normalization measures be put in place so that all locals can live together in peace. ●

REUTERS

Turkish troops, Kurdish militants clash near Iraqi border, 25 killed

NOVEMBER 2, 2017 DIYARBAKIR, TURKEY (REUTERS)

TURKISH security forces killed 17 Kurdish militants near the border between Iraq and southeast Turkey, the armed forces said on Thursday, after eight members of Turkey's security forces were killed in clashes.

Early on Thursday, Turkish forces killed five Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)

militants in clashes after the militants sought to cross the border into Hakkari province's mountainous Semdinli district, the armed forces said in a statement.

It said six Turkish soldiers and two members of the country's state-backed village guard militia were killed in the fighting.

A helicopter-backed operation was started in search of further PKK militants, and Turkish warplanes later killed another 12 militants who were trying to escape across the border to northern Iraq, the military said.

Separately, President Tayyip Erdogan said another five PKK militants were killed in clashes in the southeastern province of Tunceli.

He said the clashes in Turkey's southeast were continuing.

The PKK launched a separatist insurgency in 1984 and more than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict. It is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and European Union. ●

ميدل ايست اونلاين
middle east online

November 1, 2017

Does Washington Have a Plan for the Partition of Syria?

Trump is preoccupied with his domestic agenda. This might mean a propitious time for Erdogan to move into Syria, writes Tom Regan.

Middle East Online 2017-11-01
<http://www.middle-east-online.com/>

Now that the fighting in Raqqa is down to clearing out a few pockets of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters the next important regional question is: What about the Kurds?

How that question will be answered primarily depends on two men who have outsized egos and a disinclination to back down: US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Relations between the United States and Turkey are at a low point and the Syrian Kurds are caught in the middle. Erdogan considers the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), extensions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The latter is designated a terrorist organisation by Ankara and Washington.

The United States has supported the PYD and the YPG as part of the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) because they have been the only fighters capable of defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) and recapturing Raqqa. That was the number one concern for the United States.

What happens next with the Kurds?

The YPG will be reluctant to surrender territory captured during the Syrian conflict. That would enrage Erdogan, who doesn't want an independent Kurdish entity on Turkey's border. Many of Erdogan's supporters say the United States and Russia have a secret plan to support the creation of a Kurdish state. It would be a "second Israel," they think, which is why Erdogan's domestic constituency wants him to send troops into Syria and Iraq to deal with this threat as soon as possible.

Experts in Washington say the US response to any such move by Turkey would depend on two factors: The future of US military bases in Turkey, such as Incirlik near Adana, and Trump's mood, which can change several times in one day. Trump does not like being directly challenged on foreign policy issues. His Twitter war with North Korea's Kim Jong-un is a case in point.

While Erdogan and Trump have publicly been cordial, it's not clear how the US president would respond to a direct challenge from the Turkish leader. Would Trump be unconcerned about an important military base in Turkey?

Trump, however, is preoccupied with his domestic agenda, not least the passing of tax-reform legislation. For Erdogan, this might mean it is a propitious time to move into Syria.

As for what the Kurds may want, we probably need only look to the

recent referendum on independence by Iraqi Kurds in the north. While this infuriated the government in Baghdad and perplexed Kurdish allies abroad, it's not hard to see a similar situation arising in Syria.

Some in the world of Washington think-tanks say the United States needs to reward the Syrian Kurds for their courage in the fight against ISIS. The United States, they say, should support Syrian Kurdistan (or Rojava) as a federal region within Syria. Anything less would be considered a betrayal by the Syrian Kurds and their allies abroad. This would undoubtedly put the United States at odds with Erdogan, however.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on October 26 said the United States sees no place for Syrian President Bashar Assad in the new Syria. Tillerson met with UN Syrian envoy Staffan de Mistura, who is expected to reconvene peace talks following the SDF's success in Raqqa and gains by the Syrian regime's Russian-backed forces. Tillerson said the discussions were "fruitful" but his comments on Assad are unlikely to be received well by Russia or Iran. Turkey, however, has no love lost for Assad.

The funny thing is that this moment might not have happened if Erdogan had not been so adamant about getting rid of Assad's regime instead of simply defeating ISIS. In 2014, the United States approached him with a plan to work together. It suggested the creation of an anti-ISIS force minus the Kurds but Erdogan insisted on a no-fly zone over sections of Syria as part of his anti-Assad plan, causing the United States to back out of the deal and turn to the YPG for military reasons.

Now, the situation is very different: ISIS is all but defeated, Tillerson may have said "no Assad" but almost no one else is talking about how to actually remove him and the Kurds are in a difficult position. It's hard to say how long Erdogan will ignore his supporters' demands to send Turkish forces into Syria and Iraq. If he decides to go into Syria, Erdogan risks a massive falling out with the United States and bad blood with Russia.

However, if Erdogan is going to continue to push back against the United States, he'll need Russian support as a counterbalance so the next move may be up to the Syrian Kurds. Watch what they do in the coming few weeks. That will foreshadow what happens next between Turkey and the United States. ●

Tom Regan, a columnist at factsandopinion.com, previously worked for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *National Public Radio*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. He is the former executive director of the *Online News Association* and was a *Nieman Fellow* at Harvard in 1992.

Copyright ©2017 The Arab Weekly

‘General Soleimani Had Warned Erbil of Referendum Consequences’

IRAN FRONT PAGE / November 1, 2017
<http://ifpnews.com>

A SENIOR Kurdish diplomat has revealed that Commander of the IRGC Quds Force Major General Qassem Soleimani had warned the Iraqi Kurdish officials of the consequences of their independence referendum.

Nazim Dabagh, the representative of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Tehran, recently disclosed that General Soleimani headed meetings with local delegations in Iraqi Kurdistan region ahead of the Kurdish referendum.

“General Soleimani also had several private meetings with Masoud Barzani, the president, and Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and the leaders of other parties, including Change (Goran) party,” Dabagh said on Sunday.



He added that the Iranian side had warned the Kurds not to hold an independence referendum because all powers will stand united against the Iraqi Kurdistan region, Fars reported.

According to Dabagh, the Iranian side also told the KRG officials and Kurdish groups that Tehran wants the Iraqi Kurds' achievements to be maintained within the framework of the Iraqi constitution.

He lauded General Soleimani and other Iranian officials' efforts to help the Kurds, and said, “We always need relations and friendship of Iran.” ●



NOVEMBER 3, 2017

Kurdish street name changed to Turkmen in Kirkuk

Sangar Ali Sangar Ali | November 03-2017
www.kurdistan24.net

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region (Kurdistan 24) – On Thursday, Turkmen gathered in the street of Shahid (Martyr) Sherko Shwani in Kirkuk and changed the name to a Turkmen martyr's name, Sehit Dr. Yildirim Demirci.

The people who gathered in the area were the supporters of Iraqi Turkmen Front party and Turkmen members of the Iranian-backed Shia Hashd al-Shaabi militia also known as Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), locals told Kurdistan 24.

The street is located in the center of the diverse city where Kurds are a majority and have historical claims to the land.

Iraqi Turkmen Front was the leading opposition party who lobbied in Baghdad against the inclusion of Kirkuk Province in Sep. 25 referendum for independence in the Kurdistan Region. They also complained in Baghdad court against raising Kurdistan national flag on all the public offices in Kirkuk.

Following the fall of Kirkuk on October 16 which was attacked by the Iraqi forces and the PMF, Kurdistan flag was brought down by the militia, Iraqi forces, and supporters of the Turkmen Front party.

The Turkmen People's Party spokesman on October 17 also slammed the Iraqi Turkmen Front and PMF militia for looting their party offices and members' houses in Kirkuk.

Kirkuk is an oil-rich province located in the south of the Kurdistan



Turkmen gathered in the street of Shahid (Martyr) Sherko Shwani in Kirkuk and changed the name to a Turkmen martyr 'Sehit Dr. Yildirim Demirci', November 3, 2017. (Photo: Social Media)

Region and north of Iraq. It is a diverse province with different ethnic and religious background, including Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs, and Christians.

Following the fall of Kirkuk, Kurdistan national flag, posters of Peshmerga fighters fallen in defending Kirkuk along with other signs that link the area to the Kurdistan Region were destroyed, and Iraqi Turkmen Front party and Iraqi flags were instead raised.

In a recent visit to Turkey, the party leaders met with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and called for more support in their alleged effort to recognize the city as a Turkmen region.

Due to the October attack on Kirkuk, over 100,000 people have been displaced to Erbil and Sulaimani, among them are Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, and Arabs. ♦

L'appel au secours des derniers fidèles français du Kurdistan



Forte mobilisation pour Kurdes au Cinéma St-Germain

AVEC LES KURDES, PLUS QUE JAMAIS !
 RASSEMBLEMENT DE SOLIDARITÉ AVEC LE KURDISTAN IRAKIEN
CE JEUDI 2 NOVEMBRE À 20H00
 AU CINÉMA LE SAINT-GERMAIN
 Projection du film *La bataille de Mossoul* de Bernard-Henri Lévy.
 Copie de prises de parole par CAROLINE FOUREST ANNE HIDALGO le général HAJAR AUMAR ISMAIL
 BERNARD KOUCHNER BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY KENDAL NEZAN et MANUEL VALLS

#SupportKurdistan

Une soirée sous le signe de la liberté, de la justice, de la démocratie.
L'INSTITUT KURDE DE PARIS et LA FONDATION DIANA-DE-HILTBERGAND - FRANCE LIBERTES.
 Ce rassemblement a pour objectif de soutenir et de défendre les droits du Kurdistan, qui est le seul pays libre du monde à être sous occupation étrangère. Le Kurdistan est un pays riche en ressources naturelles et stratégiques, qui a été envahi par les forces armées irakiennes et syriennes. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a subi une tragédie humaine sans précédent. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre soutien. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre solidarité. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre amour. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre aide. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre présence. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre voix. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre action. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre engagement. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre courage. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre force. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre espoir. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre foi. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre confiance. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre respect. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre dignité. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre honneur. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre liberté. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre justice. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre démocratie. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre paix. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre prospérité. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre bonheur. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre avenir. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre espoir. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre foi. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre confiance. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre respect. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre dignité. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre honneur. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre liberté. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre justice. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre démocratie. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre paix. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre prospérité. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre bonheur. Le Kurdistan est un pays qui a besoin de votre avenir.

Entrée Libre dans la limite des places disponibles. Il est recommandé de réserver (redaction@kurdistanfr.org)
CINEMA LE SAINT-GERMAIN 22 RUE GUILLAUME-APOLLINAIRE 75006 PARIS

Texte par Sylvain ATTAL — 03/11/2017
<http://www.france24.com>

À Paris, un dernier groupe de fidèles de la cause kurde a lancé jeudi soir un appel à briser l'encerclement et à rendre justice aux combattants qui ont été les fers de lance de la défaite des jihadistes du groupe État islamique.

C'est le dernier carré des amis du Kurdistan. Ou plutôt un carré à cinq, un pentagone, donc : Bernard-Henri Lévy, Bernard Kouchner, compagnon de la première heure, aîné des "french doctors" et ancien ministre des Affaires étrangères, auxquels sont venus s'adjoindre l'essayiste Caroline Fourest, l'ancien Premier ministre Manuel Valls et la maire de Paris Anne Hidalgo. Ces cinq-là ont pris la parole jeudi 2 novembre dans une salle de cinéma pleine à craquer de Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Ce sont les derniers "VIP" à se révolter contre la lâcheté des grandes



© Christophe Caudroy | Bernard-Henri Lévy et Manuel Valls au cinéma Le Saint-Germain des-Prés le 2 novembre 2017.

puissances qui, il y a encore quelques semaines, louaient le courage des peshmerga, ces combattants kurdes seuls à combattre au sol les jihadistes de l'organisation État islamique (EI), et à les défaire.

Un réel amour de la France

À peine avaient-ils ouvert la voie à l'armée irakienne pour qu'elle entre en libératrice dans Mossoul, la deuxième ville du pays, et juste avant que les Kurdes syriens ne chassent l'EI de leur "capitale" Raqqa, la même armée irakienne, appuyée par les milices chiites entraînées et financées par Téhéran, se jetait sur Kirkouk que les Kurdes, minés par une trahison interne, devaient abandonner quasiment sans combattre. Depuis, la province autonome du Kurdistan irakien, réduite à son territoire d'origine, se trouve complètement coupée du monde. Son espace aérien, fermé par le gouvernement central de Bagdad, comme ses frontières terrestres.

Ce n'est pas la première fois que les Kurdes



Pour Bernard Kouchner, il existe un réel "amour", entre la France et le Kurdistan, dont il faut entretenir la flamme. © Christophe Caudroy

se retrouvent seuls, abandonnés par ceux qui se disaient leurs alliés contre l'EI. États-Unis en tête. Mais cette fois-ci plus encore, les Kurdes ont cru aux louanges des Occidentaux, et que le fait de les débarrasser du cancer de l'EI au nom de valeurs démocratiques communes leur vaudrait enfin reconnaissance de leurs droits nationaux mentionnés depuis 1920 par le traité de Sèvres. Une fois de plus, ils ont le sentiment d'avoir été trahis.

Autour de ces derniers défenseurs de la cause kurde, et du président de l'Institut kurde de Paris Kendal Nezan, des militants kurdes brandissant leurs couleurs, des intellectuels français, quelques élus parisiens aussi, tous venus rappeler, avec Bernard Kouchner, qu'il existe un réel "amour", entre la France et le Kurdistan, dont il faut entretenir la flamme. Manuel Valls, face à Anne

⇒



Anne HIDALGO : "Non, Paris ne laissera pas tomber les Kurdes"

⇒ Hidalgo, fruit de la même histoire familiale, a évoqué, lui, le souvenir douloureux du Front populaire qui n'intervint pas en Espagne pour défendre les républicains face au danger fasciste.

Quand les États-Unis laissent l'Iran tirer les marrons du feu alors que, par ailleurs, Donald Trump ne cesse de dénoncer la menace régionale que constitue Téhéran, on se perd en conjecture. Quand le gouvernement français tente de défendre coûte que coûte la fiction d'un Irak fédéral uni, il faut bien que quelques-uns, dans la grande tradition française des intellectuels d'action, se dressent contre cette "capitulation sans précédent" (BHL), dénoncent l'attitude "diplomatique assez méprisante" de la France (Kouchner) et le feu vert donné par la coalition internationale à l'Iran pour qu'elle repousse les Kurdes.

La "saloperie" du parallèle avec la Catalogne

Quant à la question du référendum organisé par le président kurde Massoud Barzani, auquel on a reproché une absence de réalisme et une mauvaise appréciation du rap-

port de forces diplomatique, il a sans doute servi de prétexte à une offensive conjointe et planifiée de tous ceux qui ne veulent pas d'un Kurdistan irakien indépendant, à commencer par la Turquie et l'Iran. Offensive du reste assez contenue. Car si Kirkouk, où les milices chiites se sont livrées à des massacres et à des pillages, n'a pas été défendue, les Kurdes tiennent fermement la frontière sur laquelle ils se sont repliés.

Les 94 % de "oui" à l'indépendance actent la volonté des Kurdes de rompre avec Bagdad. Bernard-Henri Lévy a dénoncé la "saloperie" du parallèle fait avec le référendum catalan, car en aucun point les deux situations ne sont comparables. Et Kendal Nezan relève que la cour fédérale de Bagdad, qui fait office de Cour suprême, n'a pas été en mesure de condamner ce vote comme anticonstitutionnel. Les Kurdes sont déterminés à continuer à se battre pour sortir de cette "union libre" qu'est l'Irak. Et ce n'est pas le comportement des Irakiens à Kirkouk qui y changera quoi que ce soit.

Clou de la soirée, l'intervention du général peshmerga Hajar Ismail, qui a pu déjouer



Général Hajar Aumar Ismaïl

l'encerclement du Kurdistan pour assister à cette "soirée de combat" : "Nous avons combattu Saddam Hussein, nous avons triomphé de l'EI, maintenant c'est le tour des chiites. Le crime reste le crime. Les visages changent, mais la culture, la mentalité restent les mêmes." ♦

Pour les Kurdes



CAROLINE FOUREST
Marianne Magazine 10 Nov 2017
www.marianne.net/

La trahison de nos alliés kurdes annonce bien pire qu'un reniement. Une défaite. Malgré tout ce qui les différencie et souvent les oppose, les Kurdes de Syrie et d'Irak se sont battus contre Daech, pour nous, au nom des mêmes valeurs. En Syrie, les glorieuses guerrières des YPJ et leurs frères d'armes des YPG portent un projet à l'opposé du drapeau noir de l'obscurantisme : égalitaire, écologiste et laïque.

Malgré tous les risques de dogmatisme inhérents aux utopies, cette poche du Rojava a le mérite inouï de planter une graine d'espoir dans un désert sans avenir. Elle permet de croire à un projet alternatif au choix mortel entre dictature nationaliste ou islamisme. Cette herbe folle qui stérilise l'ancien grenier à blé du monde depuis des décennies. A quelques kilomètres de là, les dirigeants du Kurdistan irakien ont parfois les défauts des indépendantistes devenus hommes d'affaires. Mais alentour, tout le monde reconnaît qu'ils ont su faire prospérer autour d'Erbil, l'une des seules régions de l'ancienne Mésopotamie où il fait bon vivre.

Ce n'est pas un hasard si des Arabes et des Turkmènes de Kirkouk ont voté en faveur du oui à l'indépendance. La plupart des sunnites des « territoires disputés » préfèrent vivre sous une démocratie kurde que sous la tutelle chiite de Bagdad, allié à Téhéran. Les voilà désormais à la merci des milices chiites, dirigées par un général iranien, venues aider l'armée irakienne à récupérer la ville et ses puits de pétrole.

Les peshmergas qui avaient vaillamment défendu Kirkouk face à Daech l'ont rendu sans combattre. Par peur de verser un sang inutile. Le rapport de force était perdu d'avance. Mais c'est une branche de l'Union patriotique du Kurdistan (PUK) qui a permis d'ouvrir les portes de la ville, en échange d'un marchandage peu glorieux. Trahi de toutes parts, Massoud Barzani annonce prendre du champ. Beaucoup lui en veulent d'avoir porté ce référendum au risque d'échouer.

Y avait-il meilleur moment pour réclamer non pas son indépendance,

mais au moins son désir de liberté ? Comme l'ont répété les amis des Kurdes, Frédéric Tissot, Bernard Henri-Lévy ou Bernard Kouchner, « ce n'est jamais le bon moment. Et toujours le moment ». Tout le monde pressentait qu'une fois Raqqa libéré, le monde abandonnerait les Kurdes à leur sort : un tuteur irakien qui n'a jamais respecté les accords prévus par la Constitution. Erbil était même convaincu que Bagdad planifiait cette reconquête depuis des mois. D'où cette course contre la montre pour arracher un oui à l'indépendance, franc et massif, avant d'entamer une négociation. Au lieu de quoi, Bagdad a envoyé ses milices et ses chars – fournis par l'armée américaine pour écraser Daech – rouler sur les peshmergas. Leurs chenilles se sont arrêtées à quelques kilomètres d'Erbil. Un coup de force pour imposer une unité irakienne à laquelle plus personne ne croit. Les tanks n'ont jamais conquis les coeurs. Ils ne feront pas oublier les 92,7 % en faveur de l'indépendance du Kurdistan. Ce chiffre demeure dans les esprits, tel une prise de guerre, enfermé dans un coffre de l'histoire. Pour l'ouvrir, il faudra la révolte de l'opinion internationale et une nouvelle génération de leaders kurdes, animés d'un nouvel esprit d'union. Si la plus grande diaspora du monde n'a toujours pas de nation ou de confédération, c'est aussi à cause de ses divisions – à la fois culturelles, économiques et politiques – qui l'empêchent de faire front face aux deux puissances prêtes à briser le rêve kurde : l'Iran et la Turquie.



Mobilisation pro-référendum sur l'indépendance du Kurdistan à Erbil. septembre 2017 (AFP)

Rien n'est plus inquiétant que cette alliance entre le régime des mollahs, décidé à tracer un arc chiite jusqu'à la mer, et Recep Tayyip Erdogan, se prenant pour le nouveau calife. L'Amérique, qui a perdu la tête en élisant Trump, laisse faire. Au bord d'une fitna - un schisme, une division - sans précédent, le monde se retrouve sans gendarme et sans garde-fou, plus instable que jamais. Que fera l'Europe, déchirée de l'intérieur ? Et la France ? Notre honneur serait de réclamer la reconnaissance du Kurdistan au Conseil de sécurité. Laisser nos alliés de coeur se faire dévorer ne nous amènera pas la paix. Ce signal de faiblesse ne fera qu'engraisser l'ogre de l'après-Daech. Or il nous menace aussi. ●

Syria conflict: What do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran want?

Syria's complex and devastating civil war has drawn in multiple foreign powers since it broke out in 2011. DW examines where four key countries stand on the conflict.

Author Alexander Pearson / 02.11.2017
<http://www.dw.com>

UNITED STATES

- Who it supports: Washington had given moderate rebel factions fighting against government forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad weapons and military training, but ended military aid in July. More recently, the US has provided air support and weapons to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab forces fighting against "Islamic State" (IS) militants in northern Syria. Several hundred US special forces are deployed alongside the SDF. Separately, the US backs Syrian rebels fighting IS and has a base in al-Tanf, near the Iraqi border.

- Who it's fighting against: The US has been leading an international coalition of nearly 60 countries, including Germany, targeting IS and other extremist groups with airstrikes since late 2014. The US has largely avoided direct conflict with pro-regime forces, but in April US President Donald Trump ordered airstrikes on a Syrian airbase in response to a government chemical weapons attack against civilians.

- What it wants: The US has remained steadfast in trying to destroy IS in Syria and Iraq. But its intentions on other issues have become unclear. Trump told reporters in September that the US has "very little to do with Syria other than killing IS." But in July, it had been deeply involved in brokering a ceasefire between government and opposition forces. The new administration has also given conflicting signals as to whether the US would oppose a peace deal keeping Assad in power. Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, had said that "Assad must go" for any peace deal to work. The US also seeks to block Iran and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah from establishing permanent presence in Syria that could threaten Israel.

- Which peace talks it supports: Washington has supported UN peace talks held in Geneva since 2012 between representatives from the Assad government and the Syrian opposition. But those talks have so far failed to reach a breakthrough. Both sides have disagreed about whether Assad's departure should be a precondition for any final settlement.

RUSSIA

- Who it supports: Moscow has long backed the Assad regime. It has provided government troops with air support and weapons and given it diplomatic backing at the UN and in international peace talks. Russia also has troops on the ground.

- Who it's fighting against: Russia first intervened in Syria in October 2015 when it started airstrikes against "terrorist" targets. While Moscow has said it is targeting IS and other terrorist groups, US officials have repeatedly countered that claim by saying Russian airstrikes are primarily directed against non-IS rebel forces fighting the Assad government. The Kremlin, meanwhile, has accused the US of using its campaign against IS as a way to slow Russian and Syrian government military advances.

- What it wants: Moscow wants to keep Assad – its closest ally in the Middle East – in power and secure its military influence in the region. It has an important military airbase in the western province of Latakia and a naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus. Russian leaders support a peace deal with



Turkey has sent ground forces into northern Syria to fight against IS and Kurdish opposition troops

broad consensus among Syria's moderate factions that would allow Assad to remain in power. It has also hinted it may support limited autonomy for opposition forces in certain regions within Syria.

- Which peace talks it supports: While supporting the Geneva negotiations, Moscow has also sponsored talks between the Syrian government and the opposition in Astana, Kazakhstan that began in January 2017. Iran and Turkey are also parties to the talks. The Astana process strives to create "de-confliction zones" that can reduce violence and pave the way for political talks.

TURKEY

- Who it supports: From the start of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has been one of the main backers of the Syrian opposition. Turkey has fought alongside non-Kurdish factions in the Syrian opposition including the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

- Who it's fighting against: Ankara conducted airstrikes against IS targets as part of the US-led coalition. It has also carried out unilateral airstrikes against Kurdish opposition forces in northern Syria and sent ground forces into Syria to fight IS and Kurdish forces as part of the Turkish-led operation known as "Euphrates Shield." As part of a "de-confliction zone" agreed to with Russia and Iran, Turkey has also moved into Idlib province alongside rebels it backs.

- What it wants: Ankara wants to block Syrian Kurdish territorial gains and prevent them from gaining autonomy in any post-war settlement. Turkey says that Syrian Kurdish fighters are tied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has fought a more than three decade war in Turkey. Ankara also wants to defeat IS and other extremist groups that have committed terrorist attacks on Turkish soil. Recently, Turkish leaders have been ambivalent on whether Assad should be allowed to stay in power in a final peace deal.

- Which peace talks it supports: Turkey has been heavily involved in the Geneva talks and has co-sponsored the Astana negotiations. It has staunchly opposed Kurdish factions attending peace talks.

IRAN

- Who it supports: Tehran has supported the Assad government since at least 2012, giving the regime extensive military aid in the form of training, weapons and intelligence sharing. It has also deployed Iran's elite military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Shiite militia from across the region. Its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon is also a major backer of the Assad regime.

- Who it's fighting against: Iran has directly and indirectly been fighting against both moderate and extremist factions in the Syrian opposition, as well as IS.

- What it wants: Syria has long been Iran's chief ally in the Middle East. Propping up Assad ensures an ally against Iran's regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Tehran also needs Syria to transport weapons to Hezbollah, which also opposes Israel, in neighboring Lebanon. Iran's larger goal is to create a land corridor extending from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.

- Which peace talks it supports: Iran joined the Geneva peace talks in November 2015 after the US dropped its longstanding opposition to Iranian involvement. Tehran has also sponsored the Astana peace talks along with Turkey and Russia. ●

The U.S. and Kurdistan: Revise and rebuild after Kirkuk

Ranj Alaaldin November 3, 2017
<https://www.brookings.edu>

The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) loss of Kirkuk province to Baghdad this month, along with a string of other territories in northern Iraq, has shifted the pendulum in Kurdistan from one of jubilation and defiance to despair and uncertainty. Kurdish autonomy is not in doubt, but the balance of power has moved in Baghdad's favor. U.S. relations with the KRG have also taken a serious blow as a result of Washington's acquiescence to the Kirkuk offensive, which was aimed at bolstering Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's position and sidelining Iran-aligned factions ahead of next year's elections.

As the dust settles from the Kirkuk crisis, the United States and Kurdistan must revise and rebuild their relationship quickly, for the sake of American, Kurdish, and Iraqi interests. While Washington's green light for the Kirkuk offensive has hurt relations with the KRG, the damage is not irreparable. The decision by Masoud Barzani, the longtime KRG president, to step down from his role was welcomed by the State Department. This creates an opportunity for Washington to work more closely with KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani (Masoud Barzani's nephew) and Qubad Talabani, Kurdistan's deputy prime minister. Still, the United States has a long way to go before American credibility is fully restored after an episode that will dominate the Kurdish political outlook for years to come.

Kurdistan and the United States must revise their traditional relationship to conform with the increasingly transactional and less values-based nature of U.S. foreign policy today. The Kurds can no longer pin their ambitions on the United States at a time when the country itself is in upheaval over the shape and definition of America's engagements abroad. Kurdistan must learn what others in the region learned the hard way after the turmoil that followed the Arab uprisings and the Syrian civil war, without the same suffering and colossal humanitarian consequences. The United States will no longer invest in policing the region, much less shaping and enforcing a regional order that could be conducive to Kurdish statehood.

U.S. policymakers should take stock of the fall-out from their ineffectual signaling around the Kurds' aspirations for independence. While Washington stressed its opposition to the referendum, its heavy emphasis on the war against ISIS and the centrality of the Kurdish Peshmerga, as well as military facilities and political investments in Kurdistan, led to calculations that the United States would not permit a military offensive against the Peshmerga. At least, there were genuine and not entirely unreasonable assumptions that the United States would mediate tensions.

Washington could have helped Baghdad and Erbil navigate the volatile post-referendum climate, but it instead provided carte blanche that the Iraqi government then exploited effectively, with support from regional powers. In the years to come, the United States may rue these choices and the way it handled its relationship with the Kurds and Baghdad.

Moving forward, there is still a relationship of interdependency based around mutual security and geopolitical interests, and the United States and the Kurds remain linked by a convergence of interests ahead of parliamentary elections next year. In particular, al-Abadi cannot emerge victorious from next year's parliamentary elections and continue at the helm without KRG support, which has been central to the government formation process in Baghdad since 2003 and has often played the role of kingmaker. The multiple other factions in Baghdad are either too weak or too malevolent for U.S. purposes.

Losing the Kurds will result in a weakened American hand in Baghdad and the rest of Iraq, where it will continue to contest regional powers like Iran for influence and where the United States will continue to be engaged as it



attempts to prevent ISIS and its ilk from mounting a resurrection in the coming years. In the interim, to salvage the historical alliance between Kurdistan and the United States, Washington should establish—and enforce—red lines that prevent Baghdad from making further advances toward the undisputed Kurdish border area of Faysh Khabur, which Baghdad wants to control in order to economically suffocate the KRG. That could trigger another civil war that reverses U.S. security gains in recent years and opens up space for Iran to exert its influence and fill the gap left by the absence of American leadership.

For their part, Iraq's Kurds must look closer to home and collectively engage in a long, arduous, but worthwhile journey of institution-building and political reform to enhance self-sufficiency as well as the KRG's political and security structures. The Kurdish leadership has few choices other than to go back to the drawing board. With technical, political, and financial support from the international community, including the United States, it should focus its energy and resources toward institution-building and good governance practices, including reconciliation between rival Kurdish parties. The biggest challenge facing the Kurds is a crisis of internal sovereignty and heightened tensions between its political parties—Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), its historic rival with whom it clashed throughout the 1990s.

The KDP and PUK will reconcile, as they have done before, and there are arbiters within the two rival parties that have long-standing, ongoing interactions that can ensure tensions do not escalate into another intra-Kurdish civil war. While the KDP managed to organize its rivals around a unified front for the referendum, party leaders must now realize that simply managing the fragmented political climate and the competing power centers between and within Kurdistan's main parties is no longer sustainable. It is only through championing and implementing serious political reform that Kurdistan can overcome internal divisions and, potentially, once again make a push for independence in the coming years.

A stronger Kurdistan can also help build a stronger Iraq that advances the interests of the region and the international community. Evaluating and redefining the nexus between Erbil and Baghdad could allow for a common national framework that revives the relationship between citizen and state. This will require that equitable, just, and sustained power-sharing arrangements become firmly entrenched within Iraq's fragile political system. Otherwise, aspirations for Kurdish statehood will continue to disrupt and divide an Iraqi state that has a plethora of other challenges ahead, some existential and generational. ■

Ranj Alaaldin is Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. He was previously a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University and has worked on conflict resolution and institution-building in the Middle East with the Next Century Foundation, a Track II diplomacy organization.

AFP

Bagdad accuse les Kurdes de renier l'accord sur leur retrait de zones disputées

BAGDAD, 1 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

LE PREMIER MINISTRE irakien Haider al-Abadi a accusé mercredi les autorités kurdes d'avoir renié l'accord sur le retrait de leurs forces de zones disputées, tandis que l'armée dénonçait des mouvements militaires visant à empêcher son redéploiement

Dimanche soir, au terme de deux jours de discussions, commandants kurdes et irakiens s'étaient accordés sur un retrait des peshmergas de zones du nord irakien, notamment un poste-frontière proche de la Turquie et de la Syrie.

Mais les Kurdes "sont revenus sur cet accord", a affirmé M. Abadi aux journalistes. "S'ils ne se conforment pas (à l'accord), nous allons faire ce que nous voulons, et si nos forces se retrouvent la cible de tirs, nous allons leur montrer la force de la loi", a-t-il encore menacé.

Cet accord avait été rendu possible par une trêve accordée par Bagdad après une journée de violents combats à l'artillerie lourde. Les troupes des deux camps sont toutefois toujours déployées dans l'attente d'un ordre de retrait ou de reprise des combats.

Le Commandement conjoint des opérations (JOC), qui chapeaute l'ensemble des forces irakiennes, a affirmé que "durant toute la durée des négociations, le Kurdistan a procédé à des mouvements de troupes et construit de nouvelles lignes de défense pour ralentir le déploiement des troupes fédérales et leur infliger pertes et dégâts".

Le ministère des peshmergas (combattants kurdes) a jugé plus tard dans la soirée les demandes du JOC "contraires à la Constitution" et "irréalistes".

Il a également "rejeté" dans un communiqué les accusations du JOC concernant une avancée des troupes kurdes.

"Les forces du Kurdistan sont postées sur leurs lignes de défense mais nous n'hésiterons pas à défendre la vie et les intérêts du peuple kurde", poursuit le texte qui plaide pour un dialogue politique entre les deux parties.

Hemin Hawrami, un conseiller du leader kurde Massoud Barzani contraint à renoncer à la présidence de la région autonome, a accusé auparavant Bagdad d'"escalade contre le Kurdistan".

"Le gouvernement irakien n'a pas de considération pour le dialogue", a-t-il encore écrit sur Twitter, évoquant le "grondement des tambours de guerre au Kurdistan".

Le 25 septembre, M. Barzani organisait en grandes pompes un référendum d'indépendance.

Depuis, la crise n'a cessé de s'envenimer entre Erbil et Bagdad. Le 16 octobre, les forces gouvernementales et paramilitaires irakiennes sont entrées en mouvement pour reprendre l'ensemble des zones disputées, c'est-à-dire réclamées à la fois par le gouvernement régional kurde et Bagdad.

Ces zones dépendent, selon la Constitution, du pouvoir central de Bagdad mais leur statut doit encore être discuté au cours de négociations à venir. Depuis l'invasion américaine de 2003 et dans le sillage du chaos créé en 2014 par la percée jihadiste, les peshmergas en avaient de fait pris le contrôle.

En deux semaines, Bagdad a repris le contrôle de leur quasi-totalité dans le but de revenir à la "ligne bleue" de 2003, qui limite le Kurdistan irakien aux trois provinces de Dohouk (nord-ouest), Erbil (nord) et Souleimaniyeh (nord-est), selon le porte-parole de M. Abadi, Saad al-Hadithi. ●

AFP

Turquie: un an après l'arrestation de son chef, le parti prokurde résiste

ANKARA, 3 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

UN AN APRÈS l'arrestation de son charismatique chef de file Selahattin Demirtas, le principal parti prokurde de Turquie refuse de jeter l'éponge, mais aura fort à faire pour rester une force majeure d'opposition au président Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

M. Demirtas a été arrêté avec une dizaine d'autres députés du Parti démocratique des peuples (HDP) le 4 novembre 2016, alors que les purges lancées après le coup d'Etat manqué du 15 juillet 2016 s'étendaient aux milieux critiques et prokurdes.

Accusé d'être membre et de faire de la propagande pour le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), organisation classée "terroriste" par Ankara et ses alliés occidentaux, M. Demirtas, 44 ans, risque jusqu'à 142 ans d'emprisonnement.

Le gouvernement "essaie de mettre fin au parti. Mais il n'y arrivera pas", a déclaré à l'AFP Serpil Kemalbay, nommée en mai co-présidente du parti pour succéder à Figen Yüksekdag, qui co-dirigeait le HDP avec M. Demirtas et a été arrêtée avec lui.

Le HDP, troisième formation au Parlement turc, a toujours nié tout lien avec la rébellion armée kurde, affirmant être ciblé par les autorités pour son opposition farouche au président Erdogan.

Actuellement, neuf députés du HDP sont en prison, selon les chiffres du parti. Cinq de ses 59 députés élus en novembre 2015 ont également été déchus de leur mandat, dont Mme Yüksekdag, et 55 d'entre eux font l'objet d'une ou plusieurs enquêtes.

En outre, depuis la rupture à l'été 2015 d'un cessez-le-feu avec le PKK qui visait à mettre fin à un conflit qui a fait plus de 40.000 morts depuis 1984, plus de 4.500 membres et sympathisants du HDP ont été incarcérés à travers le pays, selon le parti.

Pour Filiz Kerestecioglu, co-chef du groupe parlementaire HDP, cette formation est "le seul vrai parti d'opposition". Les autorités, dit-elle, s'efforcent de le "criminaliser" par tous les moyens et de le priver d'espace médiatique.

- RIVAL D'ERDOGAN -

Le HDP avait créé la surprise lors des élections législatives de juin 2015, raflant 80 sièges et privant ainsi le Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP, au pouvoir) de la majorité absolue. Mais lors de nouvelles élections convoquées

pour novembre de la même année, le HDP a perdu 21 députés.

La percée initiale du HDP tient en grande partie à la personnalité de M. Demirtas, qui a transformé le parti en une formation de gauche moderne et progressiste, séduisant bien au-delà du seul électorat kurde.

Avocat de formation, moderne et charismatique, M. Demirtas s'est révélé sur la scène nationale lors de l'élection présidentielle de 2014, où il a frôlé les 10% et s'est imposé comme le principal rival de M. Erdogan.

Mais les arrestations au sein du HDP mettent le parti dans une situation délicate en vue des élections municipales, législatives et présidentielle prévues en 2019.

Le parti croit toutefois pouvoir surmonter ces obstacles, même si certains sondages indiquent qu'il pourrait ne pas atteindre le seuil des 10% nécessaire aux législatives pour entrer au Parlement.

"Demirtas est en prison, mais il ne se tait pas. Il est en prison, mais il écrit", souligne ainsi Mme Kerestecioglu. "Demirtas est en prison, mais ses propos continuent de toucher les gens."

L'universitaire Burak Bilgehan Özpek, auteur de "The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurds: Anatomy of a Failure" (Routledge, à paraître) explique que "Demirtas attirait principalement un électorat non-kurde et libéral", qui a voté pour le HDP "par stratégie pour affaiblir l'AKP".

"Sans Demirtas, on peut s'attendre à ce que le HDP adopte un programme ethnique et radical", ajoute-t-il.

Mais pour Aykan Erdemir, analyste à la Fondation pour la Défense de la démocratie basé à Washington, "Demirtas pourrait se révéler être un porte-parole encore plus puissant pour la cause kurde depuis sa cellule de prison".

Depuis son incarcération dans la prison d'Edirne (nord-ouest), M. Demirtas a publié un poème --interdit car considéré comme de la "propagande terroriste"-- et un recueil de nouvelles, "Seher" ("Aurore") paru mi-septembre et dont un premier tirage à 20.000 exemplaires s'est épuisé en trois jours, selon sa maison d'édition Dipnot, qui l'a réédité depuis.

En résumé, sourit Mme Kerestecioglu, "il n'est pas facile de faire taire Demirtas". ●

How the Kurdish Quest for Independence in Iraq Backfired

SERGIO PEÇANHA NOV. 5, 2017
<https://www.nytimes.com>

Iraqi Kurds voted overwhelmingly for independence in late September, but in the month since that referendum, Iraqi government forces have seized one-fifth of Kurdish-controlled territory.

That loss of territory has handed the Iraqi Kurdish leadership a humiliating setback in their generations-long push for statehood.

Kurds in Iraq are mostly concentrated in a semiautonomous region whose legal status has been in limbo despite an Iraqi constitutional directive in 2005 to negotiate the borders.

The boundaries of the Kurdish autonomous region have been long contested, but they are often defined by a cease-fire line unilaterally established by the Iraqi government after it suppressed a Kurdish uprising in 1991.

KURDS TOOK CONTROL OF DISPUTED TERRITORIES THAT ARE RICH IN RESOURCES.

In 2014, as Iraq faced a fight against the Islamic State, the Kurds capitalized on chaos in the region and took control of contested areas that the Kurdish leadership had long claimed as its people's ancestral lands.

The additional territories included oil-rich areas, beyond the boundaries of the area controlled by Kurds when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. And they included Kirkuk, a

historically multiethnic city that is home to about a million people.

But days after September's referendum, government forces swiftly reclaimed control of Kirkuk, along with its oil fields and nearby towns claimed by the Kurds.

Vast oil reserves and about half of Iraq's farmland are in territories claimed by Iraqi Kurds, including the disputed areas.

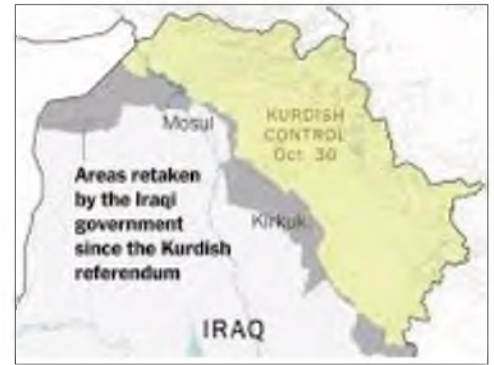
KURDS SIGNED OIL CONTRACTS, FUELING RESENTMENT FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT.

Iraq's instability in recent years has allowed the Kurdish administration to cut deals directly with industry. In 2011, the Kurdish Regional Government signed a contract with Exxon Mobil for oil exploration in Kurdish-controlled areas, in a deal that angered the Iraqi government as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

Two of the exploration areas were beyond the cease-fire line. Exxon Mobil was then under the leadership of Rex W. Tillerson, who is now secretary of state. One of those fields, in Bashiqa, is on the fringes of the territory recently retaken by the Iraqi government, according to an analysis by IHS Markit.

NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES OPPOSED THE PUSH FOR IRAQI KURDISH INDEPENDENCE.

About 30 million Kurds are spread over an area nearly the size of France that spans the Middle East and the Caucasus. International boundaries drawn after World War I left most Kurds split between Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. All four countries, along with the United States, have condemned the Iraqi Kurdish refer-



The New York Times | Source: IHS Markit Conflict Monitor

endum.

As Kurds gained power in Iraq, Syrian Kurds became a critical force in the fight against the Islamic State and made substantial territorial gains in Syria.

For Turkey, an important United States ally in the region, the Kurdish growth in Syria and the independence movement in Iraq are considered a threat that could embolden Turkey's own Kurdish population.

For decades, Turkey has been waging a war against militants from the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K. After a two-year truce, violence has picked up again, killing more than 3,200 people since 2015.

As Kurds gained power in Iraq, Syrian Kurds became a critical force in the fight against the Islamic State and made substantial territorial gains in Syria.

Since the referendum, Turkey and Iran have offered support to Baghdad, increasing pressure on Kurdish leaders in Iraq.

Massoud Barzani, the autonomous region's president since 2005, recently announced that he would resign, and this past week the Iraqi government said that talks with the Kurds had failed. ●

REUTERS

Iraq wants control of Kurdish region's oil exports: state firm

November 2, 2017 BAGHDAD (Reuters)

IRAQ wants the Kurdistan region to stop independent crude exports and to hand over sales operations to the Iraqi state-oil marketer SOMO, the company's director said on Thursday.

Iraq is talking to Turkey to allow SOMO to sell the Kurdish crude that arrives by pipeline in Ceyhan, the Turkish terminal on the Mediterranean, acting SOMO director general Alaa al-Yasiri told reporters in Baghdad.

About 530,000 barrels per day (bpd) used to arrive in Ceyhan via the pipeline until mid-October, of which about half came from the Kurdistan Regional Government's oilfields and the rest from Kirkuk, a disputed province claimed by both the Kurdish region and Iraqi authorities in Baghdad.

Output from Kirkuk fell in mid-October, when Iraqi forces took back control of the northern region's oilfields from Kurdish fighters who had been there since

2014.

Kurdish Peshmerga forces deployed in Kirkuk in 2014, when the Iraqi army fled in the face of an advance by Islamic State militants. The Kurdish move prevented the militants taking control of the oilfields.

The pipeline carried on average 419,000 bpd in October, down from 600,000 bpd in September, said Farid al-Jadir, the director general of North Oil Company, which operates Kirkuk.

NOC should resume exports from Kirkuk through the Kurdish pipeline this month, after the two sides agree on terms of use, Yasiri said. Kirkuk would also export by tanker trucks about 15,000 bpd to the refinery of Kermanshah in Iran, he added.

Yasiri expected an old pipeline that bypasses most of the Kurdistan region to resume operation in three months.

The pipeline was severely damaged by Islamic State after it took over Mosul's Nineveh province in 2014. U.S.-backed Iraqi forces ousted the group from Mosul in July, after a nine-month campaign supported by Kurdish Peshmerga fighters.

Iraq, the second-largest producer of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries after Saudi Arabia, supported any future decision by the group to support oil prices, Yasiri said.

OPEC is expected to extend curbs on oil output when it meets in Vienna at the end of month.

Reporting by Ahmed Rasheed; Writing by Maher Chmaytelli; Editing by Edmund Blair ●

Baghdad looks to take control of KRG oil

The federal government in Baghdad seeks to extend its full control over all oil wells in the disputed areas between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region, even those within the region.



Adnan Abu Zeed
November 6, 2017
www.al-monitor.com

The Iraqi State Organization for Marketing Oil (SOMO) announced Nov. 2 that it is arranging with Turkey to allow SOMO to sell Iraqi crude from the disputed territories through the pipeline from Kirkuk to the Ceyhan Turkish port. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) used to export about 500,000 barrels per day independently through Ceyhan before the Baghdad operation to retake the disputed areas in mid-October.

It was not long after the Iraqi army took over the oil fields in Kirkuk in a military operation to "impose security," as described by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, that the federal government resumed oil pumping operations. The operations started about a week after the clashes between governmental forces and Kurdish peshmerga forces. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Oil rushed to increase oil production, and on Oct. 23, the ministry requested the help of the British petroleum company BP in increasing production in Kirkuk oil fields to more than 700,000 barrels per day. The ministry also announced the formation of a ministerial committee to advance the oil industry in the province of Kirkuk.

Kirkuk has more than 35 billion barrels in oil reserves and a production capacity ranging from 750,000 to 1 million barrels per day. The federal government seems determined to control the oil sources, especially in Kirkuk and the disputed areas. In light of this, on Oct. 19, the Iraqi minister of oil warned all countries and international petroleum companies against signing contracts with any Iraqi party without first consulting the federal government.

Spokesman for the Ministry of Oil, Assem Jihad, told Al-Monitor, "The federal government should control the oil wells, even those in the Kurdistan Region, which is seeking independence. The Iraqi Constitution states that all oil sources must be under the control of the federal government."

Jihad emphasized, "The government's control of oil wealth does not mean a certain national party will monopolize the sector. All oil resources will be fairly distributed among the people."

He said, "Oil fields, mainly Bay Hassan and Havana in Kirkuk, are managed by the North Oil Company affiliated with the federal authorities and working under the supervision of the Ministry of Oil. No other company is allowed to operate there without the approval of the federal government."

Iraqi Kurdistan still exports oil to the Turkish Ceyhan port in the framework of old agreements. Kurdish oil exports range from 220,000 to 240,000 barrels a day. Therefore, the KRG might seek joint control of Kirkuk's oil in the future. However, Jihad warned that "any oil exportation without the knowledge of the Ministry of Oil would be considered smuggling punishable by law."

Jihad added that sharing control of Kirkuk's oil "should be decided by the federal government rather than the Ministry of Oil, which is only an executive party." He noted, "The Ministry of Oil is waiting for the government's decisions and policies in this regard."



Flames emerge from flare stacks at the oil fields on the outskirts of Kirkuk, Iraq, Oct. 17, 2017. REUTERS/Alaa Al-Marjani

Al-Monitor asked Jihad whether the restoration of an oil pipeline far from the Kurdistan Region's territories through Mosul to Turkey would constitute a step on the road to ending the KRG's role in any oil exportations. He answered, "The idea of such a pipeline is not new. It is the main pipeline to transfer oil, and it stopped working after the Islamic State attacked Mosul and the areas in north and west Iraq in 2014. Now, after the liberation of Mosul and other regions, the government is bent on restoring the pipeline as a main exportation means from Kirkuk to Ceyhan, passing through Salahuddin and Ninevah."

He added, "This pipeline feeds the Baiji oil refinery."

Although the federal government's control of Kirkuk will halt many oil-smuggling operations and exportations that do not have the federal government's approval, this step puts into question the future of oil contracts that the KRG signed with international companies. Those include Iraqi Kurdistan's contract with the Russian Rosneft Oil Company, signed a few days before the Kirkuk incidents to drill oil in five different locations in Iraqi Kurdistan. As per this agreement, the KRG got \$2 billion to curb its budgetary deficit.

Majida al-Tamimi, who is a member of the Iraqi parliament's fiscal committee, told Al-Monitor, "Any contract that does not go through the parliament or that is signed without the knowledge of the federal government is illegitimate."

She said, "The Kurdistan Region receives a yearly share of 17% from the federal budget. The federal government will not bear the burden of any loans or debts that Iraqi Kurdistan owes. If the federal government approves the contracts, the parliament would then examine them and conduct feasibility studies before taking a decision."

Tamimi said, "In the 2018 budget, the Kurdistan Region's name was replaced for the first time in budget charts with the name 'northern provinces,' indicating that the parliament and government are politically willing to take away as many privileges as possible from the Kurdistan Region, including oil exportation."

Although many expected Kirkuk to be a bloody battlefield, the federal government's takeover was smooth. Therefore, oil production will be more competent and prolific. The government is bent on developing facilities and has promised to distribute oil revenues fairly among citizens, including the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan. The government asserted that it would pay the Kurdistan Region's employees' salaries if it takes control of all the oil fields.

Oil wealth is past the danger stage of causing a war. Eyes are now set on the way the federal government will distribute oil wealth and whether it will indeed be fair to all Iraqis. ♦

Adnan Abu Zeed is an Iraqi author and journalist. He holds a degree in engineering technology from Iraq and a degree in media techniques from the Netherlands.

WAR IN IRAQ: MASOUD BARZANI, EX-KURDISH LEADER, SAYS U.S. KNEW IN ADVANCE ABOUT IRAQI ASSAULT ON KIRKUK

By Adla Massoud / November 7, 2017
<http://www.newsweek.com>

After decades of yearning for a state to call their own, Iraqi Kurds flocked to the polls on September 25 in a referendum aimed at creating an independent nation. Ninety-three percent of Iraqi Kurds backed secession. People from Kirkuk to Irbil were euphoric. Not only had the Kurds been instrumental in helping a U.S.-backed coalition defeat the Islamic State group, but now they were finally on the cusp of realizing their dreams of a statehood.

Leading the drive: 71-year-old Masoud Barzani, who led the Kurdistan Democratic Party through two decades of persecution under Saddam Hussein. This fall, he helped push the referendum to a vote, despite the objections of the U.S., Britain, Turkey, Iran and the federal government in Baghdad.

The Kurdish euphoria didn't last. In October, Iraqi forces backed by Shiite militias launched a major offensive aimed at retaking the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. The Kurds stood down, and the crushing defeat prompted Barzani to resign as leader of the Kurdistan Regional Government and president of his party. Now, as allegations swirl that Baghdad is trying to transform the multiethnic province into a Shiite stronghold, Barzani spoke to Newsweek about the future of Kurdish independence and whether his people had once again been betrayed.

You won the referendum, but you seemed to have damaged the chances for a Kurdish national homeland. Why did you go ahead with it?

The referendum decision was not a personal decision. It was a collective decision by all the political parties in Kurdistan. And the success of the referendum was that 93 percent of the Kurdish people [in Iraq] voted yes. So the process was successful... and I do believe this referendum has secured the future of the Kurdish people. It's true that there has been some...obstacles...post-referendum, but...it doesn't mean the determination of the Kurdish people was lost.

But many believe the timing was wrong.

We believe the timing was good...because those Iraqi forces who are currently implementing their policies to change the demography and situation in areas that they are in right now, they had this program and this



plan in mind even before the referendum. They are using the referendum as a pretext to cover their plan and plot against the Kurdish people. We went ahead with the referendum in order to avoid...bloodshed, in order to avoid battles and conflict because those [Iraqi forces] who are now fighting us...want to impose a new status quo in the area. Our mistake is we should have held the referendum earlier and not later.

The Kurdish peshmerga forces worked closely with the U.S.-led global coalition against ISIS. Do you think the U.S. has now abandoned you?

Without the role and sacrifices of the peshmerga, ISIS would not have been rolled back and defeated, nor would Mosul have been liberated. But we were not expecting to see Iraqi forces use weapons—that were given to them by the U.S. to fight ISIS—against their own citizens. It was a big surprise for us.

Do you believe the U.S. approved the Iraqi plan to enter Kirkuk and other Kurdish-held areas?

We do believe, yes, that the operation to take over Kirkuk was led by the Iranians with the knowledge of the U.S. and British officials.

Senator John McCain described the Kurdistan Regional Government as America's "long-standing and valuable partner." Do you feel your relationship with the White House has changed under President Donald Trump?

John McCain is a very respected and very knowledgeable man, who is aware of the sacrifices of the peshmerga and the Kurdish people. But with regards to the relationship between Kurdistan and the White House...I can't say whether we have a relationship or not.

Iran was Iraq's most bitter enemy and now its closest ally. What does this close relationship

mean for the region and the Kurdish people?

Iraqi decisions are in the hands of Iran. The Kurds are not going to confront the Iranians nor compete with Iran.

Are you going to work with the Iranians then? That will be decided in the future.

Many worry that tensions between Baghdad and Irbil could escalate into a new war. What do you think?

We hope the fighting and bloodshed will cease. Our policy is to seek dialogue, to seek peaceful ways for conflict resolution and conflict prevention with Iraq. If the international community and the coalition...genuinely want to prevent another armed conflict, they can. But if a battle erupts, it means they gave it the green light.

Your opponents accuse you of holding the referendum for your own political gain. What do you say to them?

The decision to hold the referendum was made in 2014 by the election commission, by parliament. The decision was not a personal one, and at that time, it was a collective decision of all the political parties and all the institutions in Kurdistan. But because of ISIS, we postponed the date to hold the referendum. Later, when we did set the date, it was also a collective decision by all the political parties in Kurdistan.

Is Kurdish independence still possible?

What's going on in [Kurdish territories]...is just temporary because nobody can change the identity of those areas. We are not going to recognize any forced demographic change. The identities of these areas are still Kurdish. We withdrew from many of the areas so as to prevent any kind of conflict and bloodshed. We wanted to prevent any kind of military confrontation to pave the way for dialogue.

To what extent are you willing to go to prevent a military confrontation with Baghdad?

We are ready to go as far as it's possible to avoid fighting with the Iraqi army...as long as they are not...changing the [autonomous] status of Kurdistan. ♦

« Ne laissons pas s'éteindre en nous la flamme du Kurdistan »

Des personnalités françaises, parmi lesquelles Anne Hidalgo et Bernard-Henri Lévy, Manuel Valls, Bernard Kouchner, dénoncent, dans une tribune au « Monde », le silence des « grandes puissances démocratiques » face au drame des Kurdes, « ce peuple ami de la France ».

Mardi 7 novembre 2017
LE MONDE.FR |

Par un collectif de personnalités françaises issues de la sphère politique et de la société civile.

- Nul ne semble réaliser que l'Irak met, un peu plus encore, la main sur l'Irak
- Exigeons l'arrêt des exactions, des pillages, des assassinats ciblés ou collectifs

TRIBUNE. Un sentiment d'accablement, et d'injustice extrême, nous étreint et nous réunit pour lancer, ici, aujourd'hui, cet appel de Paris en faveur du Kurdistan. Voilà une nation amie qui sort de cent ans de lutte contre toutes les tyrannies. Voilà un peuple qui s'est porté, trois ans durant, seul au sol, sur mille kilomètres de front, contre l'organisation Etat islamique. Voilà des femmes, des hommes, qui ont accueilli un million et demi de réfugiés chrétiens, yézididis, musulmans qui fuyaient l'enfer islamiste.

Ce peuple, le 25 septembre 2017, se prononce, par un référendum démocratique, et à une majorité écrasante, en faveur d'une indépendance qui est son rêve séculaire. Il se prononce pour l'ouverture de pourparlers avec Bagdad, dont il est bien spécifié qu'ils prendront le temps qu'il faudra pour qu'un avenir solide, concerté, puisse se construire entre peuples constitutifs de la « fédération » irakienne.

Mais voilà que les grandes puissances démocratiques condamnent, par avance, ce référendum au nom de l'intégrité territoriale de l'Irak, ce pays déchiré, désuni, chaotique, qu'elles feignent, de manière incompréhensible, de tenir pour une donnée intangible de l'équilibre régional.

LE SILENCE DE LA COMMUNAUTÉ INTERNATIONALE

Et voilà que, forts de cette condamnation du Kurdistan par ses alliés et amis d'hier, les pays voisins (Irak, bien sûr – mais aussi Iran et Turquie) qui tiennent les Kurdes



« Quand tous se détournent de ce peuple ami de la France, nous nous devons d'être fidèles à cette histoire de liberté et de grandeur. » (Photo : les Kurdes font la fête en cette journée de référendum pour l'indépendance du Kurdistan irakien, dans le centre de la ville historique d'Erbil, le 25 septembre). Laurence Geai/SIPA / SIPA

pour un peuple décidément en trop, décrètent un embargo aérien et terrestre sur le Kurdistan ; l'enferment ainsi que le million et demi de réfugiés dans ses frontières ; et que l'Irak, à l'aide de chars américains et avec l'appui de milices chiites et de pas-darans venus d'Iran, passe à l'attaque, s'empare de la zone de Kirkouk et affronte les peshmergas jusqu'à 50 kilomètres d'Erbil.

Nul, alors, ne vient au secours du Kurdistan. Nul ne condamne l'agression de ces puissants voisins pour qui le silence de la communauté internationale est une aubaine permettant d'en finir avec ce trublion démocratique, ce mauvais exemple que serait un Kurdistan libre et indépendant dans une région qui cultive les régimes autoritaires et opprime ses minorités.

Nul ne semble réaliser que l'Irak met, un peu plus encore, la main sur l'Irak et achève d'ouvrir, avec la complicité du sinistre Bachar Al-Assad, le fameux corridor chiite dont elle rêve depuis longtemps et qui a vocation à aller du Liban à Bahreïn.

Trahis par certains en leur sein, abandonnés de leurs amis d'hier, que vont alors faire les Kurdes ? Se plier à un destin funeste ? Redevenir, sous la contrainte des « Irakiens », ce fantôme de nation, cette chimère sanglante ? Rentrer dans l'ombre, retourner dans les montagnes dont nul, jamais, n'a pu les chasser ? Va-t-il, ce peuple fier qui rêvait de prospérité et de modernité, qui vivait à l'heure de la démocratie, qui en avait assez de devoir vivre les armes à la main contre d'éternels ennemis, retrouver sa flamme et reprendre sa marche séculaire vers la liberté ?

UNE HISTOIRE DE LIBERTÉ ET DE GRANDEUR

Ce peuple est un ami de la France. Il a reçu, depuis tant d'années, le témoignage répété

de notre admiration et de notre gratitude. Quand tous se détournent de lui, nous nous devons d'être fidèles à cette histoire de liberté et de grandeur. Nous avons, nous, Français, héritiers de Voltaire, de Gambetta, Zola, Dreyfus, Jean Moulin, un peuple proche de nous et qui s'est inspiré de nous ; sa flamme – la Fondation Danielle Mitterrand, qui contribue à nous rassembler ce soir, est là pour en témoigner – a été aussi, un peu, la nôtre et fait partie de l'histoire de la France et de Paris.

Ne laissons pas s'éteindre en nous la flamme du Kurdistan. Demandons le retrait des troupes irakiennes et des milices iraniennes qui les appuient sur la ligne où elles se trouvaient avant le référendum du 25 septembre. Exigeons l'arrêt des exactions, des pillages, des assassinats ciblés ou collectifs qui ravagent, depuis que les milices l'ont envahie, la ville de Kirkouk ainsi que ses environs.

Plaidons pour que la coalition internationale qui a combattu, face à l'organisation Etat islamique, au coude-à-coude avec les combattants irakiens mais aussi kurdes impose sa médiation aux frères d'armes lancés, aujourd'hui, dans une guerre ruineuse pour tous. ■

LES SIGNATAIRES :

Caroline Fourest, journaliste, essayiste ;
Anne Hidalgo, maire de Paris ;
Bernard Kouchner, ancien ministre des affaires étrangères ;
Bernard-Henri Lévy, philosophe et membre du conseil de surveillance du Monde ;
Kendal Nezan, président de l'Institut kurde de Paris ;
Manuel Valls, ancien premier ministre.

The Kurdish Security Dilemma, Explained

Yerevan Saeed November 7, 2017
<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>

Former Kurdistan region president Masoud Barzani miscalculated the potential fallout of the referendum. But political miscalculation by itself cannot explain Barzani's decision to hold the controversial referendum on September 25th. Rather, the security dilemma in which Iraqi Kurds have lived since the foundation of Iraq in early 1920 can better shed light on the motive of the former Kurdish leader's ill-fated decision.

After overthrowing the Hashemite monarchy, former Iraqi leader Abdul Karim Qasim invited Barzani's father, Mustafa, and his Peshmerga forces to return from the Soviet Union in 1958 after eleven years in exile. Qasim lured the elder Barzani on the promise of giving Kurds a real partnership in Iraq, including a vice presidential post and cultural, economic, and political rights. In addition, Qasim promised to formally recognize Kurds as one of two nations living in Iraq. Mustafa Barzani took Qasim at his word and returned to Iraq. But Qasim had other plans.

After regime change in 1958, Qasim faced stiff resistance from Arab nationalist forces, spearheaded by the Baathists. Threatened with a number of attempted coups against him, he wanted a strong alliance to crash the pan-Arab nationalists. The best choice to help eliminate this threat was to rally the help of the Kurds.

With the help of Mustafa Barzani, Qasim was able to quell the Baathists and stabilize his regime. But as Baghdad became stronger, Qasim's Kurdish alliance became weaker and Iraq became more hostile towards the Kurds. He backtracked on his earlier promises to grant Kurdish rights, arrested Kurdish officials, banned Kurdish newspapers, and prohibited Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to hold its party conference. Barzani, in response, demanded autonomy for Kurds, which was immediately rejected by Baghdad, leading to drawn-out armed conflict.

With each change of president in Iraq—in 1963, 1966, and 1968—Barzani declared a unilateral ceasefire to give dialogue a chance as an alternative to armed conflict. But each new president in Baghdad used the ceasefire to consolidate its foothold and launch military campaigns against Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Eventually realizing it could not defeat Barzani militarily, Baghdad resorted to negotiations with the Kurds in the late 1960s. In 1970 both sides signed the Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement, in which Baghdad gave the Kurds autonomy, governmental posts in Baghdad, and legislative powers in the region. But again this was short

lived. Iraq was becoming economically and militarily stronger than it had been before. It was flooded with oil money and signed multiple military agreements with the Soviet Union. Thus, the balance of power shifted in favor of Baghdad, and in 1973 the Agreement collapsed and conflict broke out once again.

The United States, Israel, and Iran were supporting the Iraqi Kurds financially and militarily. Thus the Kurdish Peshmerga under Mustafa Barzani were able to fight and defeat the Iraqi army. Then-Vice President Saddam Hussein met with the Shah of Iran at the 1975 OPEC summit, at which, having suffered a number of defeats by the Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraq made a number of territorial concessions to Iran in exchange for Tehran halting military support to the Kurds.

This agreement led to the collapse of the Kurdish revolution in Iraq. Soviet tanks and advanced weapons overran the Kurdish Peshmerga, who only had light weapons and insufficient ammunition. Barzani fled to Iran along with thousands of Kurds.

Masoud Barzani took over leadership of the KDP after his father's death in 1979. As a young soldier, he learned that Baghdad could not be trusted if it was powerful. Realizing that Baghdad's armed forces were only growing stronger, Barzani took a calculated risk of asserting Kurdistan's independence, figuring it was now or never.

This is not to acquit Barzani of his political errors. The former president should have put the Kurdish house together by considering the interests of other parties. Kurdish disunity—and a disregard for the interests and advice of the United States—undermined not just the push for Kurdish statehood, but Kurdistan's autonomy in Iraq.

And yet, like any other country Kurdish leadership acted in its own interests. Its survival was and will be at stake, as shown by historical evidence, as long as there is a strong Baghdad. In turn, only real sovereignty can shield Kurdistan from Iraq's military power. So, Barzani chose to go ahead with the referendum despite strong warnings from regional countries, the United States, and Europe, and despite the tremendous risks facing the Kurdish people.

There has not been a major armed conflict between the Kurds and Iraq since 2003, because the Kurds were the stronger political and military force in the country. That balance of power has shifted after the defeat of the Islamic State and the unconditional support by the United States, Iran, and Europe to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi at the expense of the KRG. Such support has already backfired and emboldened Baghdad to relapse into its previous modus operandi towards the Kurds.



Iraq's decision to retake Kirkuk and other disputed areas on October 16 and its maximalist demands to deploy Iraqi forces to Kurdistan's borders reinforce Barzani's fear that Baghdad has not changed its political mentality towards the Kurds. But this will have severe repercussions not just for the Kurds, but also for Western countries.

If Baghdad is left unchecked, it could lead to greater instability in Iraq in the same way unconditional support to former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki generated tremendous violence after 2011 when he started cracking down Sunnis. This error should teach policy makers in Washington and Europe that investing in one man in Iraq could prove fatal for peace and the balance of power.

In theory, it is a good *modus vivendi* to have Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi govern a federal Iraq, balance relations with neighbors, and eventually counter Iran's hegemony in the country. But practically, such an approach reveals a detachment from the reality on the ground. Iraqi politics is completely fragmented, not just on ethno-sectarian lines but within, too. Shia, Kurds, and Sunnis are more divided amongst and within themselves than ever. In turn this provides Tehran with an opportunity to further exploit such cleavages and exert greater influence over the future of Iraq.

For Washington to carry greater weight in Iraq, the best policy is to strengthen Kurdish autonomy, help promote unity within the Kurdish population, and simultaneously assist Iraqi Sunnis in forming a Sunni Region, where they can have their own local security and governance. However, unless the Sunnis and Kurds realize the magnitude of danger coming from a Shia-dominated Baghdad, U.S. investment in either community can do little to further their cause.

At minimum, such a formula could serve multiple goals, including mitigating extremism, addressing the grievances and basic needs of the Sunnis, and severing Tehran's ambitious land bridge, all while advancing stability and peace. The alternative is perpetual violence, which will only generate more extremism and instability. In turn, both will jeopardize the United States and Europe's security interests at home and in the Middle East. ●

Yerevan Saeed is a Research Associate at Middle East Research Institute. He is a Ph.D. student at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR), George Mason. He previously served as White House Correspondent for Kurdish Rudaw TV, and has worked for news agencies including the New York Times, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the BBC and the Guardian as a journalist and translator.

Is Barzani Stepping Down or Stepping Up?

Masoud Barzani's resignation as president of the Kurdistan Regional Government is part of an attempt by the two main parties to preserve their influence in an increasingly volatile political environment.



Megan Connelly November 09, 2017
<http://carnegieendowment.org>

On November 1, 2017, President Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in accordance with legislation passed by the Kurdistan parliament several days before, stepped down and devolved many of the powers of his office jointly to his nephew Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, the Speakership of Parliament, and the Judicial Council. The bill at first appeared to be a significant concession by Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to relieve the impasse surrounding his extralegal retention of office and raised the possibility of democratic reforms. However, it is instead an attempt by the KDP to maintain its dominance over the KRG in the wake of the independence referendum, and for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to preserve what remains of its long-standing and exclusive power-sharing relationship with the KDP in an increasingly volatile and polarized political environment.

After October 16, when the Iraqi central government began to reassert federal authority over the disputed territories in retaliation for the KRG's independence vote, confidence in the KRG as a political system plummeted and calls increased in volume and urgency for President Barzani, the referendum's mastermind, to resign. In addition to driving a wedge between the KDP and the PUK, the referendum galvanized the opposition. The Gorran Movement—the KRG's second-largest bloc in parliament, which was expelled from the government in 2015—along with other Sulaimaniya-based parties Komal and the Alliance for Justice and Democracy, called for dissolving the government and establishing a “national salvation government” to replace what they regard as a dysfunctional, partisan oligarchy. However, on October 25, Gorran agreed to return to parliament after receiving guarantees that a legislative proposal would provide for President Barzani's resignation and the dissolution of the presidency.

While Gorran approved of Barzani's decision to step down from the presidency, it raised objections to the proposal's content and to the legislative process that drafted it, which Gorran claimed merely packaged a joint KDP-PUK decree as a law to be retroactively approved by parliament. The proposal was drafted in an inter-politburo summit between the KDP and PUK, along with the Islamic Union. While devolving the president's powers under the 2005 Presidency Law, which granted the president of the KRG expansive executive powers, the new bill would only remain in effect until the next round of presidential and parliamentary elections, which had been scheduled for November 1 but were postponed for eight months in late October by act of a PUK and KDP-dominated parliament. This draft law provided that that until elections, “no law or decision shall be made in contradiction of this law,” precluding amendments to the 2005 law until at least June 2018. During the October 29 session, these provisions raised objections from Gorran lawmakers, who have consistently demanded that the Presidency Law be repealed and that elections proceed on November 1. Protests from the Gorran and Komal delegations demanding further debate before a vote were met with violence from KDP MPs and journalists, and later that evening KDP supporters stormed the parliament hall, attacking journalists and threatening opposition MPs while crowds in Dohuk and Zakho burned Gorran and PUK party offices.

According to the new law, Nechirvan Barzani in his capacity as Prime Minister will assume most of the powers of the presidency, including the authority to represent the KRG at the federal level and abroad. Yet, in the spirit of prior power-sharing agreements between the KDP and PUK, he will share the powers to dissolve parliament, declare a state of emergency, and assume legislative powers during emergencies with Deputy

Prime Minister Qubad

Talabani of the PUK. Therefore, in addition to ensuring that the Barzani family remains in control of the KRG's legal institutions, the PUK can also lay claim to a shared presidential mandate.

The law also delegates the power to veto all or part of legislation passed by parliament, to the “speakership” of parliament—notably not to the “speaker.” This terminology indicates that the KDP and PUK elites who drafted the law intend for these duties to fall jointly to Secretary of Parliament Begard Talabani of the PUK and to Deputy Speaker Jafar Eminki—a member of the KDP who has assumed the duties of the speaker in the absence of Speaker Yusuf Mohammed. Speaker Yusuf Mohammed, of Gorran, has been prevented from entering the capital Erbil since Barzani forcibly dissolved parliament in 2015. Therefore, the text of the law circumvents the issue of Yusuf Mohammed's readmission to parliament, which the KDP has steadfastly resisted. Additionally, the KRG's Judicial Council, led by and comprised mostly of KDP loyalists with some seats reserved for PUK members, will be able to appoint judges and public prosecutors.

The text of the new law does not, however, order the resignation of Deputy President Kosrat Rasoul of the PUK, whose own term expired in 2015. Furthermore, it does not delegate the president's duties as general commander of the peshmerga or his supervisory powers over the KRG Security Council. The latter appears to be a compromise between Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and the council's chair, Masrour Barzani, PM Barzani's cousin and Masoud Barzani's son, who is unlikely to accept Nechirvan Barzani's authority over his own paramilitary units. It is possible that Masoud Barzani's cabinet, which the statute enjoins to “continue with its duties and responsibilities,” will simply retain these powers. Additionally, Barzani remains the president of the KDP politburo, and therefore will continue as a de facto source of political and military authority within the KDP-controlled areas of the Kurdistan Region.

Masoud Barzani will also remain in his capacity as the head of the High Political Council (HPC). The HPC is the “grand coalition” that succeeded the High Referendum Council, the body established to carry out the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region. It is comprised mostly of KDP members and a few PUK executives close to the KDP, such as Mala Bakhtiar and Kosrat Rasoul. It has no accountability to parliament or any other official institution, but nonetheless declared it would “protect the stability of Kurdistan from any type of threat” and represent the Kurdistan Region in Baghdad and abroad. Therefore, Barzani will remain the head of a parallel government that can act independently of the KRG's legally established institutions. However, the prime minister and deputy prime minister have the advantage of being recognized as the legitimate heads of government by the international community, including the United States, which had been the primary external source of President Barzani's power and legitimacy in the past three years in lieu of voter confidence.

As Barzani steps down as president, the power of the KDP and PUK politburos will continue to eclipse that of the KRG's democratic institutions. Yet notwithstanding continued bipartisan participation in the cabinet, parliament, and HPC, the Iraqi federal government's reassertion of control over the region's border points, airports, and the oil-rich disputed territories has resulted in a weakened KRG that has lost its sources of revenue—and therefore there are fewer incentives for Kurdish parties to cooperate with each other. The fallout from the referendum empowered hardline factions within the PUK politburo who used the KDP's failed gamble as a pretext to cleanse Sulaimaniyah, Halabja, Kirkuk, and parts of Diyala governorates of KDP influence. The president's resignation has exposed similar fault lines within the KDP. Prime Minister Barzani derives the greatest benefit from the devolution of presidential powers. Yet although he maintains cordial relations with PUK moderates and has

➔ the diplomatic experience to control the referendum's damage to relationships with the United States, Iran, and Turkey, he is confronted with Masoud and Masrour Barzani's increasingly hawkish stance on their party's relationship with the PUK. The use of provocative rhetoric, including accusations that PUK security forces committed "treason" for withdrawing from Kirkuk, and the eruption of violence by KDP supporters in the wake of Massoud Barzani's transfer of executive power has escalated tensions between the parties. This will further polarize moderates and invigorate hardliners—placing Nechirvan Barzani in the awkward position of putting out fires started by his cousin and uncle.

Yet, while moderate KDP and PUK elites attempt to preserve their ties, the opposition will continue to regard this exclusive partnership as the source of the failure of KRG governance. Citing the violence at parliament on October 29, Gorran has rejected the prime minister's invitation for Gorran ministers and MPs to return to the government and renewed its calls to dissolve the KRG and establish a provisional government to oversee a transition to a parliamentary democracy. Yet while Gorran has the ability to mobilize massive strikes and demonstrations, it cannot compete with the ability of the KDP and PUK to bargain through the use of force. Thus, Gorran and other Sulaimaniya-based opposition parties may be for-

ced to align with more powerful brokers in the PUK in order to regain political influence—and in the process subvert their objective to build a parliamentary democracy independent of intense partisan influence.

Masoud Barzani's resignation and the devolution of executive power from the presidency to the KRG's other political institutions is not a substantial change in the KRG's governance. Rather, it is an attempt by moderates in the KDP and PUK to salvage what remains of their mutually beneficial power-sharing relationship. However, the independence referendum has changed the political landscape, bringing latent rivalries to the fore and transforming the KRG from a predictable, relatively stable, bipolar system to an unpredictable, unstable, multipolar system in which the KDP and PUK are divided against each other and within themselves. ♦

Megan Connelly is a Ph.D. and J.D. candidate at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Follow her on Twitter @meganconnelly48.

Note: The statement explaining how the "fallout from the referendum empowered hardline factions within the PUK politburo . . . to cleanse Erbil of KDP influence" has been changed to describe the cleansing of Sulaimaniyah, Halabja, Kirkuk, and parts of Diyala governorates.

TheNational

November 8, 2017

Iraqi prime minister pushes plan to cut Kurdistan's budget share

Haider Al Abadi said the proposed budget cut to 12.6 per cent was not a punishment to the Kurds for their independence vote

Mina Aldroubi / November 8, 2017
<https://www.thenational.ae>

The Iraqi prime minister Haider Al Abadi defended a proposal to cut Iraqi Kurdistan's share in next year's budget from 17 per cent to less than 13 per cent in the latest tensions between the central and regional government.

The deteriorating relationship between Baghdad and Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, took a new turn when the Iraqi Kurdish region decided to hold an independence referendum in September.

The vote was deemed illegal and unconstitutional by Baghdad, which launched a military operation to recapture the disputed of Kirkuk and the surrounding oil fields.

Mr Al Abadi said the proposed budget cut to 12.6 per cent was not a punishment to the Kurds for their independence vote, but rather that Erbil's demands to receive its 17 per cent of the 2018 budget are "unjust".

He maintained that Erbil should receive a percentage of the budget that reflects its population compared to the rest of Iraq.

Mr Al Abadi said his government is considering the region's population data, the real needs of all Iraq's regions and the poverty level nationwide before announcing the new 2018 budget shares.

The proposal is still under discussion in the cabinet, it must be endorsed and sent to parliament for final approval. If approved by the Iraqi parliament, the budget will further damage the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil.

Mr Al Abadi also confirmed that "Baghdad is prepared to pay the salaries of the state employees in the Kurdistan region after it takes control of the region's oil export, and conducts an audit of the number of employees."

"The number of employees of the region and Peshmerga is under scrutiny by the government



agencies, and most of them are not reliable," Mr Al Abadi said at his weekly press briefing.

Erbil announced this week that it has approximately 1.2 million people on its payroll, including 455,000 public servants and 266,000 Kurdish forces, which will cost Baghdad approximately US\$771 million (Dh2.83 billion) a month.

According to the KRG, Baghdad's budget draft includes measures which would have the central government finance only 682,021 public servants.

Baghdad's responded to the Kurdistan's Regional Government's (KRG) independence vote by stripping the Kurds of the oil-fields vital to their budget.

In response, Erbil has demanded the Iraqi government to dismiss the budget proposal presented by Baghdad's finance ministry.

A statement by the KRG said that "this violates Article 117 of the Iraqi constitution that recognised the Kurdistan region as a federal region with its own government, parliament and judiciary."

The KRG said that "ratifying the budget would harm high interests of the Kurdistan region, partnership basis, and coexistence in Iraq."

The Kurdistan region's allocation of the federal budget was cut off three years ago following disputes with Baghdad over independent oil exports and sales.

On Monday, the prime minister of the Kurdistan region, Nechirvan Barzani, said the KRG was ready to hand over the region's oil and other sources of revenues to Baghdad if the federal government of Iraq agreed to give the full 17 per cent of the budget to Erbil.

"We are ready to handover oil, airports, and all border revenues to Baghdad if the federal government of Iraq sends the salaries of KRG employees, the Kurdistan region's 17 per cent constitutional budget share, and other financial dues," Mr Barzani said.

Mr Barzani stressed that Baghdad had violated the Iraqi constitution by drafting a budget that does not recognise Kurdish entitlements.

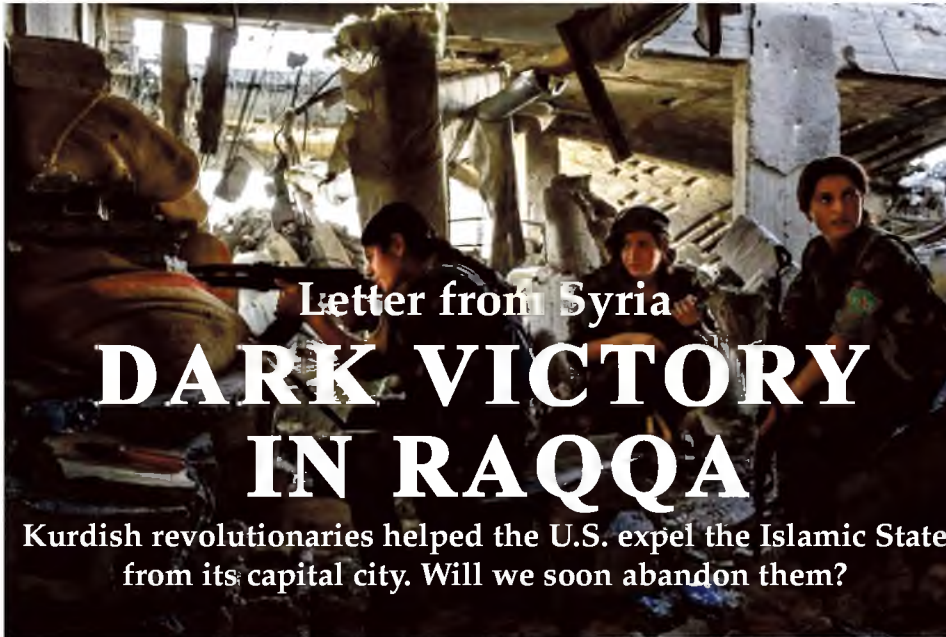
Meanwhile, Masoud Barzani, who stepped down last week as president of Iraqi Kurdistan after the referendum crisis, said in an interview with NPR radio that he has "no regrets" for holding the independence referendum. He said that the consequences his region has suffered were worth it to make clear that Kurds want independence.

"I am very proud of the result. I am very proud that we have given the opportunity for the Kurdish people to express their vote and I do not regret it," Mr Barzani said.

In efforts to resolve the crisis, Kurdish authorities offered to put their independence push on hold in order to start dialogue with Baghdad, last month.

In response, Mr Al Abadi said that "Iraq's central government will accept only the cancelling of the referendum and following the constitution."

More than 90 per cent of Kurds voted in favor of independence from Iraq in September's nonbinding referendum, which Kurdish leaders had billed as an opening bid in negotiations with Baghdad over expanded autonomy. □



Letter from Syria

DARK VICTORY IN RAQQA

Kurdish revolutionaries helped the U.S. expel the Islamic State from its capital city. Will we soon abandon them?

BY LUKE MOGELSON
NOVEMBER 6, 2017 ISSUE
<https://www.newyorker.com>

In August, in the living room of an abandoned house on the western outskirts of Raqqa, Syria, I met with Rojda Felat, one of four Kurdish commanders overseeing the campaign to wrest the city from the Islamic State, or ISIS. Wearing fatigues, a beaded head scarf, and turquoise socks, Felat sat cross-legged on the floor, eating a homemade meal that her mother had sent in a plastic container from Qamishli, four hours away, in the northeast of the country. In the kitchen, two young female fighters washed dishes and glanced surreptitiously at Felat with bright-eyed adoration. At forty years old, she affects a passive, stoic expression that transforms startlingly into one of unguarded felicity when she is amused—something that, while we spoke, happened often. She had reason to be in good spirits. Her forces had recently completed an encirclement of Raqqa, and victory appeared to be imminent.

The Raqqa offensive, which concluded in mid-October, marks the culmination of a dramatic rise both for Felat and for the Kurdish political movement to which she belongs. For decades, the Syrian state—officially, the Syrian Arab Republic—was hostile to Kurds. Tens of thousands were stripped of citizenship or dispossessed of land; cultural and political gatherings were banned; schools were forbidden to teach the Kurdish language.

Qamishli, Felat's home town, has long been a center of Kurdish political activity. In 2004, during a soccer match, Arab fans of a visiting team threw stones at Kurds, causing a stampede; a riot ensued, during which Kurds toppled a statue of Hafez al-Assad, the father and predecessor of Syria's current President, Bashar. Government security forces subsequently killed more than thirty Kurds. Amid the crackdown, a new Kurdish opposition group, the Democratic

Female fighters for the Syrian Democratic Forces, who are on the front lines of the war against the Islamic State in Syria. Many have "joined to protect other women" from Islamists who subject women to repression and rape.

Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker

Union Party, organized and recruited clandestinely.

In 2011, when anti-government protests began spreading throughout Syria, Felat was studying Arabic literature at Hasakah University. The daughter of a poor farmer, she'd begun her studies late, "for economic reasons," she told me. Along with several dozen other students, Felat left the university and returned to Qamishli. Within a week, Felat, who'd harbored ambitions of attending Syria's national military academy and becoming an Army officer, had joined the Democratic Union Party's militia, the Y.P.G. After a day of training, she was issued a Kalashnikov.

Felat expected to fight the regime. But, as the anti-government demonstrations evolved into an armed rebellion and insurrections broke out in major cities, Assad withdrew nearly all the troops he had stationed in the predominantly Kurdish north. The Democratic Union Party allowed the regime to maintain control of an airport and of administrative offices in downtown Qamishli. Arab opposition groups decried the arrangement as part of a tacit alliance between Assad and the Kurds. Islamist rebels began launching attacks in northern Syria, and the Y.P.G. went to war against them. "Many Kurdish families brought their daughters to join," Felat told me. "Many women signed up." She described her female compatriots as "women who had joined to protect other women" from extremists and their sexist ideologies.

By mid-2014, ISIS had become the largest Islamist rebel group in Syria. It seized Raqqa, a

mostly Arab city that lies some forty miles south of the Kurdish region, and declared it the capital of its self-proclaimed caliphate. ISIS then pushed into Kurdish territory, and by October thousands of militants—armed with tanks, mortars, machine guns, and suicide vehicles—had reached Kobani, a city on the Turkish border. Although the United States bombarded ISIS from the air, the militants quickly captured several key neighborhoods, and raised their flag on a hill visible from Turkey. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's President, announced, "Kobani is about to fall," and ISIS vowed that its members would celebrate the coming holy week of Eid al-Adha by praying in Kobani's mosques.

The Y.P.G. fought back, deploying small, lightly armed units throughout Kobani's streets. Felat was put in charge of eleven other women. Some, like her, were former students; some were professionals; some were wives and mothers. Apart from their rifles, they had one machine gun and one rocket-propelled-grenade launcher. "There were people who didn't even have a Kalashnikov," Felat told me. "They had to share." When I asked her where she was when ISIS declared that it would conquer the city before Eid al-Adha, she answered, "I was fighting on Mishtanour Hill." The battle is famous among Syrian Kurds, partly for the heroic action of another female fighter, twenty-year-old Arin Mirkan. At the time, Felat and Mirkan were on the same side of the hill. ISIS militants were closing in on them with tanks commandeered from Assad's forces. Mirkan, Felat recalled, "put a lot of grenades on her chest and snuck under a tank and exploded herself."

Mishtanour Hill fell to ISIS, but Kobani didn't. The U.S. intensified its bombing, and air-dropped weapons and medical supplies; Iraqi Kurdish soldiers, along with some moderate Arab rebels, reinforced the Y.P.G. By late January, 2015, ISIS had been pushed back. The Y.P.G. capitalized on its momentum and reclaimed swaths of the countryside.

Felat was assigned to command forty-five fighters, and then three hundred. When I pressed her for the accomplishments that had occasioned her promotions, she reluctantly allowed, "I was good at strategy." By chance, it was the week before Eid al-Adha, and I could not help marvelling at how swiftly the besieged had become besiegers. I asked Felat whether any of the women whom she'd fought with in Kobani were still with her.

She shook her head. "Five were killed," she said. "Two were wounded. The others went back to their families." Felat did not mention having been injured herself, but I later met a fighter who recalled sharing a hospital room with her while they were both recovering from shrapnel wounds.

The Y.P.G. presents itself as the antithesis of ISIS. Not only does it aggressively recruit women into its ranks; it promotes democracy and religious pluralism. Like many of her comrades, Felat has decided never to leave the Y.P.G., or marry, or have children. Her younger

➤ brother, Mezul, who joined the Y.P.G. after she did, was killed by a roadside bomb in 2013. Felat, who identifies as a nonpracticing Muslim, said that she has sworn on Mezul's blood to devote her life to the Y.P.G. Although the battle for Raqqa is over, she, like most Syrians, foresees more fighting to come.

Two thousand ISIS militants and hundreds of Kurds died in the battle of Kobani. It took months to extricate the bodies from the wreckage. Locals say that the town's feral cats, rummaging among the corpses, began to go bald; birds lost their feathers. Today, white placards stand amid rubble and outside damaged buildings, marking places where Kurdish fighters were killed, and listing their names in black and red paint. Many of the names belong to women. On a street downtown, two waist-high Plexiglas boxes are installed in the middle of a sidewalk that has been carefully rebuilt around them. Inside the boxes, debris and broken asphalt are preserved. At first, it's hard to tell what else the boxes contain. Then you notice the remains of two female fighters who were killed there: tufts of dust-caked hair still rooted to gray, desiccated flaps of scalp.

A few blocks away, at a local institution known as the Commission for the Martyrs, the high walls of an expansive gallery are covered with hundreds of framed portraits of slain Kobani natives. When I visited recently, the pictures ended midway across one wall. Scaffolding had been erected, and dozens of new frames were stacked on the floor. A volunteer told me that the memorial was a work in progress; organized chronologically, it hadn't yet caught up to 2017. At a far end of the gallery, faded portraits, from the nineties, showed local residents who had died in Turkey while fighting with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K. Pointing at one image—a pale girl with cropped hair and a determined stare—the volunteer said, "My sister. She left before I knew her."

The Democratic Union Party and the Y.P.G. grew out of the P.K.K. Though it is a matter of dispute precisely how involved the P.K.K. remains in their activities, the organizations share the same objectives and beliefs. In the seventies, a Turkish university dropout, Abdullah Öcalan, founded the P.K.K. as a Marxist-Leninist movement committed to the creation of an independent Kurdish state. The group launched an insurgency that mainly targeted Turkish security personnel but also murdered Turkish civilians and Kurdish adversaries.

In 1997, the United States added the P.K.K. to its list of foreign terrorist organizations, and two years later the Central Intelligence Agency helped Turkish agents capture Öcalan. Placed in solitary confinement on a prison island off Istanbul, he did what many people would do: he read. He became fascinated by an obscure American political theorist—a Communist turned libertarian socialist named Murray Bookchin. The oeuvre of Bookchin, who died in 2006, is vast and dense (a typical title is "The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism"). Öcalan was particularly influenced by Bookchin's advocacy of "libertarian municipalism": the proposition that citizens, instead of attempting to change, overthrow, or secede from oppressive capitalist gov-



In Kobani, women and children mourn two Kurdish soldiers who died in a mine blast in Raqqa. Though ISIS militants had begun fleeing Raqqa weeks earlier, they left behind many mines and improvised explosive devices. In the final weeks of battle, most fighters were killed by blasts, rather than in firefighting.

Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker

ernments, should build confederations of "popular assemblies" that can function as a parallel system within existing states. In 2004, one of Öcalan's German translators wrote to Bookchin—then eighty-three and bedridden, with osteoarthritis, in Vermont—to inform him that Öcalan was determined to "implement your ideas." Bookchin confessed to the translator that he wasn't really familiar with Öcalan. "Thanks to our parochial press, Americans are barely informed about Kurdish affairs," he wrote.

Öcalan, who remains imprisoned, has published many pamphlets. In 2011, he released "Democratic Confederalism," in which he repudiates the pursuit of an independent Kurdish state, on the ground that nation-states are inherently repressive, sexist, and complicit in the depravities of "the worldwide capitalist system." He also discusses the peril of Middle Eastern nations' being defined by religion or ethnicity. As an alternative, Öcalan suggests creating decentralized networks of community councils, where all "cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings."

The P.K.K. had always included female guerrillas; the longer Öcalan remained in prison, however, the more preoccupied with feminism he became. In a 2013 manifesto, "Liberating Life," he writes that "the 5,000-year-old history of civilization is essentially the history of the enslavement of women," and argues that no genuine political emancipation can happen without first achieving gender equality.

The P.K.K. adapted to Öcalan's evolving ideas with surprising facility. But over the years many of its members, seeking refuge from the Turkish authorities, decamped to Iraq's remote Qandil Mountains, where there was little society to revolutionize. Öcalan's vision seemed destined to remain the utopian fancy of—as Bookchin called himself—"an old radical." But then the Democratic Union Party came into possession of most of northern Syria.

At a rally in Kobani this summer, hundreds of residents congregated at a traffic circle, around

a thirty-foot-tall statue of a Kurdish female fighter with enormous white wings. Made from iron and fibreglass, the statue towered over two tanks that ISIS had used in its failed assault on the town. Now onlookers straddled the tanks' cannons. A Y.P.G. soldier poured black oil from a plastic water bottle onto handmade torches, and distributed them to people. Traditional Kurdish songs blared through an industrial sound system installed in the bed of a pickup truck. Children and teen-agers danced.

It was August 14th, the eve of the thirty-third anniversary of the P.K.K.'s first attacks against the Turkish government. The conflict has left some forty thousand people dead, mainly Kurds. At some point, the music stopped, and a woman climbed into the truck, wielding a megaphone. "No life without our leader!" she shouted.

"Long live Apo!" everyone cried, using a nickname for Öcalan.

In Kurdish parts of Syria, Öcalan is hard to escape. His image appears on billboards, flags, walls, phones, pins, posters, and patches; usually he is depicted with a warm smile beneath a paintbrush mustache. He tends to look avuncular and professorial, and is rarely shown with a weapon. In January, 2014, the Democratic Union Party promulgated a charter based on Öcalan's concept of democratic confederalism. Meant to lay the groundwork for "a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs," the charter established three autonomous cantons in Rojava, as the Kurdish region in northern Syria is known. Each canton would be composed of councils overseen by a general assembly. The charter recognized the equal status of religions, languages, and minority groups—Arabs, Syrians, Chechens, Armenians, and Yazidis. It also mandated that women comprise at least forty per cent of every governing body, institution, and committee. In an echo of Bookchin's extensive writings on social ecology, protecting the environment was deemed a "sacred" duty.

After the Y.P.G.'s victory in Kobani, it continued liberating towns from ISIS, and increasingly collaborated with Arab fighters and Christian militias. The global anti-ISIS coalition, led by the U.S., offered limited air support. The battlefield successes of the Y.P.G. contrasted starkly with the generally hapless efforts of American proxies elsewhere in Syria. By mid-2015, a five-hundred-million-dollar Pentagon program intended to train and equip more than five thousand anti-ISIS fighters had produced only about a hundred of them; according to the Pentagon, most had been killed, abducted, or relieved of their weapons by Islamists. A C.I.A. initiative, which eventually cost more than a billion dollars, sponsored anti-government rebels. In 2015, when Russia intervened in Syria, on behalf of Assad, it effectively neutralized these units with air strikes.

Although the Y.P.G. was prevailing militarily, the Obama Administration remained leery of it. Turkey, a nato member that allows the U.S. to conduct air strikes over Syria from one of its military bases, does not distinguish between the Y.P.G. and the P.K.K., which it considers an exist-

► tential threat. At this year's Aspen Security Forum, General Raymond Thomas, the head of the U.S. Special Operations Command, recounted telling Y.P.G. leaders, in late 2015, that if they wanted meaningful American support they had to change their "brand." Thomas went on, "With about a day's notice, they declared that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces. It was a stroke of brilliance to put 'democracy' in there." Soon after the S.D.F. was conceived, a U.S. aircraft parachuted a hundred pallets of weaponry to its Arab contingents, and Obama dispatched Special Operations Forces to train and advise them.

The Trump Administration has doubled down on the strategy. In May, Trump approved a plan to arm Syrian Kurds in the S.D.F. directly, and deployed several hundred marines and Army rangers to support them. Around this time, Turkish jets bombed sites in Rojava, reportedly killing twenty Y.P.G. members. The attack prompted U.S. troops, in marked vehicles, to join Kurdish fighters patrolling the Syrian-Turkish border. "This needs to stop," Erdoğan declared, adding that the presence of American flags in a "terrorist" convoy had "seriously saddened us."

The S.D.F., however, was the only rebel force capable of removing ISIS from its capital. And though Raqqa does not have a large Kurdish population, Kurdish fighters were prepared to help capture it. Rojda Felat told me, "There were a lot of discussions. But all of them were about what our role would be, not whether we would play a role."

The U.S. has not only ignored Turkey's objections; it has bolstered the Kurds diplomatically. In Aspen, General Thomas explained, "They wanted a seat at the table, and because they had been branded as P.K.K. they could never get to the table." According to Thomas, U.S. diplomats have pushed for the S.D.F.'s involvement in national peace talks that could determine the future of the country.

And yet none of the Kurdish fighters I met described the Raqqa campaign as a political quid pro quo. For them, it was a necessary phase in an ambitious, lifelong revolution.

One afternoon this summer, near a front line in West Raqqa, I sat in a requisitioned residence with Ali Sher, a thirty-three-year-old Kurdish commander with a handlebar mustache and the traditional Y.P.G. uniform: camouflage Hammer pants and a colorful head scarf tied back pirate-style. Before the war, Sher sold clothes in a market in Kobanî. He joined the Y.P.G. when ISIS attacked the city; after the battle, he made the same blood oath as Rojda Felat. "I have nothing else," he told me. "I don't have a wife. I don't have children. I don't even have a car."

When I asked Sher what he was doing in Raqqa, he said, "Don't think we are fighting only for Rojava. We're not soldiers—we're revolutionaries."

Two young women walked into the room, and Sher greeted them enthusiastically. One was a P.K.K. fighter from Turkey. ("Leave me alone," she said when I tried to interview her.) The other had been Sher's first commander in Kobanî. "During the training, he was very

tired," she said with a laugh. Her nom de guerre was Çiçek 23. In Kurdish, çiçek means "flower." Twenty-three comes from the name of a gun that she used on Mishtanour Hill. She told me that she, too, had devoted herself to the Y.P.G.

"Think about this society," Sher said. "If you're married here, what can you give your children? Clothes? Food? Even slaves have clothes and food. When you are resisting oppression and injustice, you are fighting for more than just your own small family. You are fighting for your big family—society."

The frontiers of the society for which Sher and Çiçek 23 are fighting have expanded considerably since they defended Kobanî. On March 17, 2016, the Democratic Union Party announced the creation of a "democratic federation" in Rojava, with the S.D.F. serving as its military. A draft constitution was soon put forward. It largely preserved the canton structure, and included a mechanism for incorporating other parts of Syria into its federal system.

Sher and Çiçek 23 shared the expectation that once ISIS had been expelled from Raqqa the area's citizens would vote to join the new federation. They hoped that Raqqa residents, having endured the Draconian rule of ISIS, would be open to the diametrically contrary values championed by Ocalan, from secularism to gender equality. "When we liberate areas from ISIS, we start a revolution in the mentality of the people," Sher said. "This is the most important part."

The assertion might have sounded quixotic, if not for some men who were sitting in the room with us. They were Yazidis from Shingal, a town in Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS harbors a special disdain for Yazidis, who are not Muslim, and after its militants in Iraq seized Mosul, in 2014, they attacked Shingal. Thousands of Yazidis were slaughtered; thousands of women and girls were abducted and forced into sexual slavery. Those who escaped made for a mountain range that looms over the town and extends into Rojava. P.K.K. and Y.P.G. fighters opened a corridor from the mountains into Syria. Sick and elderly Yazidis were evacuated. Able-bodied men and women were brought to training camps, formed into an armed militia, and sent back to fight ISIS.

A short and stocky twenty-seven-year-old Yazidi named Zardesht, who'd been trained and



*A sniper for the Syrian Democratic Forces. On October 19th, the S.D.F. announced that it had reclaimed Raqqa from ISIS.
Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker*

armed in Rojava, said of the Syrian and Turkish Kurds, "They saved us. They gave their blood to prevent our extermination."

Zardesht and more than a thousand other Yazidis fought alongside the P.K.K. and the Y.P.G. on the outskirts of Shingal until November, 2015, when Iraqi Kurdish forces and a heavy U.S. bombing campaign helped them take back the town. Countless P.K.K. and Y.P.G. flags were raised across Shingal. "We started to trust in their ideology, because we thought that these beliefs would help us to protect our people," Zardesht told me. "Now we are trying to apply the same council system in Shingal as the Kurds have in Rojava." When the Raqqa offensive began, Zardesht and about forty other Yazidi militia members—half of them women—volunteered to take part.

"We are ready to sacrifice our lives for the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan," Zardesht said.

Although most of the commanders in Raqqa were Kurds, most of the troops were Arabs. A few days after speaking with Ali Sher in West Raqqa, my translator and I followed two pickup trucks, crowded with about twenty Arab fighters, through the southern fringes of the city. (Arab units of the S.D.F. are entirely male.) As the trucks traversed a ravaged dirt road along the wide and calm Euphrates River, through overgrown orchards and sunflower gardens, the fighters cried out, "We are from Raqqa!" Turning north into ruined residential neighborhoods, we passed gutted husks of cars and buses, levelled buildings, and a depot littered with the twisted remnants of blown-up construction equipment.

Inside the city, the devastation was apocalyptic. Block after block of tall apartment towers had been obliterated. Every building seemed to have been struck by ordnance: either destroyed entirely, scorched black by fire, or in a state of mid-collapse, with slabs of concrete hanging precariously from exposed rebar and twisted I-beams. Bulldozers had plowed a path through heaps of cinder blocks, felled power poles, and other detritus. Up ahead, missiles hit: a whistle, then a crash, then a dark plume. Smoke and dust roiled over rooftops.

A melee broke out as soon as we stopped. It was unclear who was in charge. Amid arguments about which teams should go where, some fighters were herded inside a building while others piled into a Humvee, which then sped off toward an abandoned children's hospital that they were meant to capture. I joined a group of fighters gathered on the ground floor of the building. Most of them were from Tabqa, a city about twenty miles to the west. They had joined the S.D.F. when it liberated Tabqa, in May. After seventeen days of training from U.S. soldiers, they told me, they had been given Kalashnikovs and sent to the front. Some of them looked extremely young. One boy, Joresht Akool, must have been about fourteen. (He hesitated when I asked his age, then said that he was seventeen.) Smoking a cigarette and wearing a ski vest, despite it being well over a hundred degrees, Akool told me that he was the only member of his family left in Syria—everyone else had fled to Turkey. "My mother keeps telling me to come," he said. "She says if I come she'll find a wife for me." The men around him laughed. ►

Several of the Arab fighters wore patches featuring the face of Abdullah Öcalan. When I asked them what they thought about his ideas, however, they seemed indifferent. Many of them had battled the regime at the beginning of the war. Akool told me that one of his brothers had been killed in Aleppo while fighting Assad's forces. "That was a long time ago," he said. It wasn't, really—about three years—but I knew what he meant. It was before ISIS created its caliphate, before Russian and U.S. involvement, and before the S.D.F.

Despite the Arab fighters' lack of interest in the Kurdish social revolution, they said that they planned to remain in the S.D.F., even after the Raqqa offensive, as long as it continued to oppose ISIS. "Wherever there is ISIS in the world, I will fight them," one of them said. "I'll go to America to fight them." He wanted revenge for the indignities that ISIS had made him suffer, and for his friends and relatives who had been killed. He said, "When ISIS came to Tabqa, they arrested us and gave us Islamic instruction in the prison. They collected all the children and forced them to do military and Koranic training."

We hadn't been talking long when the Humvee returned with several men looking stunned and battered. Upon entering the children's hospital, they'd triggered a mine. "We thought it was safe," one of them said, explaining that a coalition jet had hit the hospital with an air strike, which should have detonated any improvised explosive devices that ISIS had planted inside. A report came over someone's radio: two men were dead, several wounded. The injuries included lost limbs.

The vast majority of S.D.F. fighters who were killed in Raqqa were Arabs, and most of them were killed by blasts. Firefights were rare. While I was there, at least, very few ISIS militants seemed to be defending the city. The leadership was thought to have escaped south, to the province of Deir Ezzor. The problem now was the confounding proliferation of mines that ISIS had left behind—and the S.D.F.'s inability to deal with them.

In Mosul, where ISIS had recently been defeated, the Iraqi Army had relied on an extensive fleet of American tanks and mine-resistant armored personnel carriers. But the U.S., in an effort to appease Turkey, has strictly limited its supply of matériel to the S.D.F. The five thousand troops fighting in Raqqa had access to only fifteen Humvees. Ali Sher's men and another unit—two hundred and fifty fighters, in total—shared one of the Humvees, and shortly after I met them it was disabled for a few days by a grenade dropped by an ISIS drone.

Another afternoon, on a street in East Raqqa, where the S.D.F. had pushed into the city's old quarter, breaching a huge mud-mortar wall from the eighth century, I watched an armored bulldozer return from clearing some rubble nearby. Snipers had pierced the bulldozer in three places, and it leaked a black trail of oil in the dirt. The driver was a fifty-seven-year-old Arab from Hasakah—the city where Rojda Felat had attended college. Before joining the S.D.F., he'd worked on construction projects. Now his main responsibility was excavating mines with

the bulldozer's blade, often exploding them in the process. One blast had shattered a window in the cab.

Front-line units carried sacks full of jury-rigged bombs: softball-size amalgams of homemade explosives, packaged in plastic wrap and spiked with six-inch fuses. At least one bomb was thrown into every building that the fighters planned to enter, in order to set off any mines inside. This precautionary measure, however, insured the destruction of whatever structures had managed to evade aerial bombardment—and it wasn't even foolproof. Before the Arab fighters from Tabqa had entered the children's hospital, they had deployed ten such bombs.

Four days after the incident at the hospital, I visited the surrounding area. The Humvee I was in stopped next to a Toyota pickup truck with Iraqi plates and a Russian machine gun mounted in the bed; it had been compressed beneath a building pancaked by an air strike. Next door, in a second-floor bedroom of a once luxurious home, I met three mine-removal technicians—the first I'd seen in Raqqa.

They were preparing to sweep the hospital for a third time. "The first time we went in, we found about twenty mines," one of them, a bearded Arab in gold-rimmed sunglasses, told me. They had no formal training; their primary qualification for the job appeared to be their willingness to do it. The man with the sunglasses was coiling rope tied to a grappling hook. Whenever they found an I.E.D., he explained, he placed or tossed the hook near its triggering device, paid out the rope, and pulled. Their other tool was a plastic mirror that had been Scotch-taped to a paint roller. A second technician proudly showed me how a pole attached to the roller's handle extended and collapsed, enabling them to see around corners. ISIS had dug a tunnel into the hospital's basement. "That last air strike was trying to damage it," he said. "We heard on the radio that ISIS wants to capture some of us alive."

In another bedroom of the house, I found the ranking commander for the area, a Kurd, sitting on a box spring beneath a shattered window that overlooked the hospital. Twenty-one years old, diminutive, and clean-shaven, with a line of pale scalp on the side of his head where a bullet had grazed him, he introduced himself as Vietnam Kobanî. His real name was Khairee Halal. Before the war, Halal had been a barber in Aleppo. When Y.P.G. fighters arrived in the city and set up a militia in the Kurdish quarter, he joined them. As Aleppo became divided between regime forces and rebel groups, the Kurds were caught between the two sides. "We were not with either," Halal told me. "We were just defending our neighborhood." I spent a month in Aleppo in 2013, and many Arab rebels I met there believed that the Kurds were not as neutral as they claimed: Assad's intelligence agents were said to enjoy free rein in the Kurdish quarter. That April, however, the Y.P.G. in Aleppo formally allied itself with the opposition.

In 2015, Halal left Aleppo and joined the campaign against ISIS in northern Syria after his father, who was also in the Y.P.G., was killed near Kobanî. According to Halal, an Arab member of his father's unit betrayed his comrades,



*S.D.F. fighters take a break inside a destroyed building in Raqqa.
Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker*

removing the firing pin on their sole machine gun while they slept. The next day, ISIS militants ambushed the position, killing all thirteen Kurdish fighters stationed there. "This man had been in my father's unit for two years," Halal said. "They trusted him. He'd said he wanted to help the Kurds."

Whether or not the story was true, Halal believed it. I asked him how he felt about commanding Arabs now. He nodded toward the broken window, beyond which explosions and sniper fire had been sounding. He said simply, "A lot of them are brave and fighting in a strong way." Then, seeming to recognize the irony of his situation—or, in any case, seeming to recognize that I found it ironic—Halal added, "We think that man did what he did for money. ISIS paid him to do it." As Joresh Akool had told me, 2014 was a long time ago.

In Aleppo, certainly, a lot had changed. After regime soldiers killed Akool's brother, moderate Arabs in the opposition were gradually vanquished by Islamists, and so the Y.P.G. switched sides. Last December, Kurds helped Assad's forces retake the city.

The deep grievances that many Arabs harbor toward ISIS have brought about their unlikely collaboration with the disciples of Abdullah Öcalan. But it is not clear if this temporary military alliance will translate into an enduring political one after ISIS has been purged from Syria. In Raqqa, the Kurds seem determined to try to strengthen the bond. This April, a delegation of a hundred and ten displaced natives of the city—technocrats, teachers, attorneys, and other professionals—established the Raqqa Civil Council, a governing body modeled on the regional assemblies of the new democratic federation in northern Syria. Once Raqqa was secure, the delegation declared, the council, which has U.S. backing, would assume administration of the city.

When I visited its interim offices, in a town forty miles north of Raqqa, dozens of people had crowded outside the door of a senior councilman, Omar Alloush. Inside, Alloush, a rotund, gray-haired, chain-smoking Kurdish lawyer from Kobanî, was talking with two men: an S.D.F. official, in a suit, and an Arab sheikh, in a kaffiyeh and traditional white robes. The sheikh, Farris Horan, served on a committee for the Raqqa Civil Council that acted as a liaison to

➤ Raqqa's Arab tribes. An S.D.F. fighter had accidentally shot an Arab civilian, and, after meeting with the leaders of the victim's tribe, Horan was negotiating financial compensation. Once the two men had settled the issue and left the room, Alloush, speaking of the Arab tribes, told me, "They don't necessarily believe in our ideology. But they see a future with us. That's why they joined us."

By "us," he did not mean only the Raqqa Civil Council. Alloush had helped found a political arm of the S.D.F. that is responsible for managing the envisaged expansion of the democratic federation beyond Rojava. "We believe in a new constitution for Syria," Alloush told me. Every community that the S.D.F. liberated from ISIS would be urged to join the federation. "Maybe some places will be autonomous," he said. "Federal system, noncentral system—this decision will come from the people. We have to wait and see how they'll vote."

A few days later, my translator and I gave Horan a ride to a village about ten miles east of Raqqa, across a black expanse of volcanic sand flats. The village, which hugged the banks of the Euphrates, was in an area called Karama, and Horan had been invited to attend a ceremony in which Karama's largest Arab tribe would announce its endorsement of the Raqqa Civil Council. In the car, Horan said, "They were the main tribe supporting ISIS around here. Even now, a lot of them are still with ISIS. But others are with us. So it's complicated."

In March, when the S.D.F. took Karama, hundreds of villagers retreated to Raqqa with ISIS. Some were forced to go; some had been recruited as militants and went willingly. Among those who stayed in Karama, twelve hundred men had joined the S.D.F. They were now fighting their former neighbors and relatives on the front lines in Raqqa. Indeed, Horan said, the brother of the sheikh hosting the day's ceremony had joined ISIS, and was a high-ranking official within the caliphate.

In the village center, five long tents stood in a field beside a concrete water tower lying on its side. (ISIS had sabotaged it.) Under the tents, hundreds of Arab men, representing forty-odd tribes from Raqqa Province, sat on carpets, watching several sheikhs mingle with one another, as well as with Kurdish members of the S.D.F., many of whom were women. When one of the two co-chairs of the Raqqa Civil Council

entered the tent—Laila Mustafa, a twenty-nine-year-old Kurdish engineer, wearing black jeans and boots, her hair in a ponytail—the sheikhs stood to shake her hand.

Omar Alloush, the Kurdish senior councilman, presided over the ceremony. He stood before the tribesmen and passionately condemned ISIS, the Assad regime, and anti-government rebels not belonging to the S.D.F. Only the S.D.F., he said, "aims to end the Syrian crisis and build a new democratic Syria." Other Kurdish leaders followed with similar speeches, vowing to spread their revolution to the entire country.

The head of the main tribe in Karama, who was known as Abu Jihad, stepped forward. An older man with a pockmarked face, he was, compared with the Kurdish speakers, conspicuously tepid. He thanked people for coming and mumbled, "We are ready to be with you."

Alloush stood up again. "Out of respect for everyone who is here today," he said, the S.D.F. would release fifty local families who, suspected of having especially close ties to ISIS, had been held in a nearby camp for internally displaced people. The news was greeted with loud applause.

After an elaborate lunch was served, I spoke privately with Abu Jihad. He told me that before ISIS arrived "there were no radical beliefs" in Karama. "No one thought like that, not even the people who ended up joining ISIS." This included his younger brother, Tobat. Abu Jihad said that Tobat had opposed the Assad regime, but was not particularly religious. When ISIS came to Karama, in 2014, Abu Jihad urged Tobat to stay away. "I told him, 'There's no future with them.' We argued a lot." Abu Jihad claimed that many people in Karama fell under the sway of ISIS simply because "there were no schools—there was only the Sharia instruction." He added, "ISIS filled all the young people's minds with their ideas. My brother was one of them." Tobat retreated with the ISIS militants to Raqqa, and one day he sent envoys home to recruit fighters. "I called him and told him, strongly, not to do that again," Abu Jihad recalled. "I said, 'You made your decision. Now you have to fight alone.' That was the last time we spoke." Still, Abu Jihad insisted that Tobat was "a good person." In Raqqa, he said, Tobat had "helped many people" by standing up for them against less fair-minded ISIS officials. Abu Jihad said that most of the local men who'd joined ISIS were redeemable. "A lot of them want to come back," he told me. "But ISIS won't let them."

I asked him if these men would be welcomed by his tribe if they somehow escaped.

"Absolutely."

And Tobat? Did he want to come back?

"I don't know," Abu Jihad said. He studied the prayer beads in his hands, then told me, "I'm sure he will leave them and return to us."

The Raqqa Civil Council's forgiving attitude toward former ISIS sympathizers, and its deference to Arab tribal structures, contrasted strikingly with what I saw in Rojava. In the



In Kobani, children play near buildings that were destroyed by air strikes during the 2014 campaign against ISIS. White placards, with red and black lettering, memorialize the Kurdish fighters who were killed at the site.

Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The

majority-Kurdish cantons, winning Arab support is not essential, and indoctrination seems to be more the goal. All men in Rojava between the ages of eighteen and thirty, regardless of their ethnicity, must serve at least ten months in a kind of national guard. In a camp outside Kobani, I attended a graduation ceremony for some five hundred conscripts, who'd just completed basic training. Most of them were Arabs. When I asked one of the instructors—nearly all of whom were Kurds—what the training entailed, he said, "We really focus on the mentality, the beliefs, more than the military stuff. Our main objective is to send a new man back to society, and in this way to build a new society."

The instructor's classes were intellectually ambitious. "I explain the federalist project," he said. "I begin with the whole history of federalism, from before the term existed, when it started in Greece. We talk about the Romans, about Columbus discovering America, and about the first American Congress and the colonies. Then I explain the system here in Rojava, which is not a nation-state but a mixing of different communities." The class lasts six hours a day for twenty days. Arab conscripts take workshops in the Kurdish language twice a week.

The instructor didn't mention Öcalan to me, but when the graduation ceremony began and conscripts marched across a dirt parade ground to the bleating of a brass band, they chanted, "No life without Apo!"

"Who's our leader?" a Kurdish female instructor shouted.

"Apo!"

Later, in a speech, the female instructor invoked the anniversary of the P.K.K.'s first attacks on the Turkish government: "This month was a holy month, because we are continuing the path that was started by Öcalan."

After the ceremony, a Kurdish poet recited some of his revolutionary verse, and musicians performed traditional Kurdish songs. While talking with a Kurdish instructor, I remarked on the dozens of abandoned mud-mortar dwellings scattered throughout the camp, which appeared to have once been a village.

"Arabs used to live here," he said. "God, you know what? You're sweet, but I just



Boots inside the warehouse of a military training camp outside Kobani. Soldiers' names are written on them in Arabic.
Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker

► got out of a long thing.”

“What happened to them?” I asked.

“They left with ISIS.”

“Where are they now?”

“Nobody knows.”

In late 2015, after a two-month investigation, Amnesty International accused the Y.P.G. of forcibly displacing Arabs in northern Syria, and of razing Arab villages there. According to Amnesty, the attacks constituted a “campaign of collective punishment of civilians in villages previously captured” by ISIS, or in places “where a small minority were suspected of supporting the group.” A subsequent U.N. commission, which investigated more recent allegations, found “no evidence to substantiate claims that Y.P.G. or S.D.F. forces ever targeted Arab communities on the basis of ethnicity.”

At the camp, Kurdish instructors never left my side, and I had difficulty meeting Arab conscripts. Finally, I sat down with a young man named Malik Mohammad, and asked him what he thought of his training.

“It’s useful,” Mohammad said.

The reply felt unconvincing. Like most Arab conscripts, he would probably spend the next ten months performing menial duties, away from his family. Although sixty new graduates had been selected to become officers, all but two were Kurds.

When I asked Mohammad to elaborate, he glanced timidly at several Kurdish conscripts hovering around us. Then he said, “They teach us about the importance of a free society. But if we were free we’d be able to choose whether or not to serve” in the national guard.

Many Kurds also dislike the conscription policy. But the Democratic Union Party, despite its lofty charter and constitution, has shown little patience for dissent. While the Party was consolidating power in northern Syria, rival figures in the Kurdish opposition were arbitrarily imprisoned; others were killed, or went missing. In 2013, Y.P.G. fighters shot and killed three Kurds protesting the detention of anti-Assad activists. The leader of an alliance of Kurdish political parties that are wary of the P.K.K. has been forced into exile. In March, more than a dozen offices belonging to groups opposed to the Democratic Union Party were forcibly shut down.

The Syrian civil war has produced many strange bedfellows. But it’s especially curious that Öcalan’s revolution, which strives to eliminate “capitalist modernity,” has made its recent advancements under the patronage of the United States. In Rojava, Kurds often refer to Donald Trump as *Bavê şoreş*—“Father of the Revolution”—and in Kobani there is a kebab restaurant called Trump, with the President’s visage painted on its window. I met a Y.P.G. fighter who’d named his infant daughter America.

During the Raqqa offensive, U.S. Special



At the victory celebration in Naim Square—a former site of ISIS executions—female fighters gather in front of a banner depicting Abdullah Öcalan, the Turkish dissident. S.D.F. Commander Rojda Felat (center) said of the battle to liberate Raqqa, “We thought it would be much more difficult.”

Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker

Operations Forces were deployed throughout the city, but they avoided journalists. The S.D.F. also severely restricted the press. Reporters were assigned minders, and access to active front lines was almost impossible to obtain. More than once, I was told that I couldn’t go somewhere, only to find out later that U.S. soldiers had been in the area, or that bombardment from coalition planes and artillery had taken place nearby. U.S. Special Operations Forces ran a field hospital in Raqqa that treated wounded S.D.F. fighters; when I went there and asked if anyone would speak with me, I was aggressively confronted by half a dozen armed Americans, one of whom said, “Absolutely not.” He confiscated my phone and demanded its password. (I didn’t give it to him, and he eventually returned the phone.) An older American, with a graying beard and a ball cap, told me, “For you, information is a good thing.” He then explained that, for security reasons, it was better if nobody knew that they were there. Several soldiers escorted me to my car, and for the next two days the S.D.F. shut down the entire area to reporters.

No doubt the security concerns were legitimate. But the efforts to limit media coverage in Raqqa, by both the Americans and the Kurds, might also have been tied to the controversial way that the campaign was conducted. According to the watchdog group Airwars, the coalition deployed some twenty thousand munitions during the Raqqa offensive and killed more than thirteen hundred civilians, including at least two hundred and fifty children. Thousands were injured. In August, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, declared that civilians were “paying an unacceptable price.” The coalition went on to escalate its bombing.

Many of the coalition’s strikes on Raqqa originated with front-line revolutionary Kurdish commanders like Ali Sher. At all times, Sher carried an iPad on which was installed a satellite map of Raqqa. The map allowed him to pinpoint the G.P.S. coordinates of any structure by touching its image on the screen. He could radio the coordinates to a tactical-operations center and request that the structure be targeted by coalition missiles, mortars, rockets, or artillery. Usually, Sher told me, his requests were

approved. The numerous air strikes I witnessed each day in Raqqa seemed incongruous, given the apparent paucity of ISIS fighters there. One day, Sher’s unit moved its line forward by five blocks, capturing forty buildings in the process. While they were completing the operation, I talked to Sher, who told me that nobody had shot at them the whole time. According to the latest intelligence, he said, between five and six hundred ISIS fighters remained in Raqqa. I asked him what all the bombing was for.

“Snipers,” he said. “And mines. Sometimes it’s just one guy.”

The U.S. has largely disparaged criticism of its strikes. The coalition’s commander, Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, recently wrote that assertions by groups like Airwars “are often unsupported by fact.” Omar Alloush, of the Raqqa Civil Council, was similarly dismissive about civilian casualties. He told me, “There are only two kinds of people left in Raqqa—ISIS and thieves. Otherwise, why haven’t they left yet?”

At the time of this conversation, an estimated twenty thousand civilians were still trapped in Raqqa; attempting to escape was extremely dangerous. ISIS snipers often shot at fleeing civilians, and many others were killed or maimed by mines. S.D.F. commanders told me that ISIS used civilians as shields, putting them on the rooftops of buildings they occupied. Two primitive aid stations treated wounded civilians in Raqqa. At both of them, I was told that the vast majority of patients had stepped on mines while trying to reach the S.D.F.’s front line. (When I asked the American with the graying beard if the field hospital treated civilians, he replied, “That’s not our mission.”)

After coalition air strikes took out two bridges over the Euphrates, in February, the main option for fleeing civilians was to hire a smuggler with a boat. The next month, the coalition dropped leaflets over Raqqa with a warning: “Do not use ferries or boats. Air strikes are coming.” Lieutenant General Townsend told the Times, “We shoot every boat we find,” adding, “If you want to get out of Raqqa right now, you’ve got to build a poncho raft.”

One would think that the killing of civilians, along with the total demolition of Raqqa’s infrastructure, might risk alienating residents, or turn them against their would-be liberators. For some, surely, this is the case. But others whom I spoke with exhibited a remarkable—and heart-breaking— forbearance from judgment. In South Raqqa, I met Ahmed Almoo, an S.D.F. fighter who had crossed the Euphrates, in a boat, two months earlier. Almoo was fifty-six but looked decades older. I’d noticed him standing guard outside an Arab unit’s position one morning, and was struck by the sight of a man so wizened and fragile wearing a uniform and holding a Kalashnikov. He told me that he’d been a butcher in Raqqa. To pay his smuggler, he’d sold all the equipment from his shop and the furniture from his home. His brother, who couldn’t afford to join him, had been killed by an air strike. All the same, Almoo had not hesitated to join the S.D.F. “I suffered a lot from ISIS,” he explained. He blamed the group for the death of his son. “He started feeling sick, and we took him to a doctor who did some tests and told us he had

► stomach cancer. But there's no medicine or anything in Raqqa, and ISIS won't let people leave to find a hospital. So I just brought him home, and he died."

This echoed previous conversations I'd had. The day I went to Karama, Farris Horan, the tribal liaison, had pointed out a village on the way. His cousin had lived there with her husband, a sheikh. After they had a son, she invited friends over to celebrate. Horan said that the coalition must have mistaken the party for an ISIS gathering. An air strike hit the house, killing eleven people, including Horan's cousin and her baby. In the car, Horan brought out his phone and showed me a photograph of the boy, purple-faced and swaddled in white blankets. The sheikh survived. I asked Horan what the sheikh was doing now. "He has a unit in the S.D.F.," Horan said. "He coordinates directly with the coalition."

I expressed incredulity.

"All people here want right now is to be finished with ISIS," Horan told me. "They will accept almost anything if they can just get rid of ISIS."

The willingness to countenance American crimes because of more egregious ones committed by ISIS, Russia, and the regime, speaks to how tragically tolerant some Syrians have grown of what might once have appalled them. It might also reveal a fear that U.S. involvement in Syria will be short-lived. One day, in a waiting room in Kobani, a stranger handed me his phone to show me some Kurdish text that he'd typed into Google Translate: "We love Americans so much I hope you do not give up on us." The sentiment was repeated by many others I met in northern Syria, especially by Kurdish members of the S.D.F.

Their worry is understandable. America's partnership with the S.D.F. still infuriates Turkey. In July, Turkey's state news agency published a map identifying ten undisclosed U.S. bases in Rojava, and the Turkish military began shelling a Kurdish district there. Turkish officials announced, "We will never allow the establishment of a terror state along our borders."

Many Kurdish fighters I met in Raqqa said that they were ready to fight the Turkish Army next. At the graduation ceremony in Kobani, the conscripts were commanded to stand against "our enemies in Turkey." From the perspective of U.S. interests, however, once ISIS has been defeated in Syria the utility of Kurdish fighters will diminish significantly. If a direct conflict broke out between Turkey and the S.D.F., it is difficult to imagine the U.S. employing force against its NATO ally. It is equally difficult to imagine the S.D.F. withstanding a Turkish incursion, unless it were supported by U.S. airpower.

In mid-October, ISIS holdouts in Raqqa were granted safe passage out of the city. According to Omar Alloush, the Kurdish senior member of the Raqqa Civil Council, two hundred and seventy-five Syrian ISIS members "turned themselves in to their tribes, in exchange for forgiveness." (Although some of those who surrendered came from Karama, the home of Abu Jihad, his brother Tobat was not among them.)

This fall, S.D.F. fighters and regime forces have been racing for control of ISIS's last bastion, the province of Deir Ezzor. The S.D.F. recently captured a large oil field there. The Assad regime, backed by Russian air power, is fighting in the provincial capital. A direct phone line connects the command centers of the U.S. and Russian militaries in Syria, so that they can avoid inadvertent clashes. Nonetheless, the coalition says, Russian planes have targeted S.D.F. positions, wounding fighters.

Even as the Democratic Union Party has embraced the U.S.-led coalition and forged alliances with anti-government rebels, it has tried to reach an accommodation with Assad. Crude from northern Syria's abundant oil fields, which the Democratic Union Party largely controls, is exported in tanker convoys to Damascus, and an overland route links Rojava to regime-controlled Aleppo. The Kurdish quarter in Aleppo has been granted semi-autonomy, and regime soldiers still guard the administrative buildings that the government was allowed to keep after withdrawing troops from Rojava.

Outside Rojava, Bashar al-Assad's military position is as strong as it has been in years. He has described the autonomous Kurdish cantonments as "temporary structures," and he has never equivocated about his intention to bring the entire country back under his control. Robert S. Ford, the former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that Assad "will probably succeed." Ford continued, "That means the United States will have to abandon any hopes of supporting a separate Kurdish region or securing respect for human rights and democracy." In his view, "when the Syrian government and Kurdish forces inevitably fight," it would be "a mistake" for the U.S. to "step in on behalf of old allies."

On October 19th, in a ceremony at Naim Square, in the center of Raqqa, the S.D.F. announced that the city had been "liberated." This feels like a misnomer. The coalition's air campaign has left Raqqa an uninhabitable wasteland. More than three hundred thousand civilians have been displaced. In September, Omar Alloush told me that he'd met with U.S. State Department officials who'd pledged American financial help for the rebuilding of Raqqa's infrastructure, power plants, schools, and water and sanitation systems. "Until now, this is only words," he said. "They have given nothing."

All the same, the event at Naim Square was celebratory. Under ISIS, the square had been the site of beheadings and crucifixions. Now a huge banner showing a smiling Öcalan was unfurled. Y.P.G. flags flew. "My heart was jumping for joy," Rojda Felat said recently. "We thought it would be much more difficult." She noted, "One time, on the front lines, the enemy attacked and the men took a step back—but the women didn't. When the men saw them, they started fighting again."

Hundreds of female Kurdish fighters, from various units around the city, congregated in the square. Nesrin Abdullah, the commander of an all-female branch of the Y.P.G., gave a speech commemorating the thirty female fighters who had been killed during the offensive. "Women have freed themselves of the exploitative male



The campaign to liberate Raqqa from ISIS has left it virtually uninhabitable. Much of the city is covered in mines.

Photograph by Mauricio Lima for The New Yorker

regime in political, social, cultural, and military aspects," Abdullah declared. "We dedicate the liberation of Raqqa to all the women of the world."

Whatever the Kurdish revolution is or isn't, and however sincerely its adherents have sought to implement their ideals, its commitment to women's rights cannot be dismissed. For many women in the Y.P.G., the revolution is, above all, an unprecedented feminist endeavor for the Middle East. One day in Raqqa, in September, I met a twenty-two-year-old fighter named Shilan, who was wearing fatigues, Chuck Taylors, and a calculator watch. She told me, "The men we are fighting against treat women like animals. They make them slaves, they rape them. As a woman, I have to fight these men."

ISIS is spectacularly misogynist, but Kurdish society can also be sexist, Shilan pointed out. She said that joining the Y.P.G. and battling ISIS was, in part, a means of transcending limitations that would otherwise define her life at home: "Your family tells you that you can't wear certain clothes. When you go out, people say you have to stay with your husband. You're not free. Nobody listens to you. Here, you have the right to your opinion. Men care what you have to say. They want to put you in the front. It's possible to have your place."

I asked her whether she could imagine being a civilian again, when the war in Syria ends. From where we stood, it felt like a frivolously hypothetical question, but Shilan answered right away.

No, she'd never go back. ●

This article appears in the print edition of the November 6, 2017, issue, with the headline "Dark Victory."

After Iraqi Kurdish Independence Vote Backfires, 'I Do Not Regret It,' Says Barzani

Jane Arraf — November 7, 2017
<https://www.npr.org>

There's a light rain falling in the hills around Masoud Barzani's palace north of Irbil. Last week, Barzani stepped down as president of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan regional government in northern Iraq, a position he's held for 12 years. But the building, with its soaring staircases and footsteps of staff echoing through vast marble hallways, is still distinctly presidential.

The Kurdistan region Barzani was instrumental in carving out from the ruins of Saddam Hussein's Iraq has been turned upside down. Barzani, 71, pushed through a historic referendum for Kurdish independence in September. But it backfired, and instead of the repercussions he expected — economic sanctions and temporary border closures — the Iraqi government sent in troops.

Iraqi Troops Enter Kirkuk, Seeking To Take Oil-Rich Area Back From Kurds

The Two-Way

Iraqi Troops Enter Kirkuk, Seeking To Take Oil-Rich Area Back From Kurds

Iraqi forces, including Iranian-backed Shiite paramilitaries, took back the city of Kirkuk, oil fields and towns and cities in a large swath of northern Iraq. Federal troops are retaking borders with Iran, Turkey and Syria that the Kurds have controlled since the 1990s.

The Kurds have also lost territory they've held since 2014, when Peshmerga fighters moved in to fight ISIS after entire divisions of the Iraqi army collapsed.

It's undeniably a disaster. Barzani, though, seems unchanged.

Although no longer president, Barzani remains head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the dominant party in the regional government. Crucially, he still leads Peshmerga fighters loyal to his party. And as one of the founders of modern-day Kurdistan, he retains enormous influence in many parts of this tribal region.

He walks into an interview with NPR — his first since Kurds went to the polls on September 25 — wearing his usual traditional Kurdish clothing, khaki baggy pants and a tunic with a cummerbund, along with the red and white headdress of his Barzan tribe. He has the bearing of the Kurdish fighter he cherishes as his core identity.

Barzani professes to have no regrets. He says "of course" the consequences his region has suffered were worth it to make clear that Kurds want independence.

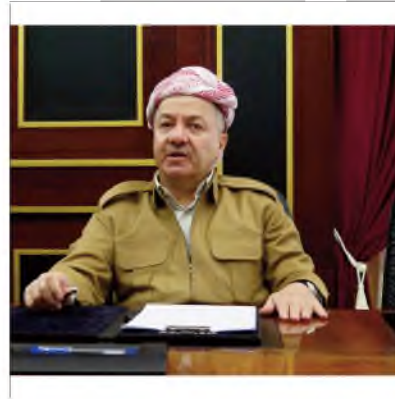
"I am very proud of the result. I am very proud that we have given the opportunity for the Kurdish people to express their vote — and I do not regret it," he says.

Asked about the expectation that he take some responsibility for the aftermath, Barzani says it was a collective decision to hold the referendum and not his alone.

He accuses specific Kurdish leaders from the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan of treason in handing over Kirkuk. And he blames the United States for allowing Iranian-backed Iraqi paramilitaries working with Iraqi troops to attack the Kurds.

"They were using American weapons — Abrams tanks and other things the American government gave to the Iraqi government to use in the fight against ISIS. But they used it against the Kurdish people, and the Americans stayed silent," he says.

The U.S., the U.K. and almost every other ally had warned Barzani not to hold the



Masoud Barzani stepped down last week as president of Iraq's Kurdistan regional government. The independence referendum he pushed through resulted in a military attack by Iraqi forces. But, he tells NPR, "I am very proud that we have given the opportunity for the Kurdish people to express their vote." He says the region will reassess its relationship with the U.S.
 Jane Arraf/NPR

referendum in September. U.S. officials brokered a deal with Baghdad to open negotiations with Irbil. If those failed, the U.S. would promise to recognize the need for a referendum.

But Kurdish officials say the offer came too late — two days before the vote, when Barzani had already made clear the referendum would go ahead.

After Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign against the Kurds in the 1980s, the United States created the conditions for the Kurdistan region to flourish, leading a no-fly zone in 1991 protecting the Kurds from air strikes. For the first time in Iraq, the Kurds gained control of their borders, creating a region that — while not exactly democratic — was seen as the most stable, prosperous and US-friendly in Iraq.

Kurdish leaders had made clear the September vote would not trigger an immediate declaration of independence. Until the last moment — at a press conference the evening before the referendum — Barzani seemed to think the worst repercussions would be border closures or economic sanctions. But with so many fault lines in the Middle East, no country was willing to see the breakup of Iraq.

"We were expecting some kind of reaction, but we had not calculated on military attack," Barzani tells NPR.

The Kurds and their Peshmerga fighters have been one of the strongest U.S. allies for two decades. US-backed Kurdish forces — often unpaid and under-equipped — played a crucial role in the multinational fight against ISIS.

Barzani sees the U.S. willingness to allow Iran-backed Iraqi forces to attack the Kurds as an inexplicable surrender to Iranian influence.

"We regard ourselves as friends of the people of the United States, as friends of the government of the United States but ... we have to revise our relationship with those who are responsible for this," he says. "I can say we are going to have a very strong revising of our relationship."

He says the Kurdish people see it as betrayal.

"From 2003, the people of Kurdistan have received the American people with hearts and flowers," he says. "The love and hope and trust that people had in the United States has declined and is decreasing day by day."

Instead of relying on the United States, Barzani says, the Kurds could improve their relationship with Russia.

Barzani's nephew Nechirvan is the region's prime minister. He and deputy prime minister Qubad Talabani — another of the new generation of Kurdish political leaders — have been trying to persuade the Iraqi government to sit down to talks.

In much of the rest of the country, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is riding a wave of popularity for regaining Kirkuk. He insists the Kurds have to renounce the referendum — declaring it null and void — before he'll sit down to negotiations to stop further Iraqi military movements.

Masoud Barzani says that's impossible. In a concession, the Kurdish government has said it would "freeze" the results of the referendum and put seeking independence on hold.

"Who can annul 3 million votes?" asks Barzani. "It's really very meaningless, this insistence. There is no way they can be annulled." ♦



Iraqi Kurdish students hold posters of Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani during a demonstration in his support in Irbil, Iraq Kurdistan, on Oct. 30. Safin Hamed/AFP/Getty Images

Iran's Role in the Kirkuk Operation in Iraq

By Jennifer Cafarella with Omer Kassim
Wednesday, November 8, 2017
<http://iswresearch.blogspot.fr>

Key Takeaway: Iran provided decisive military support to compel Iraqi Kurds to surrender in Kirkuk, Iraq, on October 16, 2017. Military forces from three major Iranian proxies participated in the operation: Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq, and the Badr Organization. Iran did not attempt to outshine Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in public. Iran instead allowed Abadi to take credit, while quietly positioning its proxies to influence Kirkuk in the future. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) conducted a rigorous study of social media activity and other reporting of troop movements in Iraq in order to assess the role of Iran's proxies in Kirkuk and across Iraq's disputed internal boundaries.

Iranian military proxies in Iraq supported Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's retaking of Kirkuk by compelling Iraq's Kurds to withdraw from their positions on October 16. ISW assesses that forces from three major Iranian proxies helped compel the Kurdish surrender in Kirkuk: Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH), and the Badr Organization, as this report will detail. The Kurdish collapse in Kirkuk was a turning point in the conflict between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iraqi Government. Iran and Abadi are now exploiting their success in Kirkuk and expanding their operations against Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's proxies continue to play a central role.

METHODOLOGY

The evidence of Iran's involvement in the initial confrontation in Kirkuk requires careful analysis of openly available sources.



Al Arabiya video on October 16, 2017 shows Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters near Kirkuk.

Official media channels of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) released little information about which units participated in the initial military operations in Kirkuk on October 16. ISW assesses that the PMF imposed a media blackout, since they went dark for an abnormal duration. One Facebook page affiliated with an Iranian proxy militia took down photos and videos about its involvement in Kirkuk that it posted from October 13-16. Social media outlets that normally report on PMF units were also unusually quiet. This media blackout may have extended to Iraqi press, which also did not report details on PMF units. Iraqi sources also rarely reported on Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) unit numbers in Kirkuk, referring instead to general "Iraqi forces." The media blackout and some retrospective removal of materials posted on unofficial social media links suggest that some authorities within the PMF, Iraq, or Iran wished to conceal evidence that the PMF participated.

Furthermore, some Kurdish press and social media sources published old, recycled imagery to argue that the Iranian-backed proxies were present, undermining the credibility of the official Iraqi Kurdish case. U.S. uniformed military spokesmen, senior general officers, and State Department officials have added to the confusion by dodging press questions about the involvement of PMF forces.

ISW conducted a rigorous study of the available evidence in social media and other reporting of troop movements in Kirkuk and across the disputed internal boundaries in order to assess which units comprised the PMF forces whose involvement Iraqi sources generally reported. Forces from three major Iranian proxies were present south of Kirkuk before the operation and advanced along with Iraqi forces: the 43rd and 42nd AAH Brigades and a Badr Organization unit also known as the PMF 24th Brigade. ISW has provided a list of indicators of the presence of these units below. ISW cannot assess the specific KH unit with confidence at the time of publication. KH, AAH, and the Badr Organization are lethal Iranian proxies that attacked U.S. forces in Iraq, particularly between 2006 and 2008.

IRANIAN PROXY LEADERSHIP IN KIRKUK

- Badr Organization leader Hadi al Ameri met with Federal Police (FP) commander Raed Jawat and the deputy head of the PMF and leader of KH Abu Mehdi al Muhandis in Bashir. An official Badr Organization media site provided pictures of this meeting on Facebook on October 15.*



Hadi al Ameri, Abu Mehdi al Muhandis, and General Yarallah in Kirkuk City on October 16, 2017.

- Hadi al Ameri and Abu Mehdi al Muhandis attended the flag raising in Kirkuk City along with Iraq's Counterterrorism Services (CTS) commander General Yarallah. The Iraqi Army's Twitter account posted a photo of the flag raising, showing all three in attendance. Facebook accounts affiliated with the Badr Organization also posted photos and videos showing the flag raising.* The Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman said that he had not seen the photos in response to a reporter's inquiry during a press briefing on October 17.

- Hadi al Ameri toured the Bai Hasan oil field on October 16 after Peshmerga forces withdrew. A Facebook account linked to the Badr Organization posted a video of Hadi al Ameri touring the Bai Hasan oil field. Ameri, during an interview from the field, thanked the Peshmerga for not clashing with the ISF. An Emergency Response Division (ERD) officer was standing next to Ameri. When asked if there were oil fields under PMF control, Ameri stuttered, saying that "oil fields... I don't think so except for Daybaka oil field which is important to control. Besides that, I don't think we have a problem." *

- Additional photos and videos that circulated on social media also show Hadi →

⇒ al Ameri and Abu Mehdi al Muhandis touring sites in Kirkuk Province.

IRANIAN PROXY MILITIA DEPLOYMENTS TO KIRKUK

Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH)

- Photos and videos taken in the vicinity of Kirkuk City that circulated on social media included AAH flags. Western reporters also cited examples of AAH flags raised near Kirkuk.

- A Facebook page affiliated with the AAH 42nd PMF Brigade shared photos with a caption stating that the 42nd Brigade led by Haj Abu Bakr Jubouri was deploying to Daquq for further movement to Kirkuk, and included a photo of a fighter with an AAH flag.

- A Facebook page affiliated with AAH's 42nd PMF Brigade posted photos on October 16 of fighters holding an AAH flag with a caption stating the photo was taken at a Peshmerga position in central Kirkuk.*

- ISW assessed on October 19 that the AAH 43rd PMF Brigade was also present within proximity of Kirkuk as of at least October 15. The 43rd PMF Brigade was deployed in Salah al Din province before the Kirkuk operation.* A Facebook page affiliated with AAH's 43rd PMF Brigade published information, including photos and videos, that supported ISW's assessment that fighters from the Brigade deployed close to Kirkuk in early October.* Screenshots from the AAH 43rd Brigade's Facebook page are included below.

Badr Organization

- The Badr Organization's Turkmen brigade, also known as the 16th PMF Brigade, was already stationed near Bashir and may have received reinforcement from 16th PMF Brigade units in the vicinity of Hamrin and Qara Tapa.*

An Iraqi news outlet shared a video from September 18 that shows a column of fighters from the 24th Badr Brigade arriving near southern Kirkuk with Abu Mehdi al Muhandis.

- A Facebook account affiliated with Ansar Allah al-Awfiya posted a photo from IVO Bashir showing civilians offering food to the PMF and security forces.* The post included photos from al-Ghadeer channel (affiliated with the Badr Organization).

- The communications directorate of the PMF announced that its force, along with ISF, control Bai Hasan oil fields in Kirkuk. The PMF in Bai Hasan most likely included a Badr Organization unit, given Hadi al Ameri's visit.

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)

- Al Arabiya published a video on October 16 from a location near Kirkuk City showing two trucks laden with fighters carrying KH



Photo of Asa'ib Ahl al Haq fighter either on the way to or near Kirkuk City.

flags, in addition to fighters carrying KH flags stationed at a checkpoint.

These units joined the local Iranian-backed forces stationed south of Kirkuk, which included: Kita'ib Jund al Imam, Liwa Kirkuk al Thani, and Firqat Imam Ali al Qitaliya. Qiyadat Quwat Abu Fadl al Abbas and a Hawza-affiliated PMF unit named Firqat al Abbas al Qitaliya may also have been present.

Iran's proxies joined an Iraqi force including the CTS and units from the 9th Iraqi Armored Division. It is unclear from publicly available information which specific CTS and 9th Iraqi Armored Division units participated. The deployment of elite Iraqi units supported by armored artillery indicates Abadi intended both to deter the Peshmerga from fighting and to prepare for that possibility. Abadi also deployed troops from the FP and ERD, which constituted the only government-controlled infantry force. The FP and ERD likely included units penetrated by Iran. These combined forces staged south of Kirkuk city in order to allow an avenue for retreat for Kurdish forces to the north.

ISW mapped these forces on October 19 and updated that assessment on October 29. ISW will continue updating its assessment and map if and when new information becomes available.

IMPLICATIONS

Iran's role in Kirkuk was decisive. The leader of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Qassem Suleimani traveled to Iraq on October 14 to convey Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's support for Abadi's response to the referendum. He also issued an ultimatum to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and possibly to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi al Ameri, also threatened "internal war" if the Peshmerga did not withdraw from Kirkuk. The deployment of Iran's proxies to Kirkuk tipped the scales against Iraqi Kurdistan enough to compel it to withdraw from Kirkuk and large portions of Iraq's disputed internal boundaries.

Iran achieved a second goal through its support in Kirkuk: to further legitimize its proxies in Iraq while sidelining the United States. Iran seeks to subordinate the Iraqi government from within, and was careful to frame

the Kirkuk operation as a sovereign Iraqi action. Iran quietly provided critical support that ensured Abadi's success while positioning its proxies to have influence in Kirkuk moving forward. Iran also took action to keep the U.S. on the sidelines by deploying an Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) against U.S. forces in early October. The Kirkuk operation thus bears signs of Iraq's most likely future on current trajectory: Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi notionally in control, Iran's proxies acting on Tehran's orders but as legitimate arms of the Iraqi state, and the U.S. on the sidelines.

Iran's proxies will capitalize politically and militarily on their role in Kirkuk and across Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBS). The battlefield circulations of major proxy leaders around Kirkuk bolstered their public image ahead of Iraq's elections scheduled for early 2018. Their subordinates may compete in local Kirkuk politics. Their forces will likely control or contest Iraqi government control of Kirkuk's military infrastructure and oil installations. Prime Minister Abadi placed an Iranian client, Ali Fadhil Imran, at the head of a new Kirkuk Operations command on October 28. Imran is the former head of the Iranian-influenced 5th Iraqi Army Division. Unconfirmed reports indicate Abadi also appointed an Iranian client, Abdul-Amir al-Zaydi, as the head of "redeployment operations" across Iraq's DIBS and border crossings on November 5. Zaydi is the former head of the Iranian-influenced Dijla Operations Command. These appointments enable Iran's proxies to consolidate militarily in Kirkuk and across the DIBS.

The U.S. remains multiple steps behind Iran. President Donald Trump rolled out a new anti-Iran strategy days before the Kirkuk operation, without specifying prescriptions for containing and reversing the strength of Iran's proxy networks. The Trump Administration's initial apathy toward Iran's role in the Kirkuk operation appeared to indicate the U.S. will not meaningfully push back against Iran in Iraq. U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson provided a more forceful, but still sluggish, U.S. response to Iran's role in Kirkuk in a subsequent trip to the Middle East from October 22-23. Tillerson said "Iranian militias that are in Iraq...need to go home" during a press conference with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir on October 22. Secretary Tillerson's statement recognizes the threat Iran's proxies in Iraq pose, but rolling back their influence is not achievable through rhetoric alone. Abadi reportedly responded to Secretary Tillerson by stating the PMF "defended their country and made the sacrifices that contributed to the victory over ISIS. Abadi subsequently stated that he will disarm Iran's proxies if they refuse to submit to his control, in an effort to reaffirm his intent to remain aligned with U.S. policy. He does not have the capability to do so without direct American military support, however. Only a serious change in U.S. policy in Iraq can save Abadi from de facto cooptation by Iran.

◆◆◆

REUTERS

Iran vying for leadership of Shi'ites in Iraq

NOVEMBER 7, 2017 / (REUTERS) -Babak Dehghanpisheh

NAJAF, Iraq — In early September, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, a senior Iranian official and cleric, flew to the holy city of Najaf in southern Iraq. His entourage included a sizable security detail and the former head of the Revolutionary Guards, the most powerful military force in the Islamic Republic.

Shahroudi, 69, spent several days on a charm offensive meeting officials, clerics and seminary students at his office near the golden dome shrine of Imam Ali, one of the world's holiest Shi'ite sites.

His aim was to raise his profile as a replacement for the top Shi'ite cleric and most powerful man in Iraq: the 87-year old Ayatollah Ali Sistani, according to current and former Iraqi officials.

While attention has focused on Iraq's battle against Islamic State, the country's future could equally hinge on what is happening in Najaf.

With Sistani's advanced age and persistent rumors about his health, the question of his replacement has become more pointed.

Iraqi Shi'ite factions are jockeying to influence who replaces Sistani. Iran, whose population is mostly Shi'ite, backs Shahroudi.

Shahroudi could prove a controversial replacement for Sistani. Senior clergy in Najaf are wary of Iran trying to expand its influence and Shahroudi is viewed with some suspicion, although he could still build support among students.

Since Sistani has distanced himself from Iranian politics some of his followers may not want a replacement who is close to Tehran.

Sources in Najaf were unwilling to go on the record on a matter as sensitive as Sistani's successor, but a former senior Iraqi official told Reuters: "The Iranians will try their best.

"It's not just religious, politics have become part of it. It will decide the fate of Iraq," the official said.

DISPUTED AREAS

Iran has already expanded its influence in Iraq by helping the Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad retake disputed areas from the Kurds.

The head of the branch of the Revolutionary Guards responsible for operations outside Iran, Qassem Soleimani, personally convinced some Kurdish leaders to abandon their claim to contested towns, like the oil-rich Kirkuk.

Attempts to reach Shahroudi and the Revolutionary Guards media office were unsuccessful, as were attempts to reach Sistani's office for comment.

If Iran can influence who becomes the next top Shi'ite cleric in Iraq, it could tighten its grip on power within the country for years.

A senior cleric in Najaf who is sympathetic to the interests of Iran would also eliminate a rival to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who claims to be the leader of Shi'ite Muslims worldwide.

For years, Sistani, who has endorsed a religious and political viewpoint independent of Iran, has been Khamenei's top challenger for the leadership of the global Shi'ite community.

Sistani is rarely seen in public but his decrees are sacrosanct to his millions of Shi'ite followers. Sistani's fatwa to rise up against the Sunni militants of Islamic State thwarted the group's push toward Baghdad in 2014.

The cleric has also used his decrees to reduce sectarian violence in the country. Sistani opposed the secession of the Kurdish region after the referendum on independence in September but then urged Baghdad to protect Kurds after reports of abuses surfaced last month.

Without Sistani's restraining influence, clashes are likely to break out between sects as well as among rival Shi'ite groups, Iraqi officials and observers say.

"Sistani is not just a poor guy sitting in a house. He can control millions of people," the Iraqi former senior official said. "It will be a very bloody struggle after Sistani passes away."

Sources in Najaf expect Sistani to remain in his post until his death. There is



Shi'ite clerics study at al-Gharawiya school run by al-Hawza al-Ilmiyya in Najaf. REUTERS/Abdullah Dhiaa Al-deen

no clear succession process, but Shahroudi would need to obtain the support of a large number of ordinary Shi'ites, seminary students and other clerics.

Shahroudi is no stranger to Najaf: he was born in the city to Iranian parents. In the 1970s he was jailed and tortured by Saddam Hussein's security forces because of his political activities.

He moved to Iran after the Islamic revolution and has been promoted to top posts since Khamenei became supreme leader in 1989.

Shahroudi was head of the Iranian judiciary for a decade and is currently the head of the Expediency Council, a body intended to resolve disputes between parliament and a hardline watchdog body, the Guardian Council.

In public, Shahroudi is often seen sitting next to Khamenei.

RALLY SUPPORT

Shahroudi's visit is only one sign of how Tehran is trying to rally support for its candidate to replace Sistani.

A company linked to the Revolutionary Guards is involved in a \$300 million project to expand the Imam Ali shrine, making it the second largest Muslim holy site after Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

"These projects create a state of dependency between recipients of aid and Tehran since they integrate the Iraqi infrastructure into the Iranian infrastructure network," said Ali Alfoneh, an expert on the Guards at the Atlantic Council. "Furthermore, such activities provide a cover for the Islamic Republic's intelligence networks operating in Iraq."

In 2011, Shahroudi opened an office in Najaf and began paying clerical students stipends, which observers say was an attempt by Iran to increase its influence.

"It was a provocative move," said an Iraqi analyst familiar with the Shi'ite clergy who asked not to be identified.

Shahroudi subsequently opened offices in Baghdad and Karbala. He pays stipends to thousands of seminary students, according to Iraqi officials and clerical sources in Najaf.

Clerics often pay stipends to students to gather support, raise their profile and perhaps become accepted as a marja, or top cleric, observers say.

"Iran is trying to influence the process of who comes after Sistani through the students," said a Western diplomat in Iraq who did not have permission to speak on the record.

Sistani is now the main sponsor of Shi'ite clerical students, paying millions of dollars in Iraq and elsewhere. His son Mohammed Ridha oversees the financial and administrative work of his office.

"Follow the dollars to see what will happen next," said an Iraqi senior official familiar with the clerical politics of Najaf. "Mohammed Ridha Sistani controls all the cash."

Mohammed Ridha's work could position him to replace his father, observers say, though passing the religious mantle within a family would be unprecedented in Shi'ite custom.

Top contenders to replace Sistani in Najaf include three other marjas but they are old and there is no clear front-runner, according to clerical sources and Iraqi officials.

"Nothing is fixed to make a decision for this procedure," said Sheikh Ali Najafi, son of one of the top Najaf marjas.

While in Iraq, Shahroudi visited prime minister Haidar al Abadi in Baghdad. Iraqi officials said Sistani refused to see him in Najaf, but they do not expect the Iranians to give up. ●

The constitutional context for Iraq's latest crisis



By Scott R. Anderson
November 7, 2017
www.brookings.edu

For the past three weeks, the central government of Iraq has been engaged in an unprecedented military campaign to re-assert its authority over the country's internally disputed territories. An explicit response to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s recent decision to hold a referendum on independence, the offensive quickly recaptured the contested city of Kirkuk, which—like much of the disputed territories—had been under the KRG's de facto control for several years. This in turn severed the KRG's access to the significant oil wealth around Kirkuk, dealing a serious blow to any hopes of secession. Federal Iraqi forces have since pushed even further into the disputed territories, up to the edge of the Kurdistan Region and at times threatening to push past it in order to reestablish control over border crossings, pipeline hubs, and other facilities the Iraqi government maintains should be under federal control.

Recently, however, there have been some signs of de-escalation. Both the Iraqi government and the KRG have indicated that they are willing to negotiate, though the preconditions remain a subject of debate. The parties agreed to a temporary ceasefire last weekend to allow security dialogues, which appear to be tenuous but ongoing. And last Monday the KRG's powerful President Massoud Barzani—a forceful advocate for Kurdish independence and the lead proponent of the independence referendum—announced his resignation, removing a potential obstacle to dialogue.

Echoing calls from the international community, both parties have said that negotiations will take place within the framework of Iraq's Constitution. This posture is consistent with the Iraqi government's framing of its military campaign, which it has consistently described as a "federal operation aimed at restoring federal authority" as assigned by Iraq's Constitution. And for the KRG, Iraq's Constitution not only guarantees Iraqi Kurds certain rights that are especially important in defeat, including to continued self-government in the Kurdistan Region, but gives some recognition to their own claims.

While this equipose allows both sides to point to the Constitution as a touchstone for reconciliation, it has also contributed to the present conflict. A product of a heated and condensed negotiation process, Iraq's Constitution sacrifices clarity for consensus, as its authors addressed major disputes in ambiguous terms in hope that future political processes would resolve them. As these processes failed, each of the parties seized on these ambiguities to legitimize their respective positions and at times further them through domestic and international legal processes.

To achieve an enduring reconciliation, both the Iraqi government and the KRG will eventually need to reach a political agreement that not only resolves the key issues underlying the conflict but is consistent with—and reflects a shared understanding of—Iraq's Constitution. This includes certain provisions that require concrete steps of the parties, such as a census and referendum. Further, recent history shows that the parties will likely not be able to implement these provisions on their own. Instead, doing so will almost certainly require renewed engagement from the international community.

A FAILED PROCESS IN THE DISPUTED TERRITORIES

The disputed territories at issue in the present conflict run along the Kurdistan Region's southern border, where they overlap with several major oil and gas fields. Despite the Saddam Hussein regime's brutal dis-



Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, meets with the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Masoud Barzani, in early 2017.

placement of Kurds and other groups as part of its "Arabization" efforts, the area contains a diverse population that often lives in mixed communities. While Iraqi Kurds have made demographic and historical claims to the disputed territories for decades—infamously going so far as to describe Kirkuk as "our Jerusalem"—other groups contest these claims.

Iraq's post-2003 interim government settled on a rough process for resolving the status of the disputed territories, which it set forth in Article 58 of the pre-constitutional Transitional Administrative Law. Article 140 of Iraq's Constitution in turn incorporates Article 58 by reference. While Iraq's Constitution places the disputed territories under federal authority, Article 140 makes the Iraqi government responsible for implementing "normalization" policies intended to unwind the effects of Arabization. These policies are then to be followed by a census and a "referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens[.]" which will be used to resolve the territories' status (though how is left unclear). Article 140 establishes a deadline of Dec. 31, 2007 for these measures, but provides no guidance on what should happen if this deadline is not met.

This omission's significance quickly became apparent as both the December 2007 deadline and an agreed-upon six-month extension passed with little progress. Several normalization policies proved controversial and stalled—in part over objections to new Kurdish settlement in advance of the referendum. A national census was repeatedly and then indefinitely delayed due to fears that it would be conducted unfairly or stoke further sectarian conflict, even after Iraq's Federal Supreme Court determined that Article 140 required a "special census" separate from any national one.

By 2010, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was publicly suggesting that Article 140 is "drafted in such a way that it cannot be implemented," necessitating a constitutional amendment. Others began to describe it as a "dead item" no longer having legal effect. But for Iraqi Kurds—who widely believed that the results of the referendum would support making the disputed territories part of the Kurdistan Region—this apparent willingness to ignore Article 140 only cast further doubt over the legitimacy of the Iraqi government's own claims of constitutional authority.

CREATING FACTS ON THE GROUND

The collapse of the Article 140 process created new incentives for ⇒

⇒ competition in the disputed territories. Absent any credible legal mechanism for resolving the territories' status, the KRG began to expand its efforts to gain leverage in any future conflict or negotiation by acquiring de facto control of—and building institutional ties to—strategic areas.

While KRG-associated peshmerga forces had been deployed in parts of the disputed territories since 2003, the scope of their operations expanded over time, often under the auspices of responding to internal security concerns. KRG administration and resources frequently followed, particularly in areas with Kurdish populations. By 2009, these efforts had resulted in a hotly contested “trigger line” that split the disputed territories—including Kirkuk—between Iraqi government and KRG control. Tense stand-offs and occasional exchanges of hostilities became common, though active mediation by the United States and others was able to stave off a broader conflict.

However, this situation changed in June 2014 when a surprise ISIS offensive caused federal Iraqi forces to abandon many of their positions along the trigger line. The KRG responded by moving its forces into Kirkuk and other strategic areas, protecting them from ISIS while simultaneously bringing them under its control. As the peshmerga went on to play an important role at the front lines of the counter-offensive, the KRG applied the same strategy to areas it helped to liberate, gradually bringing more of the disputed territories under its control.

Holding these areas was essential to protecting their civilian populations from further ISIS atrocities. Yet statements and actions by the KRG's leadership—culminating in the recent referendum on independence, which the KRG administered throughout the parts of the disputed territories under its control—made clear that the KRG had no intention of relinquishing its control once the threat from ISIS had receded. Indeed, many Iraqi Kurds saw control of the disputed territories and the referendum on independence as fulfilling the intended promise of Article 140.

CONTROL OVER OIL AND GAS

Further compounding the parties' territorial dispute is the Iraqi Constitution's ambiguous distribution of authority over the country's oil and gas resources.

Article 112 of Iraq's Constitution makes “[t]he federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments,” responsible both for managing oil and gas extractions “from present fields” and for setting related “strategic policies.” While it explicitly anticipates that subsequent legislation will delineate how these authorities will be exercised, efforts to pass a federal oil and gas law have repeatedly failed.

The Iraqi government maintains that Article 112 makes the management of oil and gas resources a federal responsibility. The KRG, however, argues that Article 112 only applies to “present fields” in operation at the time that the Iraqi Constitution was ratified in 2006. Further, as no other constitutional provision explicitly addresses the exploitation of new oil and gas resources, the KRG contends that this power should be reserved for the regions and governorates.

Pursuant to this theory, the KRG has aggressively pursued its own contracts with international oil and gas companies. Over time, these contracts have increasingly included resources in the disputed territories, reinforcing the KRG's claims to those areas. The Iraqi government has consistently objected to these contracts as unlawful and refused to recognize them. And while it has allowed some resulting exports to pass through the country's federally-controlled pipeline system, disputes over related cost- and revenue-sharing have led to frequent stoppages.

In 2013, however, the KRG finalized its own pipeline, which intersects with an existing transnational pipeline at the Turkish border. Pursuant to an agreement with Turkey, the KRG began to use this pipeline to unilaterally export oil and collect the resulting revenue. Unsuccessful at securing an injunction from Iraq's Federal Supreme Court, the Iraqi government initiated several international legal actions challenging the KRG's ownership of the exported oil. Successful at limiting the market for Kurdish oil exports, these cases each hinged on the parties' respective domestic legal authority over oil and gas, effectively exporting their constitutional dispute.

The parties ultimately put this struggle on the back-burner as the Iraqi government and KRG reached a temporary agreement on oil exports to fund counter-ISIS efforts. Yet the combination of this export capacity plus control of Kirkuk promised to dramatically increase the KRG's economic independence. This helps to explain both the Iraqi government's early focus on Kirkuk and its ongoing efforts to re-establish control over the border crossings and pipeline facilities that made KRG oil exports possible, even where they are within the Kurdistan Region itself.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

If and when the present conflict comes to an end, any progress toward reconciliation is likely to be slow. Both Iraq and the KRG will hold elections in 2018, making major compromises unlikely in the short-term. And the immediate focus of any negotiations will likely be on interim measures to de-escalate the conflict and restore cooperation on areas of common interest, such as the fight against ISIS.

Any more permanent resolution the parties eventually reach, however, will need to be reconciled with Iraq's Constitution. Failing to do so will leave it vulnerable to invalidation by Iraq's Federal Supreme Court or future repudiation as ultra vires, compromising its durability. While constitutional amendment is an option, it would require both a supermajority in Iraq's parliament and approval by a nationwide referendum. Hence, the easiest path forward would likely be to simply comply with the Iraqi Constitution as it currently stands, including Articles 112 and 140.

Fortunately, neither provision need be read as onerous. The KRG's own legal expert argues that Article 112 makes the exploitation of new oil and gas fields subject to “strategic policies” that the Iraqi government formulates “with” regional governments, giving a properly enacted federal oil and gas law primacy. And while Article 140 requires both a census and referendum, it does not define the subject matter of the latter. As the United Nations has previously suggested, a referendum could simply be used to ensure public approval in the disputed territories for a settlement negotiated by the parties, allowing for a range of possible dispositions in Kirkuk and elsewhere.

Whichever approach is taken, a joint statement by the parties—attesting their shared understanding that the constitutional requirements at issue are satisfied—will help mitigate the risk of constitutional invalidation. And while Iraq's Federal Supreme Court could arrive at a contrary interpretation, its historical reticence to take an independent stance in these disputes makes this seem unlikely.

Distrust and suspicion of self-dealing will also make it difficult for the parties to implement a mutually credible census and referendum on their own. Instead, an independent third party will be needed to provide technical expertise, develop options for implementation, and serve as both neutral observer and mediator. The most likely candidate is the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), whose extensive experience in Iraq and substantial prior work on the disputed territories make it well-qualified for this role. UNAMI will, however, require a new mandate from the U.N. Security Council that is independent of the Iraqi government's direction and control. Further, the Security Council itself will need to remain actively engaged to encourage progress and ensure that the broader international community supports and reinforces the reconciliation process.

Ultimately, the likelihood of any permanent resolution to the conflict may be low. For 15 years, half-steps and temporary measures have allowed the parties to co-exist without compromising their claims to the disputed territories or oil and gas resources. The same may prove true moving forward. Yet the longer these core disputes—and the constitutional ambiguities that help perpetuate them—are left unaddressed, the more intractable the parties' positions are likely to become. Further delaying resolution may thus only plant the seeds for a future conflict that is far more devastating. ♦

An Iraqi town where religions coexist, in theory

AMADIYA, IRAQ

BY ROÐ NORDLAND

This once-pretty picture postcard town, on its own 4,000-foot-high mesa nestling between a pair of much higher mountain ranges, is in a bad neighborhood when it comes to tolerance.

So the mystery of the Jewish holy figure Hazana, who is revered here by people of all the local faiths, is even more profound than it might otherwise be.

Amadiya is in the semiautonomous province of Kurdistan, which is the target of a crackdown by Baghdad after aiming to achieve independence from Iraq. This part of northern Iraq has been convulsed by violence since the advance of the Islamic State group, which sent Christians fleeing, enslaved Yazidi women and killed Shiites on sight, until finally being wiped out in the area last month.

Today Amadiya's population of 9,000 is overwhelmingly Kurdish Muslim. But in the early 20th century there were said to be about two-thirds that many people, about evenly divided among Muslims, Christians and Jews — although there were 10 mosques compared with two churches and two synagogues. Everyone was packed into a circumference of a mile and a half.

Amadiya's Jews all left after the creation of Israel in 1948. And so many Christians have left amid successive regional upheavals that the remaining 20



From top, prayers at the centuries-old Amadi Grand Mosque in Amadiya, Iraq. The town seen from an abandoned hotel. Today the population of 9,000 is mostly Kurdish Muslim.



Returning home after prayers in Amadiya. Muslims, Christians and Jews have been brought together in the town by a longstanding reverence for Hazana, a Jewish religious figure of unknown antiquity, whose tomb is there.

or 30 families can no longer sustain both churches.

All three faiths here are brought together by a longstanding reverence for Hazana, a Jewish religious figure of unknown antiquity — variously described as a son of David, the grandson of Joseph or just a little-known prophet — whose tomb is in Amadiya.

"All the religions are going to that grave to pray," said Muhammad Abdullah, a local teacher and amateur historian. "For all three religions, it's a sacred place. Each of them thinks he belongs to them."

Hazana's biography is so hazy that he defeats a Google search. Locals do not have much to add. He was "a really great guy, a pure person," said Bzhar Ahmad, 55, a retired government worker who had just emerged from noon prayers at the town's Amadi Grand Mosque, with a group of other Muslim worshippers nod-

ding agreement.

None of the men found it strange that Muslims, Christians and Jews all prayed at Hazana's tomb. "The Jews were always our friends," Mr. Ahmad said. "We never thought about what we were; we were just people living together."

Directions given by locals to find Hazana's tomb varied, but all ended up in a crooked lane narrow enough that in Amadiya's heyday there were footbridges connecting roofs from one side to the other so that residents could use their rooftops to go to the mosque while avoiding the visitors in the overcrowded lanes below. Or so they say.

On the way, Saran Sabah stood with her 18-year-old daughter, Amal. In the side alley leading to her house was a huge pile of firewood, ready for the coming winter. A Sunni Muslim, Ms. Sabah had prayed to Hazana, and it had worked, she said; there was a daughter to prove it.

The men had not mentioned that Hazana's popularity rested on his ability to bring fertility to supplicants, but later confirmed it. Borhan Said, a local Mus-

lim resident and retired government worker, said people asked for other things as well. "He was a religious man who was so clear and so devout," he said.

It almost sounded as if they had met, but it turned out that Mr. Said was not even sure what epoch Hazana came from. "He was before my father's father, that's all I know," he said.

Mr. Said pointed out the nondescript red metal gate of what had been the old synagogue, unlocked and unguarded, and said visitors were welcome. Inside was a garden of fig trees and pomegranates, trumpet creepers and hibiscus, unkempt but well watered. Purple and blue prayer cloths, used by those who came to ask Hazana's help, were hanging on some of the bushes.

Here and there were piles of rubble, old stone building blocks and sections of walls — the remains of the synagogue itself. Cut into the earth was a stone staircase leading to an underground tomb.

On the plastered walls inside the tomb was some fairly recent graffiti in Hebrew script, the verses of a religious song, along with an emoji-like smiley face, plus a Star of David sketched over

Hazana's plain rectangular sarcophagus.

Just what accounts for the town's communal tolerance, people say they are not sure, except that it has always been so. "We grew up like this," Mr. Said said. "My father always taught me to be like this and I teach my son the same."

Partly the town benefits from its remoteness; even when Kurds engaged in civil war from 1994 to 1997, fighting never arrived here, though both warring factions were present.

Some attribute it to Amadiya's history. Take the Amadi Grand Mosque, for example, the biggest and oldest of the town's 10 mosques. Speculation runs that it was originally a temple for the ancient Romans' Mithraic cult. Then, say locals, the building became a Jewish synagogue for centuries before becoming a Christian church for more centuries and finally, after the arrival of Islam 800 years ago, a mosque.

How much of that is actually true is debatable; Amadiya is such an out-of-the-way place that it seems not to have been much studied.

TheNational November 7, 2017

UN urges dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil on the basis of constitution

Baghdad and Erbil have quarrelled over territory and oil revenue sharing since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Their relationship reached a boiling point after the Kurdish region decided to hold a vote on independence in late September.

Mina Aldroubi November 7, 2017
<https://www.thenational.ae>

The United Nations has appealed to Erbil and Baghdad to resolve their long standing disputes on the basis of the constitution.

Baghdad and Erbil have quarrelled over territory and oil revenue sharing since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Their relationship reached boiling point after the Kurdish region decided to hold a vote on independence in late September. The referendum followed the launch of a military operation by the central government that recaptured the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

On Tuesday, the United Nations Assistant Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) reconfirmed its readiness "to play a facilitating role in the dialogue and negotiations between the two sides if requested by both the federal government and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), or indeed any other role agreed upon by both parties based on and in full conformity of its mandate," UNAMI said in a statement.

The statement follows talks between the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, Nechirvan Barzani, and the United Nations Secretary General for Iraq, Ján Kubiš,

Meanwhile, on Sunday, Iraq's cabinet proposed to slash the Kurdish share of the country's revenue in the 2018 federal budget, a move that



Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani met with Ján Kubiš, Special Representative and the Head of UN Iraq, discussed pressing issues.

Kurdish officials said was aimed at further punishing them for pressing ahead with their independence referendum on September 25. The result was a resounding "yes" in favour of breaking away from Iraq but Baghdad deems the vote to be illegal.

If approved by the Iraqi parliament, the budget will further damage the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil.

In a press conference on Monday, Mr Barzani reiterated the call for dialogue with Baghdad.

"We are even ready to talk to Iraqi political parties that genuinely want to understand the situation and find a solution for it," he said.

Mr Barzani said Baghdad had violated the Iraqi constitution by drafting a budget that does not recognise Kurdish entitlements.

Mr Barzani, the nephew of Masoud Barzani who stepped down last week as president of Iraqi Kurdistan in the wake of the referendum crisis, said the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was "prepared to give them the oil revenue." Effectively, this means the KRG is offering to negotiate over its own sales of oil — if the central government is prepared to give the Kurds their customary 17 per cent share of the national revenue.

"We are ready to handover oil, airports, and all border revenues to Baghdad if the federal government of Iraq sends the salaries of KRG employees, the Kurdistan region's 17 per cent constitutional budget share, and other financial dues," Mr Barzani said.

For the past three years, Baghdad has stopped sending funds while the Kurds held nearly all of northern Iraq's oil infrastructure and sold enough crude to fund themselves.

But the Iraqi government offensive that recaptured oil-producing territory from the Kurds last month means the autonomous region is once again financially dependent on Baghdad.

Meanwhile, UNAMI urged Erbil to acknowledge, endorse and respect this ruling of the federal court and reiterate its full commitment to the Iraqi constitution. ♦

Political Transition in Iraqi Kurdistan Region

EDITORIALS

November 10, 2017

<https://editorials.voa.gov>

The United States commends the decision of Masoud Barzani not to seek an additional term as President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The U.S. also supports the vote of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament to distribute presidential authorities to other Kurdish Regional Government, or KRG, institutions.

The United States commends the decision of Masoud Barzani not to seek an additional term as President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The



U.S. also supports the vote of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament to distribute presidential authorities to other Kurdish Regional Government, or KRG, institutions.

"President Barzani," said State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert, "is a historic figure and courageous leader of his people, most recently in our common fight to destroy ISIS. This decision represents an act of statesmanship during a difficult period."

The United States now looks forward to engaging actively with the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Nechirvan Barzani, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Qubad Talabani. A strong Kurdish Regional Government within a unified and federal Iraq is

essential to its long-term stability and to the enduring defeat of ISIS. "We call on all Kurdish parties to support the KRG as it works to resolve pending issues over the remainder of its term and prepare for elections in 2018," said Ms. Nauert.

The U.S. calls on the government of Iraq and the KRG under its new leadership to resolve pending issues under the Iraqi constitution. "We have been encouraged by the security dialogue that has taken place in recent days, and call for an end to all confrontations and clashes," said Ms. Nauert.

The U.S. also continues to support the strong leadership of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as he works to ensure the total defeat of ISIS and a stable Iraq after ISIS. The United States welcomes the recent decision from Prime Minister Abadi to begin a new dialogue with the KRG, under the Iraqi constitution, and avoid further confrontations.

The U.S. will continue to work with all parties as they address these issues for the benefit of all Iraqis. It is time for all parties to look to the future and focus on peaceful resolution of disputes under the Iraqi constitution. ■

The Kurdish oil gamble has backfired

Greg Brew, Nov. 12, 2017
<https://oilprice.com>

Since September's independence referendum and October's dramatic Kirkuk recapture by Iraqi troops, the drama over Kurdish oil continues, with new developments occurring early this week.

On Sunday, the government of the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq indicated it was prepared to hand over oil facilities, airports, border points and state revenue to Baghdad, provided the central Iraqi government agreed to hand over the Kurdish share of the national budget.

The long-running dispute over the country's oil revenues is at the center of tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region. Since 2014, Iraq hasn't shared of its oil revenues with Kurdistan, and the autonomous region signed its own oil deals and funded itself independently.

For a time, the Kurds were able to entice major oil companies like Chevron, ExxonMobil and Total SA with lucrative offers, persuading them to ignore the threats of legal action from the Iraqi government. Yet the original promise of the Kurdish oil fields has diminished, with Total and Chevron both backing away from further investing in Kurdish exploration.

The independence referendum was widely



Members of Iraqi security forces are seen at an oil field in Dibis area on the outskirts of Kirkuk, Iraq, Oct. 17, 2017. Alaa Al-Marjani/Reuters

interpreted as a move by Erbil to challenge Baghdad. The re-capture of Kirkuk was thus a dramatic setback and an indication that the Kurds possessed far less leverage than once thought.

The Kurdish announcement on Sunday came in response to news that Baghdad, which is currently in the middle of drafting the 2018 state budget, plans to slash the Kurdish share from 17% to 12.6%. While government officials have said the new figure reflects population distribution and trade data, the Kurds have interpreted the move as a punitive response to the independence referendum, one designed to place greater pressure on Erbil.

The whole country needs oil money to

fund a reconstruction effort, but the Kurds claim they're particularly worse off, having borne the brunt of fighting against the Islamic State since 2014.

Part of the new budget is a distribution agenda that would leave the three provinces that make up the Kurdish area with separate shares, rather than a single large apportion for the Kurdish government, further weakening the central Kurdish authority and forcing the three provinces to compete with one another.

On Sunday, Kurdish prime minister Nechirvan Barzani — nephew of former prime minister Masoud Barzani, who resigned in the wake of the defeat in Kirkuk — claimed that Kurdistan was prepared to hand over

its oil money in return for a proper share of the budget.

Rudaw, the Kurdish news service, called the gesture an "olive branch" and an indication that Erbil was prepared to talk through the issues that have pulled Iraq and its Kurdish provinces apart.

When Iraqi forces retook Kirkuk, it triggered a minor shockwave in global energy markets. The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, through which most Kurdish oil is exported, was temporarily and partially shut down, taking 275,000 BPD offline. Prices spiked as regional tensions rose and Kurdish exports dipped. The Iraqi government increased exports from southern Iraq by 200,000 BPD to compensate.

Iraq is OPEC's second-largest producer, with an output of 4.5 million BPD. By itself, the Kurdish region possesses one-third of Iraq's total oil reserves, 45 billion out of a total 150 billion barrels, and produces 250,000 BPD,

increasing its output to 550,000 BPD after capturing Kirkuk.

Kirkuk, a city that the Kurds occupied during the war with the Islamic State, which they claimed was part of the ancestral Kurdish-speaking region and hence a part of Kurdistan, sits atop a massive oil field. Had the Kurds retained it, they would have been in a much stronger position to dictate terms to Baghdad.

The Baghdad government led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi — who has proven capable of excelling at what is arguably one of the toughest jobs on earth — will press its advantage with Erbil. If al-Abadi succeeds in marshaling support in the Iraqi parliament, it's possible the budget will be accepted, even with the drastically reduced Kurdish share.

Then again, it's possible the move is an opening gambit in what could prove to be long and acrimonious negotiations over the future

of Iraqi oil and the country's oil wealth. The Kurdish government gambled for a larger share of that wealth and lost. It must now be prepared to negotiate from a weaker position, a reality reflected by the statement issued on Sunday.

With prices rising, potentially reaching \$70 by the end of the year, the question of who will get what has become more prevalent than ever. With luck, the Iraqis and Kurds will be able to negotiate a settlement that avoids fresh violence, though it likely won't be one that the Kurds will be happy with. ●



21 November 2017

Unity the byword as KRG leadership sits down with Kurdish parties

By Rudaw.net 21/11/2017

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – After a busy day of meetings with Kurdish parties in Sulaimani, the prime minister told reporters they were pondering two options to overcome the current crisis – holding a general election or establishing an interim government until elections can be held – stressing that the difficulties could be overcome if the parties are united.

The final decision lies with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), "once we have discussed this matter with the political parties," said Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. He and his deputy, Qubad Talabani, have been sitting down to talk with the various parties this week.

In the wake of Baghdad's rejection of Kurdistan's independence vote and Iraq's assertion of federal control over the disputed areas, several parties have called the KRG a failure and demanded its dissolution, the formation of an interim government to lead talks with Baghdad and manage affairs, and preparations for elections.

Barzani said he needs more information about what role an interim government would take on. He said the current government is itself interim after parliament voted in late October to postpone elections for

eight months and extend its mandate until elections can be held. The legislature made the move in light of uncertainties in the Region after the referendum. Presidential and parliamentary elections had been scheduled for November 1.

All parties are opposed to any action that would split the Region into two administrative zones, namely Erbil and Sulaimani, said Barzani, a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), after meetings on Tuesday with Gorran, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Socialist Democratic Party.

He said they also agreed that talks with Baghdad have to be held on a government level and no party should enter talks with the Iraqi government individually.

"As the government... with all the parties involved, we will go to Baghdad," Barzani said, adding that no timeframe had been set yet for talks.

Meetings with the parties will continue and decisions will be made public. Barzani is hopeful of a positive outcome.

"It is true that the situation is unstable, but if united, we can overcome it together," he said.

The financial crisis, specifically lack of full, regular payments of the salaries of public employees, is an issue Gorran and other parties have said must be a priority for the



PM Barzani met with Hero Ibrahim, PUK leadership member and widow of the party's founder Jalal Talabani. He was accompanied by Deputy PM Qubad Talabani and a number of ministers who come from various parties. Other senior PUK members, including Mala Bakhtiyar, were also present at the meeting.

government.

Barzani promised transparency on the matter: "We will provide the salaries of civil servants as far as we can. When we are unable to do, we will come out and explain it to our people."

PM Barzani met with Hero Ibrahim, PUK leadership member and widow of the party's founder Jalal Talabani. He was accompanied by Deputy PM Qubad Talabani and a number of ministers who come

from various parties. Other senior PUK members, including Mala Bakhtiyar, were also present at the meeting.

"We discussed the current situation and our future plans," Barzani tweeted, "we insisted on unity and supporting the Kurdistan Regional Government." ■

Who will govern Kirkuk?

As Baghdad appointed a temporary governor after reimposing its authority in Kirkuk, three main proposals are available to find a long-term governing solution for the coveted city.



Nahwi Saeed
November 14, 2017
www.al-monitor.com

Although Baghdad imposed its authority on Kirkuk on Oct. 16 and appointed a new temporary governor, Kurds still hope to reach an agreement with Baghdad that will allow them to appoint a Kurdish governor in the disputed province between Baghdad and Erbil. In the latest development, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) nominated a Kurdish candidate (the former head of the provincial council, Rizgar Ali) on Nov. 12, and demanded that the provincial council hold a meeting to vote on the new governor.

The Kurds' proposal is one of several options on the table.

The first option is appointing a military governor. Some members of the Arab and Turkmen communities in Kirkuk proposed this before and after the Kurdish referendum. For Kurds, appointing a military governor, even if for a while, means Kirkuk's restoration to the pre-2003 era and the reminder of bitter memories when the Kurds were the most aggrieved and affected group in the city. The central government may be powerful enough to hold Kirkuk for now, but appointing a military governor would push the Kurds to one side, which is likely to prove both provocative and unsustainable. Election results indicate that the Kurds are larger than other groups in the province, although there has been no official and reliable census for some time.

Kurds will reassert their claim on Kirkuk at the first available opportunity — both for the symbolic reason that many Kurds regard Kirkuk as their "Jerusalem," and for the economic reason that control of Kirkuk's oil would play a big role in any future Kurdish independence bid. The upshot is that Kirkuk was and remains a "disputed territory"; as a US State Department statement said Oct. 20, "The reassertion of federal authority over disputed areas in no way changes their status — they remain disputed until their status is resolved in accordance with the Iraqi constitution."

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi might decide against this option if he takes into account that, in the post-Islamic State period, the Arab-Kurdish conflict over Kirkuk and other disputed territories could be the biggest potential threat to stability in Iraq. In addition, such a move could be both ineffective and dangerous, for it has a great potential for escalating into ethnic violence.

The second option is to hold provincial elections in a few months, which would lead to a new council and a new government. Kirkuk province is the only province that has had only one election since 2005; the Kirkuk provincial council is now the longest-serving such council in Iraq. In 2005, 41 members were elected in a public election for the council: The Kurdish Brotherhood List has 26 members, while there are nine Turkmen and six Arabs. Other provinces (apart from the provinces forming the Kurdistan Region) held elections in 2005, 2009 and 2013. Conducting only one election within 12 years in Kirkuk province is a clear indication of the depth of disputes among the three main ethnic groups regarding Kirkuk's governance.

The current situation in Kirkuk is a good opportunity for holding a new provincial council within a few months. A member of the Kurdish provincial council told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that "the provincial council is a tired council, let a new council come with new members." Holding a provincial election, however, needs the consent of the main three groups of Kirkuk. Attempts to hold provincial elections in 2009 and 2013 failed partly because, in the view of the Arabs and Turkmen, the Kurds would win any election thanks to the process of Kurdification since 2003. The Kurds deny this allegation of Kurdification. But if Baghdad were to attempt to hold a provincial election to form a new council and then a new governor, it would need to reach an agreement between the three main groups in Kirkuk, which is unlikely to happen.

The third option is to renew the current council and push it to appoint a new governor. Although Turkmen and the PUK once supported the dismissal of the council, both now favor the council's renewal. Before the Kurdish referendum, the Iraqi Turkmen members of parliament had even launched a petition calling for the dissolution of Kirkuk's provincial council and collected 74 signa-



The Kurdish and Iraqi flags are seen on the Kirkuk province's government building in Kirkuk, Iraq, April 6, 2017. REUTERS/Ako Rasheed

tures of members of parliament for that purpose. Similarly, Bafel Talabani, a PUK member and son of former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (who died last month), addressed the people of Kurdistan on Oct. 12, suggesting the dissolution of the Kirkuk provincial council and the removal of the governor, if needed.

After the federal takeover of Kirkuk, 15 to 16 members of the provincial council from the Kurdish Brotherhood list left for Erbil, changing the balance of power on the council. The current situation and the absence of these members have put the Kurds in a weak position. If there were to be an election for a new council, the Turkmen likely would go from being the second strongest list in the province to the third; Turkmen are overrepresented on the council as a result of a low Arab turnout in the 2005 election.

Bafel Talabani's statement, on the other hand, had much to do with rivalry between the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Kirkuk and internecine squabbles within PUK wings. His wing has now struck against the KDP and his opponents within the PUK. For example, the KDP, which has held sway in Erbil, is the Kurdish party that has been hurt the most by the recent events in Kirkuk and other disputed territories. The governor of Kirkuk who was removed, Najmaddin Karim, is a Bafel Talabani rival in the PUK. In an interview with Bloomberg commenting on the recent events of Kirkuk, Karim said, "The day before the attack, Bafel, Talabani's nephew Lahur and his older brother Araz came to Kirkuk and met with [Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander] Qasem Soleimani's representative there. He gave an ultimatum, 'You either give up your positions or we will attack you.'" Thus, by weakening the position of the KDP in Kirkuk and removing Karim, who is accused by some PUK members of being pro-KDP, Bafel Talabani and his cousins may have achieved their goals and lost interest in dissolving the council. As for the Arabs, they seem comfortable to maintain the current status quo, as the Arab who was Kirkuk's deputy governor, Rakan Saeed al-Jobouri, now acts as the province's governor.

There also are legal problems to deal with. According to Rebwar Talabani, head of the Kirkuk provincial council, "There is no legal or constitutional article that allows dissolving the provincial council because the council operates under Bremer's Law 71, which is the highest authority." Thus, due to both political and legal obstructions, Prime Minister Abadi may avoid resorting to this option too.

To conclude, the current situation presents both risk and opportunity for Abadi. The risk is taking further escalatory actions and the opportunity is to put an end to the policy of imposing a fait accompli in Kirkuk and instead try to find a solution with regard to the future of the province under Article 140 of the constitution. ♦

Nahwi Saeed is an independent researcher who specializes in democracy in divided societies, coexistence between ethnic groups in post-conflict situations, power-sharing and the prevention of ethnic conflict in post-conflict societies with the focus on Iraq and the Kurdistan region. He has written several articles for Kurdish, English and Arabic media outlets.

La relation turco-russe à l'épreuve des Kurdes

Moscou a choqué Ankara en invitant les Kurdes syriens du PYD à des pourparlers à Sotchi

ISTANBUL - *correspondante*

Le président turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan était attendu lundi 13 novembre par son homologue russe Vladimir Poutine à Sotchi, dans le sud de la Russie. La rencontre entre les deux présidents, la cinquième depuis le début de l'année, vise à aplanir leur désaccord croissant au sujet des Kurdes syriens du Parti de l'union démocratique (PYD), que la Russie protège et que la Turquie veut combattre à cause de ses liens avec le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK, interdit en Turquie), en guerre contre l'Etat turc depuis 1984.

Le malaise a surgi quand Moscou a annoncé son intention d'organiser, le 18 novembre à Sotchi, un « congrès du dialogue national syrien » avec la participation de trente-trois organisations politiques, dont le parti Baas de Bachar Al-Assad, l'allié indéfectible des Russes, ainsi que le PYD syrien.

Ce projet de réunion a d'emblée été écarté par la coalition de l'opposition syrienne, la principale force de l'opposition à Bachar Al-Assad, réticente à s'engager dans un processus « sans le parrainage des Nations unies ». De nouveaux

pourparlers s'ouvriront à Genève le 28 novembre, cette fois-ci sous l'égide de l'ONU. De la rencontre de Sotchi, il n'est plus question, le Kremlin dit qu'elle a été reportée.

L'idée d'une conférence sur la Syrie où les Kurdes du PYD auraient été invités a donné des sueurs froides à la partie turque. « Nous avons tout de suite formulé nos objections », a expliqué Ibrahim Kalin, le porte-parole du président turc, dimanche 5 novembre, assurant que la rencontre aurait lieu plus tard et sans le PYD. « La Russie nous a assurés que le PYD n'y participerait pas », a précisé M. Kalin dans une interview à la chaîne turque NTV.

« Obligés d'attaquer »

Le PYD, dont les combattants se sont illustrés dans le combat contre l'organisation Etat islamique (EI), contrôle une bonne partie du nord de la Syrie, au grand dam d'Ankara qui considère cette organisation kurde comme « terroriste ». Les autorités turques voient d'un très mauvais œil l'éventuelle émergence d'une région autonome kurde aux marches sud de leur pays, notamment dans la région d'Afrin qui jouxte la province turque du Hatay. « Nous sommes

La Turquie voit d'un mauvais œil l'éventuelle émergence d'une région autonome kurde aux marches du pays

obligés d'attaquer Afrin, sinon nous allons perdre le Hatay », a expliqué récemment Ihsan Basbozkurt, un général à la retraite qui, en février 2015, avait dirigé les opérations d'évacuation de Syrie des reliques de Souleyman Chah, le grand-père du fondateur de l'Empire ottoman.

Malgré leurs divergences, notamment sur le sort de Bachar Al-Assad que Moscou veut maintenir à la tête de la Syrie tandis qu'Ankara réclame son départ, les présidents Poutine et Erdogan ont réussi, depuis un an, à coopérer pour trouver une solution au conflit.

Le 12 octobre, la Turquie a déployé soldats et blindés dans la région syrienne d'Idlib pour mettre en place l'une des « zones de désescalade » prévues dans le

cadre des accords signés à Astana entre la Russie, la Turquie et l'Iran. La région d'Idlib est contrôlée par Tahrir Al-Cham, une organisation djihadiste dominée par l'ancienne filiale d'Al-Qaida en Syrie, avec qui les Turcs ont pris langue pour installer leurs postes de contrôle sur le terrain. Mais aux yeux des Turcs, ce dépeçage vise avant tout à encercler les milices kurdes YPG dans leur fief d'Afrin.

Obsédé par la perspective de gains territoriaux kurdes en Syrie, Ankara n'a de cesse de soupçonner le PKK et ses alliés de vouloir former un couloir jusqu'à la Méditerranée. Le président Erdogan et son chef d'état-major, Hulusi Akar, veulent une intervention de l'armée turque à Afrin afin d'empêcher les forces du PYD de gagner du terrain. Mais une telle opération est impossible sans le consentement de Moscou dont les soldats sont aussi présents dans la poche d'Afrin.

Pour le président Erdogan, qui a échoué à persuader les Etats-Unis de cesser leur coopération avec le PYD dans le cadre de la guerre contre l'EI, le fait que la Russie le soutienne est une sérieuse déconvenue. ■

MARIE JÉGO



15 NOVEMBRE 2017

Pétrole: la Russie au chevet du Kurdistan irakien

Le pétrolier russe Rosneft a versé une avance de 1,3 md USD au Kurdistan irakien

Par Claire Fages / 15 novembre 2017
<http://www.rfi.fr>

Le géant pétrolier russe Rosneft vient de verser plus d'un milliard de dollars au Kurdistan irakien. Une aide à la région autonome kurde, affaiblie depuis que Bagdad lui a repris les champs de pétrole de Kirkouk.

La Russie vole au chevet du Kurdistan irakien par l'intermédiaire de son géant du pétrole Rosneft. Le groupe russe vient d'annoncer qu'il avait versé une avance de 1,3 milliard de dollars aux autorités kurdes, pour des livraisons futures de pétrole. Une aide déguisée de la Russie au gouvernement d'Erbil.

Malgré son succès au référendum de septembre, la région autonome kurde d'Irak aurait perdu près d'un milliard de dollars depuis qu'elle est privée des champs pétroliers de Kirkouk. Le gouverne-

ment fédéral irakien les lui a repris le 17 octobre dernier lors de son offensive contre le groupe Etat islamique.

LE KURDISTAN, NOUVEL ALLIÉ DE LA RUSSIE

C'est la deuxième fois que Rosneft soutient le Kurdistan irakien en moins de deux mois, un nouvel affront pour le gouvernement de Bagdad.

Le mois dernier, la compagnie russe avait déjà signé un contrat d'exploration sur cinq blocs de pétrole dans la région autonome kurde. Ce qui avait mis en colère les autorités fédérales irakiennes. Bagdad avait dénoncé une « ingérence irresponsable ». Ce à quoi le directeur général de la société russe avait répliqué : « S'il y a un problème entre le gouvernement irakien et le Kurdistan, c'est à eux de le résoudre, je ne suis pas un homme politique, mon problème c'est de produire du pétrole ». Une répartie qui fait sourire quand on connaît le



lien de Rosneft avec le Kremlin. A travers cette aide au Kurdistan irakien, la Russie se crée de nouveaux alliés, comme elle le fait avec les Kurdes de Syrie, sans trop de risques étant donné la faiblesse des pouvoirs centraux irakien et syrien.

L'IRAK SE RAPPROCHE DE L'IRAN

Pendant ce temps, pour vendre le pétrole de Kirkouk récupéré aux Kurdes, l'Irak se rapproche de l'Iran. Bagdad ne peut plus utiliser l'oléoduc des Kurdes vers la Turquie au Nord, alors il cherche à évacuer le brut vers l'Est, chez son ancien ennemi, l'Iran. Un projet d'oléoduc est ressuscité, mais ce sera très long étant donné le relief. Ce sont des camions qui transporteront le pétrole de Kirkouk dans les jours qui viennent, 15 000 barils par jour d'abord puis 60 000 barils. Insuffisant toutefois pour évacuer les 300 000 barils de Kirkouk. Le pétrole retiré aux Kurdes est encore loin de profiter aux Irakiens. ♦

Phone diplomacy defuses Iraq rift

FISH KHAMBOUR, IRAQ

Back-channel talks avert new clashes between Kurds and federal forces

BY MARGARET COKER

Turn on a television or scroll social media in Iraq and, by almost any measure, more conflict appears imminent between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdish region in the north.

Kurdish officials accused federal forces — without corresponding evidence — of committing a slaughter last month when they seized control of 20 percent of territory that had long been under Kurdish domain. Iraqi lawmakers demand prison sentences for Kurds who supported the Sept. 25 independence referendum.

Yet amid the acrimony over the last few weeks, leaders in Baghdad and the Kurdish strongholds of Erbil and Sulaimaniya have also been exchanging almost daily phone calls, hoping to hash out solutions to problems exacerbated by that vote — and to get thousands of federal and Kurdish troops massed within one another's sight lines to stand down.

The back-channel chats have taken on heightened importance since formal de-escalation talks stalled on Oct. 29, after only two face-to-face meetings.

"The channels of dialogue and communication have not been interrupted," said Sa'ad al-Hadithi, a spokesman for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.



Iraqi security forces last month fired a rocket launcher at Kurdish pesh merga positions near the Fish Khabbour border crossings with Turkey and Syria.

Three officials involved in the informal talks say they are discussing temporary arrangements to the most pressing issue for both sides: Control of Iraq's Fish Khabbour border crossings with Turkey and Syria, where about one-fifth of Iraq's oil exports pass through. The officials were granted anonymity to discuss a sensitive diplomatic matter.

This stab at conflict resolution illustrates the diffuse nature of Iraqi politics, where key power brokers sometimes have no formal or elected authority. It also highlights a dangerously fractured

political spectrum in which elected officials can be eclipsed, sometimes by rival factions from within their party or even family.

While back-channel discussions have helped keep oil, food and consumer goods flowing between Turkey and Syria — along with humanitarian aid from Iraq bound for Syria — over the last two weeks, they are far from any breakthrough.

Diplomats say that Iraq's tradition of carrying out delicate negotiations in secret, often by people acting well outside their official roles, can be baffling to outsiders.

Riding a wave of victories over the Islamic State, Mr. Abadi ordered his troops in October to re-establish government control throughout the country. The independence referendum prompted him to include many areas long under Kurdish control.

While no official casualty statistics have been released, about 65 men died in clashes sparked by these advances, according to two military commanders familiar with the situation. Beyond the loss of life, the Kurdistan Regional Government lost face over the rapid withdrawals by their pesh merga security forces. It also lost most of its oil fields to federal troops, and with them the economic self-sufficiency that has underpinned the region's de facto autonomy since 2005.

In late October, after advancing northward amid several short skirmishes, federal forces dug in about 10 miles from the Fish Khabbour oil terminal and the nearby cargo crossing with



Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi plants the Iraqi national flag in the city of Qaim, on the Syrian border, on Nov. 5 after it was recaptured from the Islamic State.

Turkey, one of the largest trading partners for both Iraq and the Kurdish region.

With tensions boiling, Baghdad on Oct. 28 announced a cease-fire and a round of negotiations between Iraqi and Kurdish military commanders, ostensibly to allow federal forces to take over the border without further bloodshed.

On Oct. 29, however, talks broke down, amid intransigence by the Kurds about the altered balance of power.

"The talks mixed security and politics," according to Sheikh Jafar Moustafa, a veteran pesh merga commander and one of four Kurdish negotiators, who added that his side did not have the political authority to approve any agreement with the Iraqis.

"We had to get political approval for any deal," he said, "and no political decision was forthcoming."

At that point, the phone diplomacy increased among leaders including the Kurdish regional deputy prime minister, Qubad Talabani; Mr. Abadi's deputy chief of staff; and Iraq's intelligence chief.

These relationships have helped avert any new clashes near the border, despite a buildup of Iraqi forces, and helped keep the trade corridor open and

oil exports flowing, albeit at a reduced rate, according to Turkish and Iraqi officials.

However, not all political factions in Baghdad or Kurdistan support de-escalation or a border deal.

Those include Iraqi Shiite politicians close to the Popular Mobilization Forces, a paramilitary organization made up of dozens of militias recognized by the Iraqi state in 2014 as an auxiliary force to fight the Islamic State.

Although the militias are under the formal command of Mr. Abadi, some of their leaders are his parliamentary rivals and profess close allegiance to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

On the Kurdish side, it is unclear who, exactly, could enforce any potential border compromise.

Mansour Barzani, the son of the long-time Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, commands an elite Kurdish security force that is defending a ridge between an Iraqi artillery unit and the Fish Khabour border. Last week, he said he would fight to the death rather than allow the Iraqi federal troops to control the crossings. But a cousin, the regional prime minister Nerchivan Barzani, supports a negotiated deal.

In the second largest Kurdish city, Sulaimaniya, relatives of the former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, who died last month, are immersed in their own feuds over control of Mr. Talabani's party and the security force loyal to it.

Such divisions have already scuttled one attempt to stave off military conflict between Baghdad and the Kurds.

In the aftermath of the independence referendum, Mr. Talabani's eldest son, Bafel, began unilateral negotiations with Mr. Abadi. (Qubad Talabani is Bafel's brother.)

He proposed that troops from the American-led coalition against the Islamic State take over a large military base near the oil-rich town of Kirkuk, along with federal forces and Kurdish forces loyal to his father's party.

An aide to Mr. Abadi, and two Western diplomats, confirmed that such a deal had been proposed. Mr. Abadi gave Mr. Talabani until Oct. 16 to get a green light from the Kurdish leadership to implement the plan, or he would launch the operation to seize the area from Kurdish control.

With the deadline past, Mr. Abadi instead ordered the federal forces to push into Kirkuk, and then farther north toward the Turkish border.



16 November 2017

Najmaldin Karim: I am the legitimate governor of Kirkuk

By Rudaw.net 16/11/2017

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Najmaldin Karim, former Kirkuk governor, says he is still the legitimate governor of Kirkuk according to all Iraqi laws.

"According to all the laws, letters sent to Kirkuk by the Iraqi government itself stating that laws enforced in other provinces of Iraq do not apply in Kirkuk, and the final decree of the Kirkuk Provincial Council of Kirkuk – I am the legitimate governor of Kirkuk," said Karim in an interview with Rudaw TV on Wednesday night.

Asked about the Iraqi Federal Court's response to his appeal regarding his removal from the post, Karim said "if there is a just court, if there is a court that is not controlled by politics, it would decide that we were right."

Iraqi law commits Kirkuk administration to work according to the Bremer Law, according to which "only the Provincial Council is authorized to remove or appoint a gover-

nor," he stated.

The Iraqi parliament voted in September to remove Karim from his post after the governor was a vocal supporter of Kurdistan – flying the Kurdistan flag in the disputed province and promoting the independence referendum.

Karim appealed the parliament's decision in the Federal Court, which dismissed the case on Tuesday, saying the matter is administrative, not legislative.

"The court rejected Najmaldin Karim's appeal and stressed that the decision was administrative not legislative, therefore the Iraqi Federal Court cannot review it," court spokesperson Ayas Samok said in an announcement.

After the takeover of Kirkuk by Iraqi forces, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi replaced Karim with an Arab, Rakan al-Jabouri.

Karim's removal was also approved by Fuad Masum, president of Iraq. Masum and Karim are both members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) politburo.



Najmaldin Karim, former Kirkuk govenror and member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) politburo speaking to Rudaw TV. Photo: Rudaw

"I do not know why he [Masum] was so eager to sign it. You know what, even if the president does not sign anything, the ruling is still issued without him," Karim said.

Iraq's presidency is largely a ceremonial role.

Karim added that his party, PUK, did not support his removal.

Karim also spoke of his longtime party member and friend Kosrat Rasul Ali. The top PUK leader was hospitalized this week in Sulaimani before flying to Germany for medical treatment.

"I went to Sulaimani to check up on his health a day after he underwent surgery. It was true he was unable to speak, but the day after he

was quite better and able to speak and became more conscious," said Karim, a medical doctor himself.

He praised the care team supervising Rasul saying "they did an excellent job to improve the health of Rasul."

Rasul, 64, became the party's acting head after the death of PUK founder Jalal Talabani on October 3. A day before his illness, Rasul attended a memorial for Talabani in Sulaimani.

He was Vice President of the Kurdistan Region until late October. ■

Le Kurdistan accepte l'interdiction juridique de proclamer son indépendance

Par Oriane VERDIER 14/11/2017
<http://www.france24.com>

Le gouvernement régional du Kurdistan irakien a annoncé, mardi, qu'il respectera la décision de la justice fédérale irakienne sur l'unité de l'Irak et l'interdiction de la sécession de la région autonome.

Un peu moins de deux mois après le référendum sur l'indépendance du Kurdistan, le gouvernement régional du Kurdistan irakien (GRK) a annoncé, mardi 14 novembre, qu'il respecterait la décision de la justice fédérale irakienne interdisant la sécession de la région autonome.

"Nous avons toujours insisté sur la recherche de solutions aux conflits entre les autorités fédérales et la région du Kurdistan par des moyens constitutionnels et légaux, et sur notre position connue qui accueille toutes les initiatives pertinentes (...), en ce qui concerne le règlement des différends sur la base de la Constitution, nous respectons l'interprétation de la Cour suprême fédérale du premier article de la Constitution irakienne", déclare le GRK dans un communiqué.

Et d'ajouter : "Nous pensons que cette déci-

sion doit devenir le point de départ d'un dialogue national ouvert entre Erbil et Bagdad pour résoudre tous les différends."

DEUX MOIS DE TENSIONS

La Cour fédérale suprême a estimé, le 6 novembre dernier, qu'aucune région ou province ne pouvait faire sécession. Elle avait été saisie par le gouvernement central qui lui demandait de mettre fin à une "interprétation erronée" de la Constitution et de réaffirmer l'unité de l'Irak.

"Il s'agit d'un rétropédalage annoncé, précise Oriane Verdier, correspondante de France 24 à Erbil. Aujourd'hui, le gouvernement kurde reconnaît la décision de la justice fédérale, et c'est une manière pour lui de rappeler que cette même Constitution demande l'organisation d'un référendum pour savoir quelle autorité sera en charge de la ville disputée de Kirkouk".

Le 25 septembre dernier, le leader kurde Massoud Barzani avait organisé un référendum d'indépendance. Ce vote avait déclenché une crise sans précédent entre Erbil et Bagdad.

Aussitôt après les résultats, le gouvernement central irakien avait envoyé ses troupes reprendre le contrôle de toutes les



Le Premier ministre du Kurdistan irakien, Nechirvan Barzani, lors d'une conférence de presse le 13 novembre 2017 à Erbil.
 © Safin Hamed, AFP

zones situées hors de la région autonome, comme Kirkouk, et dont les combattants kurdes avaient pris le contrôle depuis 2003. En quelques jours, la quasi-totalité de ces territoires sont repassés aux mains de Bagdad. ♦

Avec Reuters et AFP

Un attentat dans un marché fait 32 morts en Irak

Par Murtada Faraj The Associated Press 21 novembre 2017

BAGDAD — Un kamikaze a fait détoner son camion bourré d'explosifs en Irak, mardi soir, tuant 32 personnes dans une ville revendiquée par le gouvernement central à Bagdad et les autorités de la région kurde.

La puissante explosion survenue à Touz Khormatou a également blessé au moins 80 personnes. Au moins six membres des forces de sécurité de l'Irak sont parmi les victimes, selon ce qu'ont rapporté la police et les responsables des hôpitaux à l'Associated Press.

La ville — revendiquée tant par les Irakiens que par les Kurdes — est située à environ 210 kilomètres au nord de Bagdad et abrite une population diversifiée de Kurdes, d'Arabes sunnites et de

Turkmènes chiïtes.

Mais depuis le départ de Saddam Hussein, Touz Khormatou a été le théâtre de plusieurs violences sectaires qui se sont aggravées depuis le vote sur l'indépendance des Kurdes en septembre.

Personne n'a revendiqué la responsabilité de l'attaque de mardi dans l'immédiat.

Lorsque les forces irakiennes ont repris le contrôle de Touz Khormatou, de Kirkouk — une autre ville contestée — et d'autres territoires contestés en octobre après le référendum controversé des Kurdes, Amnistie internationale avait fait état d'attaques à l'aveugle, d'émeutes et d'incendies criminels dans la ville.

En avril 2016, des conflits ont éclaté entre les combattants kurdes et les

unités majoritairement chiïtes d'Hachd al-Chaabi qui étaient responsables de sécuriser la ville après qu'elle eut été reprise des mains de Daech (le groupe armé État islamique). Les forces kurdes et les troupes irakiennes — avec les milices chiïtes — étaient des alliées dans le combat contre Daech.

Les combattants chiïtes ont accusé les Kurdes d'avoir détruit des maisons appartenant aux Turkmènes chiïtes. À leur tour, les militaires kurdes ont accusé les chiïtes d'avoir détenu arbitrairement des Arabes sunnites.

La région kurde et Bagdad sont en ce moment dans l'impasse après la tenue du référendum sur l'indépendance des Kurdes. Le premier ministre irakien



Haider al-Abadi a qualifié le scrutin d'inconstitutionnel et a fermé l'espace aérien dans la région kurde, en plus d'avoir repris le contrôle des territoires contestés.

Le conflit a forcé Masoud Barzani, le président de la région kurde, à remettre sa démission.

Les Kurdes demandent à Bagdad de reprendre le dialogue pour résoudre le conflit, mais le premier ministre refuse de discuter tant que le référendum de septembre ne sera pas annulé. ♦

Séisme meurtrier à la frontière Iran-Irak

— Le tremblement de terre qui a frappé dimanche soir les régions frontalières entre l'Irak et l'Irak, peuplées en majorité de Kurdes, a fait au moins 415 victimes.

Façades arrachées, immeubles aplatis... Les images de destruction à Sarpol-e Zahab (Iran) évoquent les ravages de la guerre. Diffusées par l'Agence de presse des étudiants iraniens (Iranian Students' News Agency, Isna), elles témoignent de la violence du séisme qui a secoué dimanche en début de soirée cette région frontalière entre l'Irak et l'Irak. Le bilan est très lourd côté iranien où, lundi matin, on recensait au moins 407 victimes et 6 000 blessés, selon la cellule de crise mise en place par le gouvernement. Côté irakien, le gouvernement régional du Kurdistan d'Irak annonçait pour sa part 8 morts et plus de 500 blessés.



Les images de Sarpol-e Zahab, en Iran, montrent une ville dévastée par la secousse de 7,2 sur l'échelle de Richter. Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA/maxppp

À 500 km à l'ouest de Téhéran, ces zones montagneuses du Kermanshah sont particulièrement isolées.

L'épicentre se trouvait pratiquement sur la frontière entre les deux pays, à 32 km au sud-ouest de la ville kurde de Halabja (Irak). D'une vingtaine de secondes, la secousse de 7,2 sur l'échelle de Richter, selon l'Institut d'études géologiques des États-Unis, a été ressentie jusqu'en Turquie et en Israël. Selon le Programme alimentaire mondial, 450 000 personnes habitent à moins de 50 km de l'épicentre. La province iranienne de Kermanshah est la plus touchée, surtout les villes de Sarpol-e Zahab, d'Azgaleh et de Qasr-e Shirin. Les photographies de Sarpol-e Zahab montrent des tours d'habitation éventrées,

des rues bordées d'habitations effondrées, des civils jetés dans les rues dans la nuit glaciale, tandis que les premiers secours fouillent les décombres.



À 500 km à l'ouest de Téhéran, ces zones montagneuses du Kermanshah sont particulièrement isolées. Il va être « difficile d'envoyer des équipes de secours dans (certains) villages car les routes ont été coupées (à cause de) glissements de terrain », s'est alarmé Pir Hossein Koolivand, le chef du Service national d'urgence iranien, interrogé par la télévision d'État.

Dans ses condoléances, l'ayatollah Ali Khamenei, guide suprême de la République islamique d'Irak, a pressé les agences de l'État d'« aider les blessés, surtout ceux pris au piège sous les décombres ». Précédée lundi par une délégation menée par le ministre de l'intérieur, une visite du président iranien Hassan

Rohani dans les régions dévastées est attendue aujourd'hui, selon l'agence Associated Press.

Pour Abdulahhi Khosrow, représentant en France du Parti démocratique du Kurdistan d'Irak

(PDKI), mouvement indépendantiste, les autorités iraniennes ont surtout peur que la catastrophe augmente le mécontentement de la population kurde de cette province : « C'est l'une des régions les plus pauvres d'Irak. Les gens survivent grâce aux colporteurs qui commercent avec le Kurdistan irakien. Le soir du référendum kurde en Irak, le 25 septembre, des foules en liesse sont descendues dans les rues. Des centaines de personnes ont été arrêtées. »

Cette catastrophe tombe après un mois et demi de crise entre le gouvernement central irakien et sa région autonome du Kurdistan, qui a organisé un référendum d'indépendance malgré l'opposition farouche de l'État central et de ses voisins. L'épicentre se trouve à

l'extrémité sud-est des territoires contrôlés par les Kurdes d'Irak, dans la région de Halabja, ville symbole de la répression du ré-

gime de Saddam Hussein – 5 000 civils kurdes y avaient été tués en 1988 par un bombardement au gaz. Paradoxalement, cette région a peu voté en faveur du référendum le 25 septembre.

Bien que les négociations entre Erbil et Bagdad soient à l'arrêt depuis le 29 octobre, le premier ministre irakien, Haïdar Al Abadi, a promis hier l'aide du gouvernement central : « J'ai donné l'ordre aux équipes de la défense civile et des agences humanitaires et de santé de faire tout leur possible pour fournir leur assistance à nos citoyens », a-t-il déclaré sur les réseaux sociaux. La Turquie, qui s'est ligüée avec l'Irak contre le référendum, a envoyé un avion d'aide médicale et humanitaire, qui a atterri à l'aéroport de Souleymaniyé – pourtant fermé aux vols internationaux, suite au référendum. L'occasion d'une détente régionale sur le dossier kurde ?

Jérémy André

Le référendum sur l'indépendance du Kurdistan irakien: quels lendemains?

Gholam-Hossin Vakilzadeh
Mercredi 15 novembre 2017
<https://www.lecourrier.ch>

Après le vote massif des Kurdes irakiens pour leur indépendance, l'Irak et l'Irak ont organisé courant octobre des opérations militaires communes pour reprendre aux peshmergas kurdes les territoires disputés par Bagdad. Dans l'analyse qu'il propose de cette crise, GHOLAM-HOSSIN VAKILZADEH s'intéresse plus particulièrement aux enjeux politiques liés à la présence iranienne.

Après la guerre du Koweït en 1991, le Kurdistan irakien est devenu dans les faits une région autonome soutenue par les États-Unis, notamment grâce à l'instauration d'une zone d'interdiction de vol («no-fly zone») imposée par les Américains dans son espace aérien. Cette région était ainsi la seule partie du territoire irakien à pouvoir bénéficier d'une démocratie relative. En 1991, le Kurdistan se composait de trois provinces – Erbil, Suleimaniyeh et Dohouk – pour une surface totale de 40 000 km². Cette même partie de l'Irak est reconnue comme « région autonome » dans la Constitution irakienne de 1970. Après la chute de l'ancien régime irakien en 2003, ces trois provinces ont été reconnues comme Gouvernement régional du Kurdistan (GRK).

L'EXTENSION DES FRONTIÈRES DU KURDISTAN

Depuis 2003, notamment après l'occupation de larges portions du territoire irakien par l'Organisation de l'État islamique (EI/Daech) et la participation active des forces du GRK aux opérations militaires visant à repousser les forces de Daech, les territoires sous le contrôle du GRK se sont rapidement élargis. La grande ville de Kirkouk, ainsi que nombre d'autres villes qui ne font pas partie du territoire du GRK, selon la nouvelle Constitution irakienne, mais où de larges commu-



Référendum au Kurdistan irakien : le «oui» à l'indépendance l'emporte avec plus 92%

nautés kurdes vivent, sont ainsi tombées sous l'autorité de facto du GRK. Ainsi, ce dernier avait inclus, au cours de ces dernières années, des villes comme Kirkouk, Khanaqin... sous son autorité, élargissant ainsi la surface de cette région. Pendant ces années, on estimait le nombre de peshmergas (combattants) et d'autres forces armées du GRK entre 300 000 à 400 000, selon les sources. De plus, les champs pétrolifères du nord de l'Irak, notamment près de Kirkouk, étaient contrôlés par le GRK.

LA SITUATION DE KIRKOUK ET LES TERRITOIRES SUJETS DE DISCORDE

Le contrôle de Kirkouk a été, depuis longtemps, un sujet de discorde, les Kurdes considérant la ville kurde, les Arabes comme une ville arabe. Les résultats du référendum du 25 septembre 2017 montrent que la population de Kirkouk compte une majorité kurde. L'article 140 de la Constitution irakienne de 2005 précise que le gouvernement central devait fixer, avant fin 2007, le sort de Kirkouk et d'autres territoires dont la souveraineté est contestée, en organisant des référendums au cours desquels les populations locales se prononceraient. Mais le gouvernement de Bagdad a refusé, à ce jour, d'organiser de tels référendums.

POURQUOI LE RÉFÉRENDUM DU 25 SEPTEMBRE?

En 2017, alors que la guerre contre Daech touchait à sa fin en Irak, le GRK, craignant que le gouvernement de Bagdad, débarrassé de la menace que représentait Daech, ne tente de rétablir au nord du pays le

statu quo ante 2003 – voire pire concernant l'avenir du Kurdistan –, a décidé d'organiser le référendum du 25 septembre 2017 afin de faire reconnaître la nouvelle situation. A savoir: l'indépendance totale du Kurdistan, ses nouvelles frontières géographiques, sa propre armée nationale, ainsi que la reconnaissance de la souveraineté du GRK sur les territoires contestés. En dépit de l'opposition de toutes les parties – tous les pays voisins (Turquie, Iran et Syrie), États-Unis, Europe et ensemble des pays arabes – le GRK a tenu ce référendum à la date prévue. Certains analystes estiment que le mandat de Massoud Barzani à la tête du GRK touchant à sa fin, celui-ci a voulu réaliser son rêve d'un Kurdistan indépendant pour lequel il avait combattu pendant des décennies.

Le référendum du 25 septembre était extrêmement agaçant pour Bagdad, mais surtout très dangereux pour la Turquie et, tout particulièrement, pour le régime iranien. La répression des Kurdes sunnites et des Kurdes en général au Kurdistan irakien a toujours fait partie du bilan sanglant de la République islamique d'Iran dès son avènement, il y a 38 ans. La velléité d'indépendance du GRK pouvait donc réveiller les aspirations à la liberté de la population kurde iranienne; cela alors que Téhéran est sous une pression sans précédent sur la scène internationale de la part des Américains et des Européens, en raison notamment de son expansionnisme régional.

LE SIÈGE DU KURDISTAN ET L'OFFENSIVE DES MILICIENS HACHD AL-CHAABI CONTRE KIRKOUK

Avec un taux de participation de 72% et la victoire du «oui» à l'indépendance, exprimé par plus de 92% des votants, la tenue du référendum du 25 septembre a envoyé une onde de choc vers toutes les parties concernées. D'un côté, ce résultat a été révélateur du soutien massif du peuple kurde irakien à l'indépendance de ses territoires et, de l'autre, il a contribué à l'exacerbation des hostilités à l'égard du GRK. Ghassem Soleimani, chef de la force al-Qods, l'unité d'élite des Gardiens de la révolution islamique (CGRI/Pasdarans) en Iran, a été dépêché à Bagdad et à Suleimaniyeh. Sa présence à Suleimaniyeh pour rendre hommage à Djalal Talabani, ancien président kurde de l'Irak décédé récemment, mais aussi ancien chef de l'UPK (Union patriotique du Kurdistan) rivale de la formation de Barzani, le PDK (Parti démocratique du Kurdistan), a eu des conséquences d'une ampleur dramatique, dans la mesure où la coordination, effectuée par ce chef notoire, des pasdarans iraniens avec une partie importante de l'armée nationale irakienne et une partie des peshmergas kurdes, a remis sérieusement en question le résultat du référendum qui perdait sa «raison d'être».

C'était ainsi que les forces irakiennes, les milices chiites irakiennes Hachd al-Chaabi et des pasdarans venus d'Iran ont pu entrer dans la province de Kirkouk sans affrontement militaire sérieux, à la suite des trahisons de forces kurdes en poste à Kirkouk, le tout sous l'œil de Ghassem Soleimani. Ces forces ont également occupé de nombreux territoires en dehors des trois provinces principales kurdes, avec parfois des violences contre les peshmergas, mais aussi contre les populations civiles. Les miliciens Hachd al-Chaabi sur lesquelles Soleimani s'appuyait beaucoup pour faire avancer la stratégie de Téhéran, ont tenu le rôle principal dans ces opérations.

Selon une enquête de Radio France Internationale (RFI), les forces Hachd al-Chaabi sont entièrement financées et armées par Téhéran. L'AFP estime leur nombre entre 60 000 à 110 000. L'agence de presse Fars, affiliée au CGRI, considère pour sa part que «l'échec du complot sioniste de la partition de ➤»

⇒ L'Irak a été rendu possible avant tout en raison du ralliement d'une partie importante des forces politiques et des peshmergas kurdes à l'autorité de Bagdad et aux forces conjointes du gouvernement central, dont les Hachd al-Chaabi et les forces de l'organisation Badr». L'organisation (anciennement Brigades Badr) est une milice irakienne constituée par les pasdaran sous l'ancien régime. Son commandant Hadi Al-Ameri est l'actuel chef de l'ensemble des milices réunies dans la coalition Hachd al-Chaabi, censée être contrôlée par le gouvernement irakien. En réalité, cette milice irakienne est sous commandement iranien. Al-Ameri a la double nationalité iranienne et irakienne.

Certains rapports relèvent que les membres de milices Hachd al-Chaabi ont commis de nombreuses exactions après leur entrée dans les territoires occupés du Kurdistan irakien. Des organisations de défense des droits de l'homme ont déclaré, jeudi 2 novembre, que plus de 180 000 citoyens civils, majoritairement kurdes, sont actuellement victimes de déplacements forcés à la suite des affrontements entre le gouvernement central et la région kurde du nord (Reuters, 2 novembre 2017). Selon le site «Kurdistan 24», des membres de Hachd al-Chaabi auraient assassiné, le 29 octobre, un journaliste-photographe de la chaîne Kurdistan TV dans le village Hafteh-Ghazi près de la ville de Dahough dans la province de Kirkouk. Ces milices sont également accusées d'avoir commis de nombreuses exactions contre les citoyens kurdes, pillant et incendiant des centaines de maisons dans plusieurs localités occupées le 15 octobre dernier.

Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandes, le commandant-adjoint de Hachd al-Chaabi, affirme: «Je suis fier d'être un soldat sous le commandement du général Ghassem Soleimani (site K 24-Erbil). Al-Mohandes est pourtant recherché par les forces irakiennes pour tentatives d'attentat contre l'ambassade des États-Unis au Ko-weït. Il figure également parmi les commandants de la force Qods des pasdaran.

Avec les Hachd al-Chaabi et les forces irakiennes s'approchant des frontières du GRK, les combats, c'est-à-dire la résistance des peshmergas, ont gagné d'intensité. Au cours de ces derniers jours, des affrontements violents ont été rapportés du triangle frontalier turco-irako-syrien.

LA NOUVELLE POSITION DU GRK

Après le retrait de ses forces, le GRK a déclaré la suspension des

résultats du référendum, appelant aux négociations avec Bagdad dans le cadre de la Constitution irakienne. Ce recul a été salué par les États-Unis et implicitement par le Conseil de Sécurité de l'ONU. Téhéran en a profité pour réclamer plus: «Même si la reculade de Barzani après d'un 'référendum' déjà tenu et sa résignation aux négociations (!) ne sont en soi guère suffisantes, il n'en demeure pas moins une avancée importante et significative... pour laquelle il faut saluer le rôle central joué par le général Soleimani», souligne le quotidien iranien Kayhan, proche du «Guide suprême» Ali Khamenei (25 octobre 2017). Bagdad a également déclaré que la «sus-pension» des résultats du référendum n'était pas suffisante et que ceux-ci devraient être «annulés».

Les États-Unis et la France ont cependant demandé à Bagdad d'accepter l'offre de dialogue d'Erbil. Dans un changement de position, le premier ministre irakien, Heidar Ebadî, a affirmé le 27 octobre avoir donné aux forces irakiennes l'ordre de stopper leur progression pendant 24 heures pour pouvoir négocier avec le GRK le positionnement de ces forces. Ces négociations auraient été entamées le 28 octobre à Mossoul.

L'AVENIR DU KURDISTAN IRAKIEN

Trois éléments seront sans doute déterminants dans les développements à venir:

> Négociations avec le gouvernement de Bagdad

Il en va de soi que la situation du GRK, par rapport à celle dont il jouissait avant les événements de septembre et octobre, s'est nettement affaiblie. C'est pourquoi, lors des négociations entre les deux parties, on peut s'attendre à un énorme règlement de comptes de la part de Bagdad, sous l'influence du régime de Téhéran et du CGRI qui entendent faire avancer leurs propres projets, avec le GRK, et la personne de Massoud Barzani.

Après le référendum kurde, Ali Akbar Velayati, ancien ministre des Affaires étrangères de Téhéran et actuel conseiller de Khamenei, avait dit que Barzani était sur le point de chuter, et que les Kurdes eux-mêmes allaient à coup sûr le renverser avant même que le gouvernement central ne le fasse.

> Les divisions internes du Kurdistan

Dans les jours qui ont suivi le siège du Kurdistan, les pressions diverses



Les forces irakiennes avancent vers le centre de Kirkouk, le 16 octobre 2017 AHMAD AL-RUBAYE / AFP

des régimes iranien, truc et irakien et l'occupation de territoires par les pasdaran et les Hachd al-Chaabi, certaines factions kurdes ont commencé à collaborer avec Téhéran en tournant le dos au GRK et à Massoud Barzani. Il y a même eu des tentatives pour diviser le Kurdistan irakien en deux régions distinctes, la région de Suleimaniyeh et Halabja dans le sud, et la région d'Erbil et Dohouk dans le nord. Ainsi, la partition du Kurdistan aurait eu pour conséquence la diminution du pouvoir du GRK, maintenu depuis 1991, et la marginalisation du Parti démocrate kurde (PDK).

Par souci d'éviter l'effusion de sang et une attaque contre la région sous son contrôle, Massoud Barzani a décidé de s'écarter de la présidence du GRK, refusant que son mandat soit prolongé jusqu'à la prochaine élection présidentielle qui devait avoir lieu dans huit mois. Il a transféré ses prérogatives au parlement et au premier ministre Netchirvan Barzani qui lui succédera probablement à l'issue de la prochaine élection. Selon les observateurs, cette initiative clairvoyante a ajouté à son estime auprès de la population. Mais il faudrait les pressions américaines et européennes sur le gouvernement central pour éviter une autre tragédie au peuple kurde.

> La politique américaine dans la région

Toutefois, l'intervention de Téhéran et des Hachd al-Chaabi au Kurdistan irakien ravive la confrontation géopolitique des États-Unis avec le régime iranien dans la région. Cette situation contribue à réactiver la même contradiction qui avait conduit à l'élaboration de la nouvelle stratégie de Washington vis-à-vis de l'Iran – inscription du CGRI sur la liste noire américaine comme entité terroriste et sanctions prises à son encontre. Le Secrétaire d'État Rex Tillerson avait demandé, lors de son entretien récent avec le premier ministre irakien, l'intégration des miliciens chiites aux ordres de

Téhéran dans l'armée régulière irakienne pour que celle-ci soit libérée de l'emprise du régime iranien.

Même si la théocratie iranienne est considérée tactiquement comme le vainqueur principal de la crise du Kurdistan irakien, renforçant par-là son influence en Irak et au Kurdistan et portant un coup dur au parti indépendantiste kurde – obstacle majeur sur le chemin de son projet expansionniste –, la République islamique pourrait finir, d'un point de vue stratégique, le principal perdant de cette crise. Car l'exacerbation de la confrontation avec Washington entraînera une nouvelle configuration au Kurdistan. Les forces de Massoud Barzani et d'autres factions kurdes qui s'étaient gardées de réactiver leurs points de discorde avec Téhéran, vont s'employer à créer un front hostile au régime du Guide suprême jusque-là inexistant.

Par ailleurs, les États-Unis et la France ne pourront plus se contenter du rôle d'observateurs des avancées de la République islamique dans la région. La situation intérieure de l'Iran ne peut, non plus, être ignorée: ces activités extraterritoriales sont très mal vues par la population iranienne en prise à des crises financières. Le Kurdistan iranien, sous une chape de plomb, est une poudrière. La population de cette région souffre énormément depuis plus de trois décennies d'une répression brutale, religieuse et ethnique, de la part de Téhéran. Et les mécontentements envers le pouvoir des mollahs se généralisent un peu partout en Iran, y compris à Téhéran. Les autorités iraniennes sont de plus en plus préoccupées par une population exaspérée qui risque de ne plus être contrôlable. ●

* Citoyen suisse d'origine iranienne résidant à Neuchâtel, Gholam-Hossin Vakilzadeh est né dans la ville de Chiraz. Militant contre les excès du régime iranien, il est membre de l'Association des experts iraniens en Suisse.

Iran, Turkey have own plans for Iraq's strategic Sinjar

The Islamic State has been largely driven out of Iraq, but Turkey and Iran both remain intensely interested in certain areas.



Mahmut Bozarslan
November 15, 2017
www.al-monitor.com

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey — Sinjar, Iraq, is shaping up to be the essential gem in someone's crown, but there are several contenders. Turkey, Iran and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) are all vying for control of the strategic area — all for different reasons.

Turkey is working to make good on its threat to demolish PKK strongholds in Iraq by continuing to bombard the group's positions. Though such operations have been ongoing for years, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stepped up the rhetoric earlier this month, vowing, "If the authorities there don't solve the problems of Qandil and Sinjar and if [Iraq] does not undertake what is to be done, then we will raze those places to the ground."

He has followed up the threats with a series of air raids. The pro-government Daily Sabah reported Turkish forces killed 96 PKK fighters in the mountains of Qandil and Zap and destroyed or seized caches of PKK explosives. Turkey, the United States and the European Union consider the group to be a terrorist organization.

The PKK's main headquarters is in the Qandil Mountains in northeast Iraq near the Iran border. Sinjar — known to the Kurds as Shengal — is home to the Yazidis, a Kurdish religious minority, and is in northwest Iraq near the Syria border. Erdogan is interested because when the PKK came to the region in 2014, it refused to leave despite strong reactions from Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. This eventually made Sinjar a prime target for Turkey.

When Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which are supported by Iran, showed up at Sinjar five months ago and began taking over control of villages from Yazidi forces known as the Sinjar Resistance Units, it became clear that Iran was interested in the area.

The PMU also became the driving force of the Iraqi army's operation last month to recover Kirkuk from the KRG. Kurds said there were Iranian soldiers in the predominately Shiite PMU who, after helping to take over Kirkuk, headed north to Sinjar.

Turkey's interest in Sinjar because of the PKK presence was understandable, but why was Iran, which had no religious or ethnic ties to Sinjar, suddenly so interested?

In 1991 during the first Gulf War, Iraq under Saddam Hussein had fired Scud ballistic missiles into Israel from Mount Sinjar. Some people are wondering if that's what Iran has in mind now.

Others, such as Mehmet Alkis, a doctoral student at Marmara University who closely monitors the Middle East and Iraqi Kurdistan, said Iran is also seeking to realize its dream of a Shiite crescent.

"Strategically and politically, Iran wants access to the Mediterranean. That's the best way to export its oil and gas. It is also true that it wants to secure itself against Israel. Iran wants to control a line from Sulaimaniyah, Kirkuk, [Sinjar] [all in Iraq], Rojava [northern Syria], Deir ez-Zor [Syria], Damascus and Lebanon that will be both its strategic corridor and the base of the Shiite crescent. [Sinjar] is right between Iraq and Syria," Alkis told Al-Monitor. "This is a vital connection for Iran that will also enable it to sever the links between the Kurds."

Iranian control of Sinjar could be considered a threat to some, but Tehran is building strength to act as a deterrent force and isn't likely to engage in a direct war easily, according to Alkis.

Alakis attributes Turkey's keen interest in Sinjar to the roles of both the PKK and Iran. "Turkey doesn't want Sinjar to become a new Qandil to be used by the PKK [as a stronghold]. Turkey will not allow a Kurdish corridor to emerge, even if it is controlled by Iran, which could also be a threat against Turkey. Turkey's goal is to sever the Kurdish links or control the area itself."

Alkis said he doesn't know if Turkey could manage to control the area or whether it has developed such a plan. But he does know Turkey doesn't



Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shaabi fighters in Kurdistan's Sinjar region. Photo: File..

want Iran in the area any more than Erdogan wants the PKK there.

Mohammad Keyani, who was a deputy of the Kurdish Gorran movement in the Iraqi parliament from 2010 to 2014, is among those who see a potential Iranian angle. "Turkey and Iran are [vying for] Sinjar. For Iran, [Sinjar] is the key to an Iran-Syria connection via Iraq. If Iran can control [Sinjar], it will have easy access to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Also, don't forget there are Sunni areas in [Sinjar]. To keep Sunnis under observation is important for Iran."

He added, "Syria believes that if Sunnis become stronger and Turkey continues supporting them, it could create trouble for Iran. To sever the ties between Sunnis in Iraq and those in Syria, border control is essential for Iran. As for the KRG, to control the Kurdish movements, especially the Syrian Kurds, Iran has to control [Sinjar]. The United States is sending weapons to Kurds via the Semalke crossing of [Sinjar]."

Keyani believes Turkey has additional reasons to be concerned with Sinjar: "First, it is close to the Syrian border. Syrian Kurds are now controlling a large territory. Turkey wants to end this. It doesn't want a [situation] similar to Iraq to emerge. Second, [Sinjar] is close to Tal Afar, where Turkmens live. Turkey still has historical interest, even ambitions, in Ninevah province. If it can't physically control it, it will want to have a proxy" to do it, such as the Barzani family or former Ninevah Gov. Atheel al-Nujaifi, who is now commander of the Turkish-backed Ninevah Guard Sunni militia. "If you ask me, Barzani will regain his status with Turkey by preventing the other Kurds from gaining prominence."

Keyani said that in the short run it won't be possible for Iran to threaten Israel with missiles from Mount Sinjar. "It will not be easy to deploy those missiles, to bring them over. [However], a threat that can materialize in Iraq is a total takeover by Iran. But the United States will not allow that. That's why the United States opposed the [Kurdish independence] referendum. Americans wanted a strong Kurdish region that will have a strong influence on the central government. The United States didn't want Iraq to fall under [Iran's control], but sadly the Kurds didn't understand it," he added.

Iran and Turkey, which had differences over Syria's civil war, found themselves on the same front when the issue became a Kurdish one. Yet these two countries, which have been competing for hundreds of years, can't agree to stay on the same line of action forever, even when the issue is the Kurds. At the end of the day, they will confront each other at Sinjar, if not militarily, then politically. Turkey, Iran or the PKK — whoever controls Sinjar — will have an indisputable advantage in Iraq and Syria. The domination of Sinjar will be vitally important to the future of the region's Kurds. ♦

Mahmut Bozarslan is based in Diyarbakir, the central city of Turkey's mainly Kurdish southeast. A journalist since 1996, he has worked for the mass-circulation daily Sabah, the NTV news channel, Al Jazeera Turk and Agence France-Presse (AFP), covering the many aspects of the Kurdish question, as well as the local economy and women's and refugee issues. He has frequently reported also from Iraqi Kurdistan. On Twitter: @mahmutbozarslan



Budget Politics and Baghdad-Kurdish Relations

By Harith Hasan al-Qarawee / November 16, 2017
<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org>

One of the main disputes behind tensions between the Iraqi federal government and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) includes disagreement over budget allocation. This month, the Iraqi government approved the proposed budget for 2018 and sent it to the parliament for debate in the coming weeks. The draft budget, strongly criticized by the KRG, is the latest episode in the contention between Baghdad's vision of a strong center and KRG's preference of strong regions. It also highlights a fundamental problem: the actual meaning of Iraqi federalism, which still lacks a clear institutional framework.

In the last five years, the KRG used economic policy to further its strategy of securing more autonomy from Iraq, even by increasing the region's dependency on Turkey. The strategy worked so long as the KRG could expand its control over oil fields and widen its economic relations with foreign countries and companies, largely encouraged by high expectations over Kurdistan's oil reserves and, since 2014, the sustainability of KRG's control over Kirkuk's oil fields. Now, by reclaiming those very oil fields, the federal government forces the KRG to choose between two difficult options: either continue relying on its shrinking and insufficient resources, or undo a great deal of its constitutionally dubious economic autonomy and accept more supervision and intervention from the federal government.

The proposed 2018 budget reduces the KRG's share from 17 percent to 12.67 percent. KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani described it as the worst budget proposal, urging Baghdad to restore the previous share agreed upon with the Iraqi interim government in 2004. The disagreement began during former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's second term. Intertwined with the discord over managing oil resources and disputed territories, the budget clash was exacerbated by conflicting interpretations of the constitution regarding oil exports and revenue management. At the time, PM Haider al-Abadi headed parliament's financial committee and took the side of Iraqi government, arguing that the KRG claimed more than its fair share of the state budget if allocated based on demographic percentage. The problem, of course, is that Iraq has not conducted a census since 1987. The KRG argues that the 17 percent must continue until a new census takes place.

The proposed 2018 budget also demands that the KRG exports no less than 250,000 barrels of oil per day and hand over the revenue to the federal Ministry of Oil. In other words, Baghdad is directly challenging the KRG's autonomous oil policy and attempting to impose federal authority, at least when it comes to the management of oil exports and its revenue. With no specifications regarding the contracts already signed and debt obligations between the KRG and international oil companies, it is difficult to envision a smooth implementation of this item. Baghdad and Erbil will need to negotiate these details before the parliament votes on it. Without clarity on such minutiae, it will plant the seeds of future tension and obstruct budget implementation.

The draft budget also implicitly discredits the KRG by using the term "Kurdistan region governorates" in a way that implies plurality of Kurdish actors. The change in language sparked outrage from the KRG's Council of Ministers and PM Barzani accused the federal government of aiming to abolish the KRG as a constitutional entity. Although the budget's text does not mention it explicitly, Baghdad seems willing to deal directly with governorates if the KRG does not cooperate. Abadi previously rejected calls to divide the Kurdistan region, but he also argues that the KRG, controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), violates the constitution and challenges federal authority. By directly dealing with the KDP's main rivals—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Goran movement, both of whom share influence in Sulaimaniya—Abadi could further delegitimize the KRG



Photo: An Iraqi flag is seen on a military vehicle at an oil field in Dibis area on the outskirts of Kirkuk following the Iraqi government takeover of the province from Kurdish control. Photo taken October 17, 2017. Taken by Alaa Al-Marjani.

and undermine the KDP.

While Kurdish parties reject any policy aiming to delegitimize the status of Kurdistan as a unified federal region, they have also proved willing to strike separate deals with Baghdad when required. The obvious example was the PUK-Baghdad deal which facilitated the redeployment of federal forces in Kirkuk. More recently, however, the PUK and Goran also came to a separate deal—excluding the KDP—with Iraqi parties over the formation of the Independent High Electoral Commission's board members. The deal provided each Kurdish party with a representative on the nine-member board, depriving KDP from having its own affiliate on the electoral commission. Despite complaints of disunity, the PUK and Goran may argue that they have simply followed the KDP's example when it unilaterally controlled the region's policy.

Some unconfirmed reports claim that Baghdad made any future negotiation—about key issues such as budgets, autonomy, and the nature of Baghdad-KRG relations—conditional on engagement with a KRG delegation that includes all major Kurdish factions. Whether true or not, it seems that Baghdad shares a common interest with the PUK and Goran in reducing the KDP's influence in the region and at the federal level. This policy appears to capitalize on a weakened Masoud Barzani and his son, Masrur, who are blamed for the ill-fated referendum and increasing authoritarianism in Erbil. Nonetheless, these expedient alliances will likely change in Iraq's fluid political context where ideological leanings fall secondary to familial and patrimonial considerations. It would not be surprising if the KDP, internally divided and increasingly isolated, focused on consolidating its power in its traditional strongholds in Duhok and Erbil, rather than championing the cause of Kurdish independence. In fact, the attacks at the PUK's and Goran's offices in some KDP-controlled areas after Masoud Barzani's announcement that he is stepping aside as a president suggest a growing intolerance among Kurdish parties that might intensify geographic segregation.

Lastly, the KRG welcomed Abadi's statement expressing his willingness to pay the salaries of the region's public servants, saying it would provide Baghdad with the required information about its employees. But again, the devil is in the details. The federal government has long suspected that Kurdish parties exaggerate their number of employees to award their loyalists, given that Kurdistan has more public employees per capita than Baghdad. Abadi demanded that his own auditors verify the lists provided by the KRG and floated placing a possible ceiling on the number of civil employees and peshmerga.

In this and other issues, Iraq's federal government has taken a more assertive posture, seizing the moment to gain more control and limit Kurdistan's autonomy. But this policy requires strategic vision that addresses the long-term relations between the KRG and the federal government and the scope, nature, and feasibility of federalism in Iraq. This conversation has yet to begin, but the longer it takes, the more likely short-term calculations and de facto politics will impose their own unpredictable realities. ●

Harith Hasan al-Qarawee is a senior non-resident fellow with the Rafik Hariri Center. Follow him on Twitter @harith_hasan

Piece by piece, Iran moves towards a 'new empire'

With much of the Arab world in decline after the revolutionary convulsions of the "Arab spring," the Tehran regime saw its chance to strike.

By Ed Blanche - BEIRUT - 2017-11-19
<http://www.middle-east-online.com>

Iran's takeover of Iraq's strategic city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields in a show of force underlined how Tehran is steadily expanding its power from the Arabian Gulf to the Mediterranean to create a modern-day version of its ancient empires.

At their height in 475BC, the Persians ruled over an estimated 44% of the world's population, more than any other empire in history.

The Iranians are turning Iraq, their long-time Arab foe delivered into their hands by US President George W. Bush's invasion of March 2003, into an Iranian satrapy.

This was a system of governance that was based on the loyalty and obedience of regional monarchs to the central power that was devised by Cyrus the Great, founder of the first great Persian empire in 530BC, which was ruled by the Achaemenid dynasty.

The Iranians' armed intervention, using the US-trained and -armed Iraqi Army supported by powerful Iranian proxy militias known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), to crush Kurdish moves towards independence emphasised Tehran's assiduous penetration of all levels of Iraqi society, particularly since 2003, as part of its ambitious strategy of dominating its Sunni Arab neighbours.

Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the elite al-Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the strategist behind the Iranian expansion, warned the Kurds not to have an independence referendum, which produced a clear majority in favour of a breakaway republic in northern Iraq.

The Kurdish leadership defied Soleimani and he could not let such audacity go unanswered. In several hours of fighting on October 16, the forces he controls overwhelmed the Kurds in Kirkuk.

"We appear to have witnessed a masterful exploitation" of long-time divisions within Iraq's Kurdish population, "a sudden and decisive turning of the screw... with hardly a shot fired," observed roving analyst Jonathan Spyer on October 18.

"This deal was only feasible because of smart investments that Iran made in the politics of both Shia Arabs and Iraqi Kurds during previous decades, plus the judicious mixing of political and military force, an art in which the Iranians excel.

"Indeed, Iran's influence in Iraq, both political and military, goes beyond the PMU" and the schism between the pro-Western Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Iran-aligned Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Spyer wrote in the American Interest.

"The fall of Kirkuk confirms the extent to which Iraq today is an Iran-controlled satrapy and it vividly demonstrates the currently unrivalled efficacy of the Iranian methods of revolutionary and political warfare, as practised by the IRGC throughout the Arab world," Spyer declared.

The Iranians' swift acquisition of Kirkuk underlined the sharp increase in Iranian operations across the region since the Tehran regime signed the July 2015 nuclear agreement with the United States and other global powers.

There does not seem to be any reason to believe that will slow down. On the contrary, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels fighting a Saudi-led Arab alliance in Yemen have begun firing ballistic missiles, supposedly supplied by Iran with crews trained by the IRGC, deep into Saudi Arabia.

That will escalate a messy war that began in March 2015 over the Arab world's poorest country and that could ignite the smouldering confrontation between the two Gulf titans into a full-scale conflict that could eclipse the other wars ravaging the region.

Iran's success in Iraq was clearly a critical setback for the Americans, who face the Iranian takeover of the northern tier of the Middle East and the



Iran's Army Chief of Staff Major-General Mohammad Bagheri

consolidation of Iran's emerging land bridge between Tehran and the eastern Mediterranean.

In war-ravaged Syria, the Iranians extended their control over that country's energy resources by driving the Islamic State (ISIS) out of much of Deir ez-Zor province in the north-east, where most of Syria's major oil and gas fields are located and which borders Iraq.

This area is a key link in the land bridge that Tehran has been assiduously establishing across Iraq to Syria to create a Shia-controlled corridor from the Arabian Gulf to the Mediterranean and Israel's northern border.

Iran stands to gain economically from its massive investment of troops and treasure in keeping Syrian President Bashar Assad in power and has amassed formidable investment in infrastructure that will keep Syria dependent for decades.

These imperial-style machinations mean that Iranian influence extends to Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Sana'a — approximately one-fifth of the Arab world.

Iran's efforts at extending its frontiers have invariably been helped by history, particularly when the Middle East is in turmoil — as it is today, arguably the worst turbulence since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the first world war — and it is able to manipulate internal divisions to its advantage.

For now, much of the fighting involves heavily armed proxies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Bahrain. The swelling confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, leader of Islam's dominant Sunni sect, is the most worrying flashpoint.

Their military face-off in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's southern neighbour which dominates the strategic Bab el Mandeb Strait, is steadily escalating, with Houthi rebels firing ballistic missiles into the kingdom in a power struggle that has engulfed other countries in the region.

Lebanon, a Saudi dependency and a sectarian minefield, was also gripped by alarm as the Iran-backed Hezbollah consolidated its military and political dominance and talk of war, possibly between Hezbollah and Israel, is on everyone's lips.

The island state of Bahrain in the Gulf, which has a Shia majority ruled by a heavy-handed Sunni monarchy, is another flashpoint.

Much of the turmoil convulsing the region is the consequence of the United States' ill-advised invasion of Iraq in March 2003 to get rid of Saddam Hussein and then, eight years later, withdrawing its troops, leaving the ancient land gripped by Iran-fuelled turmoil.

The Americans' bungled occupation and its bewildering failure to understand the Arab world sowed the seeds of Islamic jihadist power

in its fumbled attempt to impose Western democracy on the Middle East.

All this played into Tehran's hands. By ousting Saddam, Iraq's strongman since the 1970s and for decades the Arab bulwark against their ancient enemies, the Persians, the Americans allowed Iraq's long-downtrodden Shia majority to seize power.

That opened the way for Tehran to launch its long-held ambition to hold sway over the whole region, empowering Shia Islam after nearly 1,400 years of Sunni supremacy.

Iran had been working towards that end since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's overthrow of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in February 1979. The founding of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s was the first real step towards achieving a new Persian Empire and provided the model for future armed proxies.

With the Arab world in decline after the revolutionary convulsions of the "Arab spring," along with the perceived betrayal of the United States' disengagement in the Middle East by Barack Obama's pivot towards countering China, the Tehran

regime saw its chance to strike.

Analysts say the clerical regime in Tehran had been planning its expansionist strategy since Khomeini's Islamic Revolution, which he vowed to extend across the Muslim world.

Omer Carmi, an Israeli analyst with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, noted: "Iran has invested a great deal of money and effort into developing a complex network of allies, partners and surrogates worldwide in hopes that such a network would deter its enemies from attacking the Islamic Republic while simultaneously enabling it to

project influence throughout the region and beyond."

Ed Blanche has covered Middle East affairs since 1967. He is the Arab Weekly analyses section editor. ■

This article was originally published in The Arab Weekly.

REUTERS

Iraqi court rules Kurdish independence vote unconstitutional

NOVEMBER 20, 2017 REUTERS Ahmed Rasheed, Raya Jalabi

BAGHDAD/ERBIL, Iraq (Reuters) - Iraq's Supreme Federal Court ruled on Monday a Sept. 25 Kurdish independence referendum was unconstitutional and the results void, strengthening Baghdad's hand in a stand-off with the Kurdish region watched closely by neighbouring Turkey and Iran.

The Kurdistan Regional Government did not directly say whether it accepted the effective cancellation of the vote, but its new prime minister called for a third party to oversee talks between Iraq's central government and the Kurds.

The KRG also called on the international community -- including the United Nations, European Union and non-governmental organisations - - to intervene and help lift what it called "restrictive" sanctions imposed by Baghdad in retaliation for the referendum.

Kurds voted overwhelmingly to break away from Iraq in the referendum, defying the central government in Baghdad and alarming neighbouring Turkey and Iran who have their own Kurdish minorities.

"The Federal Court issued the decision to consider the Kurdish region's referendum unconstitutional and this ruling is final," a court spokesman said. "The power of this ruling should now cancel all the results of the referendum."

The court is responsible for settling disputes between Iraq's central government and its regions, including Kurdistan. The verdict is not subject to appeal.

A statement from Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said: "We call upon everybody to ... avoid taking any step which violates the constitution and law."

FLIGHTS BANNED

The court had ruled on Nov. 6 that no region or province can secede. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) said last week it would respect that verdict, signalling a new phase in efforts to restart negotiations over the region's future.

The Iraqi government responded to the Kurdish independence referendum by seizing the Kurdish-held city of Kirkuk and other territory disputed between the Kurds and the central government. It also banned direct flights to Kurdistan and demanded control over border crossings.

Long-serving Kurdish president Masoud Barzani stepped down over the affair and the regional government led by his nephew Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has tried to negotiate an end to the confrontation.

In a news conference following Monday's ruling, Nechirvan Barzani said the court's ruling was reached unilaterally, without input from KRG representatives, and called for a third party to oversee negotiations between



People look for their names on the lists at a polling station, during Kurds independence referendum in Erbil, Iraq September 25, 2017. REUTERS/Ahmed Jadallah/Files

Baghdad and the Kurds.

"The rights of Kurds are enshrined in the (Iraqi) constitution and we seek the implementation of this constitution to resolve our issues with Baghdad," Barzani told reporters, according to Kurdish Rudaw TV.

"The constitution is one package and must be applied in its entirety, not selectively."

However, Barzani did not directly say whether Kurdish officials accepted the effective cancellation of the referendum. The KRG had previously offered only to freeze the results.

The KRG later said its chief concern was the lifting of an embargo on international flights to the region, which it said hampered foreign investment as well as humanitarian efforts for the more than 1.5 million internally displaced people currently in the region.

"We call on the international community to intercede in urging Baghdad authorities to lift the embargo, without condition, on international flights."

"The restrictive policies adopted by Baghdad against Erbil are in violation of Iraq's obligations and responsibilities under international and humanitarian law," the KRG said in a statement. ●

Syrie: Erdogan veut « nettoyer » Afrine des milices kurdes

Ankara, 17 nov 2017 (AFP)
<https://www.lorientlejour.com>

Le président turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan a indiqué vendredi qu'il voulait "nettoyer" Afrine, dans le nord de la Syrie, de la présence de milices kurdes soutenues par les Etats-Unis contre le groupe jihadiste Etat islamique (EI).

"Il nous faut nettoyer Afrine des organisations terroristes PYD et YPG", a dit M. Erdogan lors d'un discours à Ankara retransmis à la télévision, ajoutant qu'il fallait y déployer des troupes turques.

Ankara considère le Parti de l'Union démocratique (PYD) et son bras armé, les Unités de protection du peuple (YPG), qui contrôlent une large part du nord de la Syrie, comme des organisations "terroristes".

Mais les YPG sont aussi la principale composante des Forces démocratique syriennes (FDS), une alliance arabo-kurde soutenue et armée par les Etats-Unis qui a notamment été le fer de lance de la prise de Raqqa, capitale autoproclamée de l'EI en Syrie.



Le président turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan a prévenu vendredi que la Turquie comptait chasser la milice kurde YPG (Unités de protection du peuple) de la poche d'Afrin dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie.

Ce désaccord sur les YPG a contribué à tendre davantage les rapports entre Ankara et Washington, deux alliés au sein de l'Otan, et M. Erdogan a une nouvelle fois critiqué vendredi les Etats-Unis.



"Que venez-vous faire en Syrie, vous qui vous trouvez à 12.000 km de là?", a interrogé le chef de l'Etat turc.

La Turquie a lancé l'an dernier une offensive terrestre dans le nord de la Syrie pour repousser l'EI vers le sud et empêcher les YPG de relier les territoires qu'ils contrôlent dans le nord de la Syrie.

M. Erdogan a plusieurs fois menacé de lancer une opération militaire à Afrine, et sa nouvelle mise en garde survient à quelques jours d'un important sommet Russie-Turquie-Iran, mercredi.

La Russie et l'Iran, qui soutiennent le régime syrien, et la Turquie, qui appuie l'opposition, parviennent un accord visant à réduire l'intensité des combats pour préparer le terrain à un accord politique en vue de mettre un terme au conflit syrien qui a fait plus de 330.000 morts depuis mars 2011. Dans le cadre de cet accord, la Turquie a notamment déployé des troupes ayant une mission d'observation dans la province d'Idleb (nord-ouest), non loin de la zone d'Afrine contrôlée par les YPG. ♦

Talal Sello, porte-parole des FDS, "aux mains" d'Ankara

Ankara, 17 nov 2017 (AFP)
<https://www.lorientlejour.com>

Une figure importante d'une force arabo-kurde syrienne combattant le groupe Etat islamique (EI) avec l'appui de Washington, mais honni d'Ankara, est "aux mains" des services secrets turcs (MIT), a rapporté vendredi le quotidien turc Hürriyet.

Talal Sello, un porte-parole des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), "s'est rendu" cette semaine à des rebelles syriens pro-Ankara et a été transféré dans la province de Gaziantep (sud-est de la Turquie) où il est interrogé par le MIT,

selon Hürriyet.

M. Sello a disparu il y a plusieurs jours dans des circonstances troubles, et d'intenses spéculations circulaient à son sujet, certains affirmant qu'il s'était livré à la Turquie, d'autres qu'il avait été capturé.

Dans un communiqué publié jeudi, les FDS, une alliance essentiellement composée des milices kurdes YPG, ont estimé que la "disparition" de M. Sello était "le résultat d'une opération spéciale des renseignements turcs, en collusion avec des membres de sa famille". Selon ce communiqué, M. Sello "faisait l'objet de beaucoup de pressions et de chantage de la part de l'Etat turc, jusqu'au point où il a reçu des menaces visant ses enfants qui se trouvent en Turquie".

L'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'Homme (OSDH), une ONG qui s'appuie sur un vaste réseau de sources en Syrie, avait affirmé jeudi que M. Sello se trouvait "aux mains des renseignements turcs". "Il semble qu'il ait été attiré en Turquie par la ruse", a indiqué l'OSDH.

Les FDS sont soutenues par les Etats-Unis et ont été le fer de lance de la prise de Raqqa, capitale autoproclamée de l'EI en Syrie. Mais pour Ankara, cette structure n'est autre qu'un paravent visant à légitimer les YPG, considérées par la Turquie comme une "organisation terroriste".



Le porte-parole des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), Talal Silo, lors d'une conférence de presse

Le quotidien Hürriyet rapporte vendredi que M. Sello est interrogé par le MIT sur les positions défensives des YPG dans la zone d'Afrine, dans le nord de la Syrie, ainsi que sur ses alliances et son armement.

La Turquie a lancé l'an dernier une offensive dans le nord de la Syrie pour empêcher la jonction des différents territoires contrôlés par les YPG, et répète régulièrement qu'elle a l'intention de lancer ses forces sur Afrine. "Il nous faut nettoyer Afrine des organisations terroristes", a ainsi déclaré le président turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan vendredi. ♦

La mémoire saccagée des chrétiens d'Orient

Longtemps, les chrétiens du nord de l'Irak ont vécu en sécurité. Ces dernières années, ils ont dû fuir la folie éradicatrice de Daech.

*Reviendront-ils? Entretien avec **le père Najeeb**, qui a sauvé une partie des manuscrits de Mossoul*

Propos recueillis par **SARA DANIEL**

Son histoire a fait le tour du monde. Daech venait de conquérir Mossoul, puis Qaraqosh, la capitale officieuse des chrétiens irakiens, et lui remplissait des camionnettes de manuscrits médiévaux pour les soustraire à la folie éradicatrice des djihadistes. Au checkpoint, il arrêtait les chrétiens qui fuyaient. Ils n'avaient eu le temps d'emporter que quelques habits, peu de souvenirs, mais le prêtre dominicain les pria de tout abandonner pour prendre à la place des manuscrits. Il vient de publier aux Editions Grasset un témoignage, « Sauver les livres et les hommes ».

Quel est le message de votre livre?

Les hommes ne peuvent pas vivre sans leurs racines. Ni leur mémoire. C'est bien pour cela que Daech a essayé d'effacer la culture, de saccager les musées, détruire les vestiges et brûler des bibliothèques dans de véritables autodafés. Ceux qui veulent sauver les chrétiens et les minorités doivent avoir conscience qu'il faut aussi sauver leur passé. Dans ce livre j'évoque mon enfance, les moments de fraternité entre les chrétiens et les musulmans. Nous étions fiers du passé de notre pays, pique-niquions ensemble près des taureaux ailés hérités des Assyriens. Quand j'ai vu les membres de Daech en train de les défigurer au marteau piqueur, j'ai bien compris que, pour eux, c'était comme s'ils étaient en train de tuer des êtres humains.

Les chrétiens étaient près d'un million et demi avant 2003 en Irak. Il en reste à peine deux cent mille. Quelle est leur situation actuellement?

A Qaraqosh, principale ville chrétienne, 40% de la population qui était réfugiée au Kurdistan est revenue. A Mossoul, en revanche, aucun des cinquante mille chrétiens n'est rentré. C'est bien trop dangereux. Dans la ville de Bartella, où vivaient aussi beaucoup de chrétiens, les Shabaks, une minorité chiite d'origine iranienne, ont

pris possession de 80% des maisons. Les chrétiens disent que Daech a déjà muté et que les persécutions continuent. Nous sommes dans une situation bancal, pris entre les Arabes musulmans et les Kurdes, et s'allier avec les uns signifie être exclus par les autres.

Comment voyez-vous l'avenir institutionnel de la plaine de Ninive?

Nous vivons sur une terre qui est encore disputée. La plaine de Ninive est désirée et convoitée par tout le monde depuis des décennies déjà. Historiquement, nous étions du côté des Arabes musulmans de la grande province de Ninive. Mais ceux-là, d'une manière ou d'une autre, ont ouvert les portes de Mossoul à Daech, et les chrétiens ne peuvent plus leur faire confiance. Les Kurdes aussi ont fui devant l'avancée de « l'Etat islamique », nous laissant sans défense, mais ils ont ensuite accueilli les réfugiés chrétiens durant quatre ans. Serons-nous rattachés au Kurdistan ou au gouvernement central de Bagdad? Ce n'est pas clair. Nous sommes une carte, une monnaie d'échange entre ceux qui se livrent aujourd'hui une guerre ouverte, alors que la ville de Kirkouk et une partie de la plaine de Ninive viennent d'être occupées par le gouvernement central.

Les chrétiens ont-ils pris position à l'occasion du référendum sur l'indépendance du Kurdistan?

Beaucoup ont voté en faveur de l'indépendance. Ils ont nourri l'espoir de voir émerger un Kurdistan qui soit un pays ouvert et démocratique, où le gouvernement serait non confessionnel et la loi laïque. Ce serait un exemple pour l'Irak et les pays arabes. J'espère d'ailleurs que la mention de la religion sera retirée de la carte d'identité...

Les chrétiens pensent-ils que les persécutions dont ils ont été victimes n'auraient pas lieu dans un Kurdistan indépendant?

Les Kurdes ont, eux aussi, massacré des chrétiens, à Simele en 1933, ou participé au génocide arménien. Massoud Barzani, le président du gouvernement régional du



Né en 1955 à Mossoul (Irak) dans une famille catholique de rite chaldéen, MICHAEL NAJEEB est entré chez les dominicains à 24 ans. Condamné à mort par Al-Qaida, il fuit Erbil après l'offensive de Daech. Il publie « Sauver les livres et les hommes » aux Editions Grasset (avec Romain Gubert).

Kurdistan, l'a lui-même reconnu. Mais il faut croire que les hommes peuvent changer. Les Kurdes ont accueilli les chrétiens persécutés par « l'Etat islamique ». Ils reconnaissent leurs errements, et à présent il nous faut écrire une nouvelle page de notre histoire commune. Mais nous sommes vigilants : les Kurdes restent majoritairement des sunnites. Pour eux aussi, nous sommes des « dhimmis », c'est-à-dire des citoyens de seconde classe.

A vous lire, l'idéologie fondamentaliste a préexisté à la victoire de Daech dans la région?

En 2006, j'ai reçu une lettre de menace qui contenait trois versets du Coran disant que je devais être considéré comme un impie, et un polythéiste. Dans l'enveloppe se trouvaient une balle et une croix découpée en morceaux. En 2007, nous avons été obligés de quitter Mossoul. Or Daech n'existait pas encore. Cette organisation n'est qu'une des émanations de cette idéologie néfaste qui a été propagée par les salafistes, les fondamentalistes puis Al-Qaida, et ainsi de suite. Une idéologie qui s'impose actuellement dans le monde entier, en France, en Europe, en Amérique.

Cette violence n'est-elle pas intrinsèque aux religions? N'existe-t-elle

pas aussi dans le christianisme?

Bien sûr, il y a eu les croisades, les guerres de Religion entre catholiques et protestants, et les Espagnols qui en Amérique ont converti les Indiens avec une grande brutalité. C'est un fait historique. Mais ce n'est ni l'Evangile ni Jésus qui ont commandé de prendre l'épée pour tuer ceux qui ne sont pas chrétiens. Comme le souhaite une grande partie des musulmans, il faut arrêter de prendre le Coran au pied de la lettre, replacer les textes qui incitent à la violence dans leur contexte historique. Mais est-ce que les prédicateurs intégristes, alors qu'ils essaient d'imposer la charia dans le monde arabe et même en Europe, l'accepteront? Je n'en suis pas sûr.

Votre livre parle de l'importance de préserver les vestiges du passé. Que pensez-vous de la réhabilitation du site de la mosquée de Jonas à Mossoul?

En faisant sauter cette mosquée, Daech, à son corps défendant, a ouvert une porte vers le passé. Ils ont mis au jour l'église qui pré-existait à la mosquée, et, dans la strate encore inférieure, des taureaux ailés et des

trésors, et le sarcophage d'un roi assyrien. J'ai proposé à l'Unesco et à sa directrice générale de l'époque, Irina Bokova, de sauver en personne ce monument historique et d'en faire un lieu de mémoire qui pourrait être visité par le monde entier. Il faut restaurer le site de manière scientifique, mais il faut aller vite pour stopper le mollah du lieu, parce que les islamistes ont déjà commencé à injecter du ciment pour recouvrir les vestiges. Or il y a plus de mille mosquées à Mossoul, donc celle-là n'est pas nécessaire.

Dans quel état se trouvent votre couvent et son église à l'horloge à Mossoul?

L'église est encore debout mais dénudée de son habit de marbre et de pierre. C'est une carcasse désolée. L'horloge n'existe plus, et la tour qui la contenait est à moitié sciée. Daech voulait sans doute faire sortir le mécanisme de cette horloge que l'impératrice française Eugénie avait offerte à la ville en 1880. Les quatre cloches, fondues à Paris en 1887, ont aussi été volées. Actuellement, je ne sais pas si le mécanisme de l'horloge est encore sur place.

Quelle sera la destination de vos livres?

Ils resteront à Erbil, au Kurdistan. On ne les a pas sauvés pour risquer de les remettre en danger, à Qaraqosh ou à Mossoul. Ce dépôt est un trésor pour l'Irak, pas seulement pour les chrétiens, mais aussi pour les yazidis, les musulmans, les sabéens. J'ai même retrouvé des manuscrits latins et carolingiens.

Où en est le processus de numérisation qui permettra désormais, quoi qu'il arrive, d'en conserver le contenu?

8 000 manuscrits et 40 000 documents d'archives ont été numérisés. Je m'occupe actuellement en priorité des manuscrits qu'on a pu arracher aux mains de Daech, ceux qui ont été retrouvés à moitié brûlés ou détrempés et que des gens m'apportent pour que je les restaure. Je voudrais aussi faire un musée avec les objets liturgiques, les tableaux, les livres saccagés pendant l'occupation de « l'Etat islamique ». Pour que cette période sombre de notre histoire ne soit pas oubliée par les générations à venir. ■

Challenge

8 novembre 2017

L'Iranien Velayati s'affiche à Alep, vante les succès chiites au Proche-Orient

Par Reuters le 08.11.2017 / www.challenges.fr

AMMAN (Reuters) - Le dirigeant iranien Ali Akbar Velayati, principal conseiller du guide suprême de la République islamique, a promis mercredi lors d'une visite à Alep la reconquête de la province d'Idlib tenue par les rebelles syriens, tout en vantant les succès des alliés de Téhéran dans l'ensemble du Proche-Orient.

Lors de ce déplacement aux allures de provocation envers l'Arabie saoudite, qui vient de dénoncer la déstabilisation régionale dont se rendrait coupable, selon elle, l'Iran, Ali Akbar Velayati a indiqué que Téhéran aiderait les forces du président Bachar al Assad à reprendre le contrôle de l'ensemble du territoire syrien.

"Nous aurons bientôt nettoyé l'est de la Syrie, puis ce sera au tour de la région d'Idlib dans l'Ouest", a dit le bras droit de l'ayatollah Ali Khamenei, selon des propos rapportés par l'agence de presse iranienne Mehr.

Les forces de Bachar al Assad, qui incluent des milices chiites armées par l'Iran, dont le

Hezbollah libanais, ont annoncé mercredi être sur le point de reprendre le dernier bastion urbain du groupe djihadiste sunnite Etat islamique dans l'est de la Syrie.

Seul le Nord sous contrôle de forces majoritairement kurdes soutenues par les Etats-Unis et la province d'Idlib divisée entre groupes djihadistes et mouvements rebelles sunnites pro-turcs échapperont alors à l'autorité de Damas.

ARC CHIITE

La reconquête d'Alep-Est à la fin de l'année dernière a marqué un tournant décisif dans le conflit syrien et l'Iran, principal soutien du régime de Bachar al Assad avec la Russie, affiche depuis de plus en plus ostensiblement son engagement sur le front syrien.

Ali Akbar Velayati est le deuxième dirigeant iranien de premier plan à se rendre en Syrie depuis deux semaines et ses déclarations vantant les succès des alliés de Téhéran au Proche-Orient sont de nature à exacerber un peu plus la crise qui couve avec l'Arabie saoudite.



Ali Akbar Velayati, le haut conseiller du Leader de la Révolution islamique en matière de politique étrangère, le 7 novembre 2017 à Alep, en Syrie.

Selon des propos rapportés par un organe de propagande du Hezbollah libanais, le conseiller du guide suprême iranien a évoqué devant des miliciens chiites venus combattre en Syrie une "ligne de résistance" allant de Téhéran à Beyrouth, le fameux "arc chiite" redouté de longue date par les puissances sunnites de la région.

"La ligne de résistance part de Téhéran et traverse Bagdad, Damas et Beyrouth pour atteindre la Palestine", a-t-il dit.

Outre le régime de Bachar al Assad et le Hezbollah, l'Iran arme et finance d'influents milices en Irak et le Hamas dans la bande de Gaza.

Téhéran appuie également les miliciens chiites houthis au Yémen, où l'Arabie saoudite et ses alliés sont entrés en guerre il y a deux ans pour soutenir les forces du président Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi. L'interception près de Ryad, samedi, d'un missile tiré par les Houthis a été qualifié par l'Arabie saoudite de "déclaration de guerre" iranienne. ◆

Les Kurdes syriens misent sur un soutien russe

Les FDS veulent la reconnaissance par Damas de l'autonomie des territoires passés sous leur contrôle

KAMECHLIYÉ (SYRIE) - envoyé spécial

Aucun départ n'est plus prévu depuis de longues années en gare de Kamechliyé. Des locomotives diesel et leurs wagons rouillent sur des rails qui ne mènent plus nulle part et les voies désaffectées évoquent des trajets que la guerre a rendu inconcevables. Les trains ne roulent plus, mais ceux qui contrôlent la majeure partie de la ville ont trouvé une nouvelle affectation à la gare. Elle abrite les bureaux de l'enca-drement politique kurde des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), victorieuses de l'organisa-tion Etat islamique (EI) à Rakka, à 230 kilomètres de ce terminus frontalier de la Turquie.

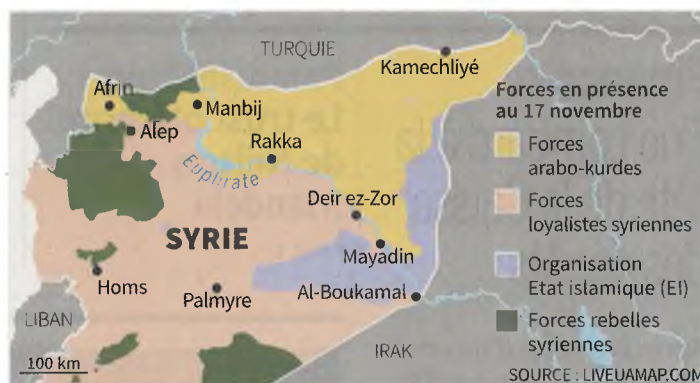
Perpendiculaires aux voies ferro-viaires, les lignes de front conti-nuent de changer dans l'est de la Syrie. Les djihadistes, en déroute, ne contrôlent plus que quelques enclaves désertiques. Au bout du chemin de fer qui part de Kamechliyé, Deir ez-Zor a été reprise par les forces du régime syrien, qui continuent à avancer sur la rive droite de l'Euphrate.

Damas a par ailleurs lancé un nouvel assaut sur la localité d'Al-Boukamal, dernier fief de l'Etat islamique sur la frontière avec l'Irak. Les FDS, soutenues par la coalition internationale, s'ap-prêtent à réduire les dernières poches de l'EI sur la rive gauche du fleuve et se sont déjà empa-rées des champs de pétrole et de gaz avoisinants. La chute du « ca-lifat » de l'EI a enfanté une géo-graphie nouvelle avec laquelle ceux qui occupent l'ancienne gare de Kamechliyé doivent dés-ormais composer.

« En Syrie, il n'y a plus que deux forces qui comptent sur le terrain : nous et le régime, lance le « cama-rade » Badran, l'un des principaux cadres de l'appareil kurde dans le nord de la Syrie. Soit il y a confron-tation et c'est le chaos, soit on ouvre un dialogue en vue d'une so-lution politique. Nous préférons le dialogue. » Officiellement, l'enca-drement politique des FDS, issu de la matrice idéologique et mili-taire du Parti des travailleurs du

Deux soldats kurdes des Forces démocratiques syriennes postés à un point de contrôle entre Kamechliyé et Kobané, à la frontière turco-syrienne, le 15 novembre.

LAURENCE GEAI
POUR « LE MONDE »



Kurdistan (PKK), actif en Turquie depuis les années 1980, revendique l'instauration en Syrie d'un système fédéral. L'enjeu est la reconnaissance par le régime syrien de l'autonomie des vastes terri-toires kurdes, mixtes ou arabes passés sous leur contrôle à la fa-veur de la lutte contre l'EI. Pas question d'une quelconque quête d'indépendance.

Déclarations hostiles

Depuis la chute de Rakka pour-tant, les déclarations en provenance de Damas sont hostiles. Faisant fi des précautions de l'en-cadrement kurde des FDS, elles tendent à l'accuser d'ambitions sécessionnistes. Le 7 novembre, Bachar Al-Assad a indiqué que la guerre se poursuivrait après la victoire de ses troupes à Deir ez-Zor et qu'elle pourrait être portée contre ceux qui cherchent à « divi-ser et à affaiblir les Etats ».

Ces commentaires ont été diffu-sés après une rencontre avec Ali Akbar Velayati, le conseiller diplo-

matique du Guide suprême irani-en, qui avait indiqué à Bey-routh, le 3 novembre, que le ré-gime syrien et ses alliés « libé-raient » Rakka des FDS dans un « avenir proche ».

C'est cependant sur un autre al-lié de Bachar Al-Assad que l'enca-drement kurde entend miser pour pousser le régime à une so-lution négociée. « L'Iran a une po-sition idéologique rigide sur le re-tour du régime sur tout le terri-toire, constate le « camarade » Ba-dran, mais la Russie est plus ouverte. Une solution de type fédé-ral lui permet de garder toutes les

Etroite, la voie d'une coopération politique avec la Russie est suspendue aux relations entre Moscou et Ankara

« Les Américains n'ont qu'une stratégie militaire en Syrie. Pas de vision politique. Les Russes, eux, ont un projet »

« CAMARADE » BADRAN
cadre kurde

cartes en main sur le terrain sy-rien. » Cette volonté de rappro-chement avec Moscou pourrait surprendre de la part d'une force armée soutenue par les Etats-Unis depuis 2015 dans le cadre de la guerre contre l'EI.

Elle relève pourtant d'une éva-luation pragmatique du rapport de force. Les dirigeants kurdes n'ont pas cessé d'entretenir des relations, y compris militaires, avec la Russie dans l'enclave d'Afrin, au nord-ouest d'Alep, con-trôlée par les FDS. Le dénouement de la guerre contre l'EI lui permet aujourd'hui d'affirmer ces liens dans le domaine politique.

« Après Rakka, les Etats-Unis ont promis qu'ils feraient des pas en avant pour que nous ayons une reconnaissance, mais, ce que nous comprenons, c'est que les Améri-cains n'ont qu'une stratégie mili-taire en Syrie. Pas de vision politi-que. Les Russes, eux, ont un pro-jet », résume le « camarade » Ba-dran à Kamechliyé. La voie de cette coopération politique avec

la Russie est cependant étroite et suspendue aux relations entre Moscou et Ankara. La ville russe de Sotchi, sur les bords de la mer Noire, devait accueillir, le 18 novembre, le premier congrès pour le dialogue national en Syrie. Une rencontre qui vise à contourner les négociations de Genève, sous l'égide de l'ONU, pour parvenir à une solution politique en Syrie grâce à des forces qui ne sont pas hostiles à la Russie. Exclues des négociations de Genève et d'Astana du fait de l'opposition de la Turquie, les FDS auraient eu l'occasion d'apparaître pour la première fois dans un cadre officiel, pourvoyeur de légitimité.

En raison de l'hostilité de la Turquie et des rebelles syriens qui lui sont alliés, le sommet de Sotchi a été repoussé. Vu d'Ankara, l'encadrement des FDS n'est que le prolongement du PKK, qui

mène dans le sud-est de la Turquie une guerre de guérilla depuis 1984. Le président turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, avant de rencontrer Vladimir Poutine à Sotchi, avait réitéré sa menace d'une opération militaire turque contre l'enclave kurde syrienne d'Afrin. Une offensive qui ne peut être envisagée sans l'assentiment de Moscou.

Malgré cet environnement diplomatique chargé, dont ils ne peuvent que subir les remous, les dirigeants kurdes syriens entendent profiter de leurs gains sur le terrain pour arracher un soutien russe. Des rencontres avec des délégations venues de Moscou ont eu lieu cet automne à Kameliyê, ville toujours connectée à Damas par son aéroport, resté aux mains du régime. « Nous pourrions trouver à l'avenir un compromis avec les Russes,

qui, à leur tour, pourront influencer le régime », estime Ilham Ahmed, coprésidente du Conseil démocratique syrien, la façade politique des FDS.

Atouts de poids

Dans les négociations qu'il souhaite établir avec le régime, le leadership kurde jouit d'atouts majeurs. En tant qu'alliés exclusifs au sol de la coalition contre l'EI dirigée par les Etats-Unis, les FDS ont pris le contrôle de territoires très étendus et d'infrastructures stratégiques.

Depuis l'été 2016, elles contrôlent Manbij, une ville majoritairement arabe devenue un carrefour commercial important entre les zones FDS, la Turquie voisine et les zones qu'elle contrôle avec ses alliés syriens de l'opposition anti-Assad et les territoires sous la mainmise du régime. En plus de la ville de Rakka,

encore largement déserte et massivement détruite, les FDS tiennent également les barrages de Tichrine et celui de Tabqa, la plus grande installation hydroélectrique du pays.

S'ajoutent à ces prises de guerre les puits pétroliers de la province de Deir ez-Zor, dont le vaste champ d'Omar, près de la frontière irakienne, passé sous le contrôle des FDS fin octobre. « Nous nous sommes engagés loin de nos bases, dans la bataille de Rakka notamment, pour avoir plus de poids face au régime après l'Etat islamique. Aujourd'hui, ces acquis renforcent notre position et nous permettront de sauvegarder l'autonomie du cœur de notre territoire, le long de la frontière turque », indique un conseiller politique de premier plan de l'encadrement kurde des FDS. ■

ALLAN KAVAL

Le Monde.fr

19 NOVEMBRE 2017

La Turquie n'exclut plus un maintien de Bachar Al-Assad en Syrie

Avant le sommet de Sotchi, Ankara est prête à faire des concessions aux Russes pour marginaliser les forces kurdes

Par Marie Jégo (Istanbul, correspondante) 19.11.2017
www.lemonde.fr

Alors que les grandes manœuvres diplomatiques s'accroissent autour du règlement du conflit syrien, la Turquie a considérablement assoupli sa position sur le sort du président syrien Bachar Al-Assad, dont elle réclamait jusqu'à récemment le départ. Une revendication qui constituait un sérieux point d'achoppement au sein du groupe d'Astana avec la Russie et l'Iran, les deux autres puissances du trio qui ambitionne de mettre un point final au conflit syrien en imposant un règlement aux pays arabes et occidentaux, qui continuent de plaider pour une transition incluant le départ de Bachar Al-Assad dans le cadre des pourparlers de Genève, sous l'égide des Nations unies.

Les ministres des affaires étrangères turc, russe et iranien se sont retrouvés, dimanche 19 novembre, à Antalya, dans le sud de la Turquie, pour une rencontre de préparation du sommet tripartite de mercredi 22 novembre dans la ville russe de Sotchi entre Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Vladimir Poutine et Hassan Rohani. La Russie, qui conduit le processus d'Astana,



Les ministres des affaires étrangères turc (à droite), Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, et iranien, Mohammad Javad Zarif (troisième en partant de la gauche), dimanche 19 novembre, à Antalya.

cherche à faire passer au second plan les négociations sous l'égide de l'ONU entre le régime et l'opposition, dont la prochaine session doit s'ouvrir à Genève le 28 novembre.

« La Russie tient ses promesses. Le processus d'Astana commence à porter ses fruits. Sur le terrain, la situation est bien meilleure qu'il y a un an ou qu'il y a six mois », avait tenu à souligner le chef de la diplomatie turque, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, lors d'un briefing avec la presse étrangère, vendredi 17 novembre à Istanbul. Les accords d'Astana ont en effet permis l'instauration de quatre «

zones de désescalade » en Syrie, mais le calme n'y est pas systématiquement respecté, notamment dans la Ghouta orientale, aux portes de Damas, où le régime syrien bombarde sans relâche et affame la population pour venir à bout de la dernière poche de rébellion proche de la capitale.

« Il est temps de penser à une solution politique », a-t-il poursuivi. Toutefois, ses grandes lignes restent à définir. « L'Iran et la Russie veulent qu'Assad reste pendant la transition. Les Russes ont besoin d'Assad. C'est par lui qu'ils ont été invités à intervenir. Ceci n'est pas de notre ressort et nous

verrons bien qui se montrera le plus flexible », a-t-il ajouté. Avant d'esquisser une ouverture sur le sort du dictateur syrien : « Il faut d'abord en parler avec l'opposition (syrienne, dont Ankara défend les intérêts). Désormais, la Russie et l'Iran ne sont pas les seuls à dire que Bachar Al-Assad peut rester. L'Arabie saoudite et la France disent la même chose. Il ne faut pas être trop dans l'émotion, mais réunir tout le monde autour de Bachar Al-Assad ne sera pas chose facile. »

En mettant un sérieux bémol à ses critiques envers Bachar Al-Assad, Ankara insiste également sur la nécessité de préserver l'unité de la Syrie, espérant ainsi faire pièce aux ambitions autonomistes des Kurdes syriens à sa frontière. Les « gains territoriaux » des milices kurdes YPG dans le nord de la Syrie inquiètent en effet la Turquie au plus haut point. Dimanche, à Antalya, M. Çavuşoğlu a rappelé à ses partenaires russe et iranien qu'il n'était pas question que les Kurdes syriens du Parti de l'union démocratique (PYD), une filiale du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK, interdit en Turquie), prennent part aux négociations sur l'avenir de la Syrie. ■

Irak : La Cour suprême irakienne déclare le référendum kurde "anticonstitutionnel"

Le Premier ministre kurde Nechirvan Barzani a dénoncé une décision "unilatérale", se disant "prêt au dialogue" avec Bagdad.

Bagdad, 20 nov 2017 (AFP)

www.lorientlejour.com

La Cour suprême irakienne a déclaré lundi "anticonstitutionnel" le référendum d'indépendance de la région autonome du Kurdistan, dernier épisode en date de la crise entre Bagdad et Erbil née de cette consultation organisée contre l'avis des autorités fédérales.

La Cour suprême a indiqué dans un communiqué avoir "rendu une décision déclarant anticonstitutionnel le référendum tenu le 25 septembre 2017 au Kurdistan irakien et dans des zones en dehors de la région autonome". La décision prévoit en outre d'"annuler l'ensemble des conséquences et des résultats qui en ont découlé". L'annulation de cette consultation est la condition préalable au dialogue posée par Bagdad, tandis qu'Erbil refuse de revenir sur la victoire écrasante du "oui".

La semaine dernière, alors qu'approchait l'échéance annoncée par la Cour suprême pour rendre son jugement, le gouvernement du Kurdistan irakien avait dit "respecter" les décisions de la plus haute instance juridique du pays. Il avait notamment dit respecter un jugement précédent insistant sur l'article premier de la Constitution, qui mentionne "l'unité de l'Irak". Erbil avait ajouté vouloir en faire "une base pour le dialogue".

"PRÊT AU DIALOGUE"

Lundi, la Cour suprême a estimé que la tenue du référendum "contredisait" cet article de la Constitution, a expliqué le porte-parole de la Cour, Ayas al-Samouk, cité dans le communiqué.

Acculé, le Kurdistan tente désormais de manoeuvrer face à Bagdad, où le Parlement exa-

mine actuellement le budget fédéral pour l'année à venir, et notamment la part qui sera réservée à la région autonome.

Lors d'une conférence de presse à Erbil, le Premier ministre kurde Nechirvan Barzani a dénoncé une décision "unilatérale" de la Cour suprême, prise sans consulter les représentants de la région autonome. Mais il s'est dit "prêt au dialogue" avec Bagdad.

Abdel Salam Barwari, ancien député et membre du Parti démocratique du Kurdistan (PDK) --le mouvement de Massoud Barzani, qui a quitté la présidence de la région autonome début novembre-, a lui dénoncé "une décision prévisible". Et cela, a-t-il dit à l'AFP, "au vu du passé de cette Cour et le fait qu'elle est maintenant devenue un outil politique".

De Bagdad, le Premier ministre irakien Haider al-Abadi, déjà à l'origine d'une requête en constitutionnalité avant même la tenue du scrutin, a au contraire salué la décision. Il a affirmé que son gouvernement "refusait ce référendum et refusait d'y avoir affaire".

Le 25 septembre, M. Barzani avait organisé en grande pompe cette consultation sur l'indépendance dans les trois provinces de Dohouk (nord-ouest), Erbil (nord) et Souleimaniyeh (nord-est), qui constituent la région autonome, mais également dans des zones disputées, placées selon la Constitution sous l'autorité du pouvoir central à Bagdad.

MANDATS D'ARRÊT

Depuis, la crise n'a cessé de s'envenimer. Privé du soutien international sur lequel il comptait, M. Barzani a quitté son poste début novembre après avoir perdu la quasi-totalité des zones disputées et l'ensemble de leurs ressources pétrolières qui auraient pu assurer la viabilité économique d'un hypothétique Etat kurde.

Mi-octobre, les forces gouvernementales et paramilitaires irakiennes étaient en effet entrées en mouvement pour reprendre l'ensemble des zones disputées. Ces régions sont revendiquées à la fois



Des combattants kurdes pointant du doigt le drapeau kurde après avoir voté pour l'indépendance du Kurdistan irakien, à Erbil, le 25 septembre 2017. AFP / SAFIN HAMED

par le gouvernement régional kurde et Bagdad et, selon la Constitution, leur statut doit encore faire l'objet de négociations.

Depuis l'invasion américaine de 2003 et dans le sillage du chaos créé en 2014 par la percée jihadiste, les peshmergas (combattants kurdes) en avaient de fait pris le contrôle. En deux semaines, Bagdad a repris le contrôle de leur quasi-totalité dans le but de revenir à la "ligne bleue" de 2003, qui limite les trois provinces du Kurdistan.

Bagdad et Erbil ont également délivré des mandats d'arrêt contre des personnalités politiques et militaires des deux camps. Le Kurdistan irakien a délivré des mandats d'arrêt contre 11 personnalités irakiennes, dont des dirigeants des unités paramilitaires du Hachd al-Chaabi combattant aux côtés des forces gouvernementales. De son côté, un tribunal de Bagdad en a émis contre les organisateurs du référendum ainsi que contre le vice-président du Kurdistan irakien et haut dirigeant de l'Union patriotique du Kurdistan (UPK), Kosrat Rassoul. ♦



Irak: Erbil accuse Bagdad de refuser le dialogue

ERBIL (IRAK), 27 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

LE PREMIER ministre de la région autonome du Kurdistan irakien a accusé lundi le gouvernement de Bagdad de refuser le dialogue malgré ses demandes répétées.

Il a par ailleurs demandé l'ouverture d'une enquête sur des événements ayant eu lieu à Touz Khormatou, une localité multi-ethnique du nord du pays dont les Kurdes ont été chassés lors de la reprise de la région par les forces irakiennes.

"Nous pensons que les problèmes entre Bagdad et Erbil doivent être résolus par un dialogue sérieux (...) mais, jusqu'à présent, Bagdad n'est pas prêt au dialogue", a affirmé Nechervan Barzani lors d'une conférence de presse à Erbil, capitale du Kurdistan irakien.

Après la mise à l'écart du président du Kurdistan irakien, Massoud Barzani, à la suite des conséquences désastreuses de son référendum d'indépendance, le 25 septembre, c'est son neveu qui dirige la région autonome.

"Ils nous demandent de leur transférer le contrôle des passages frontaliers et des aéroports. Nous ne comprenons pas ce que cela signifie, nous n'avons pas de problème à ce qu'il y ait une supervision de (Bagdad). Mais est-ce que

cela signifie que les Kurdes travaillant aux postes frontaliers et aux aéroports ne sont pas des Irakiens ou bien que Bagdad ne veut employer que des personnes parlant arabe?", a-t-il dit.

Après le référendum d'indépendance au Kurdistan, auquel il était fermement opposé, le gouvernement central a exigé de reprendre en mains les frontières que les Kurdes contrôlaient et, le 29 septembre, Bagdad avait fermé les aéroports d'Erbil et de Souleimaniyeh aux vols internationaux.

Nechervan Barzani a souligné que les Kurdes respectaient la décision de la cour fédérale jugeant anticonstitutionnel le référendum tout en soulignant que Bagdad devait de son côté annuler les sanctions prises à leur égard après cette consultation.

Il a par ailleurs demandé l'ouverture d'une enquête sur des événements survenus en octobre à Touz Khormatou, dont la population est en majorité turcomane.

"Nous ne pouvions pas imaginer que cela arrive à notre peuple (...) et qu'il soit contraint de fuir leur région. Nous tenons le gouvernement irakien responsable de ce qui s'est passé et exigeons le retour des déplacés et leur protection".

Selon les Nations unies, 35.000 personnes, en grande majorité des Kurdes, ont été déplacées de Touz Khormatou.

Cette ville, qui comptait 100.000 habitants kurdes, turkmènes et arabes, était sous le contrôle conjoint des peshmergas et des unités paramilitaires du Hachd al-Chaabi jusqu'au 16 octobre lorsque ces derniers se sont emparés de la ville. ●

Barzani: US knew Iraqi forces planned Kirkuk takeover

8 Nov 2017
<http://www.aljazeera.com>

Masoud Barzani, the ex-president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, has said that a major Iraqi operation last month to take over Kirkuk and other Kurdish-held areas took place with the full knowledge of the US and the UK.

The Iraqi army, backed by Shia militia, captured the entirety of the oil-rich Kirkuk province on October 21 after a rapid advance in the wake of a controversial referendum on Kurdish secession that Baghdad had declared illegal.

"We do believe, yes, that the operation to take over Kirkuk was led by Iranians with the knowledge of the US and British officials," Barzani, 71, said in an interview with Newsweek.

The referendum, which was held on September 25, received an overwhelming 93 percent approval, despite lacking regional and interna-

tional support, including from the US. Barzani, who quit his position from the KRG and president of his Kurdistan Democratic Party on November 1, defended the decision to go ahead with the vote.

"We believe the timing was good ... because those Iraqi forces who are currently implementing their policies to change the demography and situation in areas that they are in right now, they had this programme and this plan in mind even before the referendum," he said in the Newsweek interview.

"They are using the referendum as a pretext to cover their plan and plot against the Kurdish people.

"When asked if the KRG's relationship with Washington has changed since President Donald Trump took office in January, Barzani replied: "With regards to the relationship between Kurdistan and the White House ... I



Former Iraqi Kurdish President Masoud Barzani to Newsweek: 'Our policy is to seek dialogue' [Reuters]

can't say whether we have a relationship or not."

'BIG SURPRISE FOR US'

Barzani also said without the contribution of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, ISIL "would not have been rolled back and defeated" in Iraq, including in Mosul, the country's second-largest city.

"But we were not expecting to see Iraqi forces use weapons - that were given to them by the US to fight ISIS - against their own citizens," he said, using a different name for ISIL.

"It was a big surprise for us."

Sadi Pire, a senior KRG official and member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party, told Al Jazeera that the US "definitely had knowledge" of the Iraqi forces' plan to enter Kirkuk.

"The US saw that the referendum would weaken the relationship between the [Kurdish] Peshmerga and the Iraqi forces, which would lead to clashes and a general weakening of forces fighting against terrorism," said Pire.

"The US favoured postponing the referendum because its main priority is the fight against Daesh," he added, using the Arabic acronym for ISIL.

"But it also made it clear that it would not fight against the Iraqi forces if they took over the Kirkuk province."

'Seeking dialogue'

The Peshmerga seized Kirkuk, Iraq's second oil hub, in mid-2014 when Iraqi troops withdrew from the advancing ISIL armed group.

But last month's operation by the Iraqi army resulted in Baghdad retaking five oil fields from the Kurdish forces.

This dealt a heavy blow to the KRG's finances who had depended on revenues from exports of Kirkuk oil.

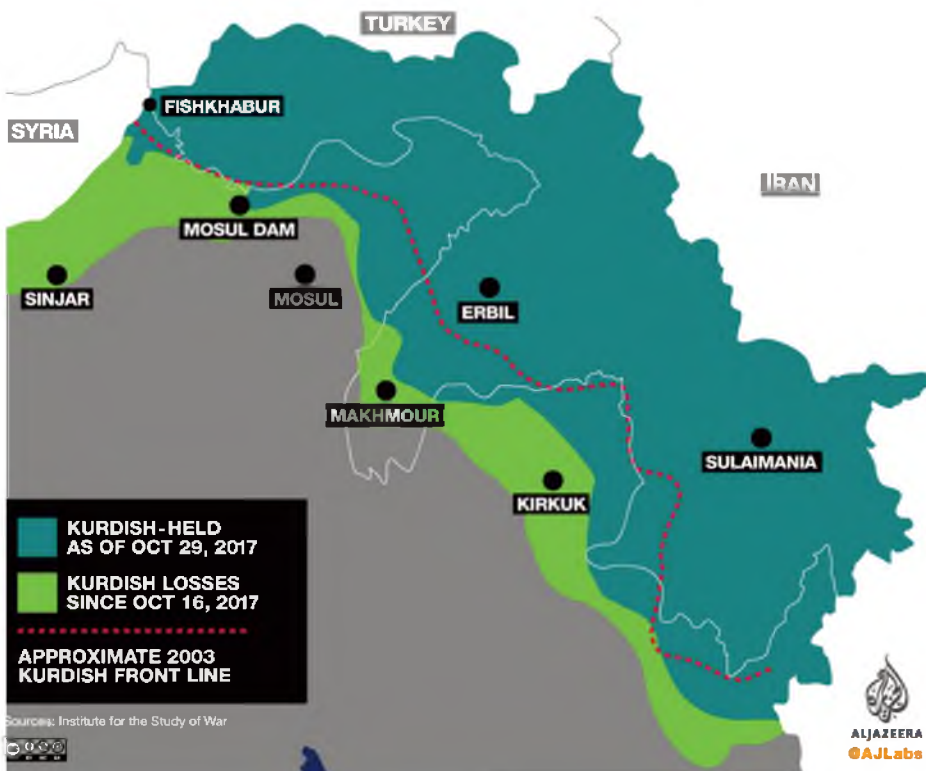
Yet Barzani, whose responsibilities have been distributed to the judiciary and parliament, said the Kurds do not seek an escalation of tensions with the federal government in Baghdad.

"Our policy is to seek dialogue, to seek peaceful ways for conflict resolution and conflict prevention with Iraq," he told Newsweek.

"We are ready to go as far as it's possible to avoid fighting with the Iraqi army, as long as they are not ... changing the [autonomous] status of Kurdistan." ●

Territory lost by Kurds in Iraq

Kurds in northern Iraq voted in a non-binding secession referendum on September 25. **Since then, they have lost 40 percent of the area they had taken in the fight against ISIL, as Iraqi forces moved in.**



MONDE



Bachar ou comment s'en accommoder

La chute de Deir ez-Zor « libère » la Syrie de Daech et donne une actualité nouvelle à la question du soutien du président el-Assad.

par Vincent Hugué

Après Bachar, Bachar? Hier jugé incongru, le scénario du maintien de l'héritier de la dynastie El-Assad à la barre d'une Syrie certes délestée du fardeau de Daech, mais amputée et sous tutelle, fait son chemin. En vertu, si l'on ose écrire, d'une forme de realpolitik par défaut. Longtemps, le sort du criminel de guerre alaouite fut la pierre d'achoppement de tout règlement appelé à codifier une transition négociée. Quoique sans illusion sur les travers du personnage, ses parrains iranien et russe refusaient de le sacrifier; tandis que Washington, Bruxelles, Paris et

Ankara faisaient de son éviction un préalable impérieux. Époque révolue. Le naufrage de la chimère du groupe État islamique – l'instauration d'un califat enjambant la frontière irakosyrienne –, précipité par la chute de ses bastions urbains, Mossoul, Raqqa, puis, le 3 novembre, Deir ez-Zor, change la donne et, à l'échelle de ce Moyen-Orient plus volatil que jamais, redessine une carte aux contours incertains. Pour autant, les variations quant au destin promis au Néron de Damas éclairent les calculs, les ambiguïtés et les reniements des acteurs d'une tragédie qui, en six ans, aura coûté la vie à plus de 330 000 civils et condamné à l'exil 10 millions de naufragés. Revue d'effectifs, à

moins d'une semaine du huitième round des négociations, à ce jour stériles, orchestrées par l'ONU à Genève.

RUSSIE FAUTE DE MIEUX

Si l'appui aérien massif fourni dès l'automne 2015 sauve un raïs syrien aux abois, Moscou semble un temps prêt à lâcher son obligé, mais y renonce faute de féal de substitution. Au-delà de son intrusion militaire décisive, le Kremlin s'active sur le front diplomatique. Pour preuve, les pourparlers d'Astana (Kazakhstan), mis en musique depuis janvier 2017 avec l'Iran et la Turquie. Ce forum à épisodes parasite le processus de Genève, mais aura eu le mérite de réduire l'intensité des combats via l'instauration de quatre

Incontournable Vladimir Poutine et Bachar el-Assad à Moscou, en 2015. Le leader russe est devenu l'interlocuteur de toutes les puissances impliquées dans la guerre en Syrie.

« zones de désescalade ». Autre indice de cette ambition, la tenue le 18 novembre à Sotchi, sur la mer Noire, d'un Congrès pour le dialogue national censé réunir l'ensemble des forces politiques syriennes, Kurdes inclus, mais boudé par les rescapés d'une opposition démocratique fragmentée. Vladimir Poutine use d'un atout enviable : s'engouffrant dans la brèche ouverte par la « stratégie » erratique de l'administration Trump, il a conquis le titre d'interlocuteur de toutes les puissances impliquées, y compris l'Arabie saoudite, la Turquie et Israël.

IRAN AND THE WINNER IS...

Bien sûr, il arrive à des diplomates iraniens de confesser en privé le peu d'estime que leur inspire l'allié syrien. De là à immoler sur l'autel de la morale celui dont les égarements ont permis à la République islamique d'étendre son influence dans l'aire arabe et de consolider l'assise du Hezbollah libanais, inféodé à Téhéran... Un signe : lorsque le général Ghassem Soleimani, patron de la force Al-Qods, unité d'élite du corps des Gardiens de la Révolution, vient tisonner in situ l'ardeur de ses troupes, il a droit à un traitement de chef d'Etat. A l'aune du rendement géopolitique, l'Iran apparaît donc comme le grand gagnant de la version moderne et levantine du *Great Game* cher à Rudyard Kipling. Impossible désormais de reléguer l'émergence d'un arc chiite courant du Liban à l'Afghanistan, via la Syrie, l'Irak et le Yémen, au rang de psychose millénariste. D'autant que la théocratie iranienne dispose de robustes soutiens au Qatar, au Koweït et à Oman. Téhéran s'efforce déjà de sanctuariser son quasi-protectorat syrien, quitte à contrarier le partenaire russe. La reconstruction d'un pays ravagé par la guerre – le montant des

dégâts est estimé à 170 milliards d'euros – annonce ainsi une âpre compétition entre les deux associés.

TURQUIE L'OBSESSION KURDE

Naguère intransigeant, le « sultan » Recep Tayyip Erdogan peut lui aussi s'accommoder de la présence sur scène d'El-Assad Jr, dont le mandat expire en 2021. Car le président turc s'assigne une autre priorité, plus vitale à ses yeux : conjurer le spectre de l'éclosion à ses portes d'une entité kurde souveraine. On ne saurait exclure que l'envoi le mois dernier d'un contingent turc dans le secteur d'Idlib préfigure un déploiement durable dans les régions septentrionales contrôlées par les Forces démocratiques syriennes, mouvance assimilée par Ankara à une filiale du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), l'ennemi juré. Si la Turquie, membre indocile de l'Otan, et la Russie ont scellé un rapprochement spectaculaire, le devenir des Kurdes trouble ces retrouvailles : Moscou leur promet l'octroi d'un statut fédéraliste s'ils consentent à un *modus vivendi* avec Damas. Formule que récuse fermement Erdogan.

ARABIE SAOUDITE LA HANTISE CHIITE

La Syrie constitue avec le Yémen, pays à l'agonie, le champ de bataille le plus crucial de la rivalité régionale entre Riyad et Téhéran. Rivalité qu'illustre par ailleurs l'étrange trajectoire du Premier ministre libanais Saad Hariri, contraint à la démission par des « protecteurs » wahhabites qui voient en lui un otage du Hezbollah, et accueilli à Paris le 18 novembre. Nul doute que l'impulsivité de Mohammed ben Salmane, le jeune prince héritier du royaume, contribue à enfiévrer une arène hautement inflammable.

ÉTATS-UNIS AMERICA FIRST, SYRIA LAST

Bien malin qui saura déchiffrer la doctrine de Washington, si doctrine il y a. Le 26 octobre, le secrétaire d'Etat Rex Tillerson claironne que « le règne de la

famille Assad touche à sa fin ». Quinze jours plus tard, on apprend dans la coulisse d'un sommet asiatique à Danang (Vietnam) que Donald Trump et Vladimir Poutine sont convenus d'associer Bachar aux palabres de paix de Genève. Le tandem russo-américain, persuadé qu'« il n'y a pas d'issue militaire à la crise » – à se demander pourquoi ce duo a fait du pays un stand de tir –, envisage un schéma d'un irénisme confondant : cabinet d'union nationale, réforme constitutionnelle, élections générales ouvertes à tous les Syriens. Du moins aux survivants. Que révèle un consensus à ce point paradoxal ? Le désir de désengagement des Etats-Unis, disposés à laisser le champ libre au tsar du Kremlin, pourvu que les intérêts vitaux d'Israël soient préservés et l'ambition iranienne contenue. Epaulés jusqu'alors par le Pentagone, les rebelles kurdes, acteurs décisifs de la reconquête de Raqqa, ont du souci à se faire.

FRANCE UNE PLACE PARMI LES GRANDS ?

Les zigzags de Paris valent bien ceux de Washington. Durant sa campagne victorieuse, Emmanuel Macron avait dénié au rais miraculé toute prétention à jouer un rôle dans l'après-carnage. Mais, au détour d'une interview publiée le 22 juin, il dévoile son *aggiornamento* : le président ne voit plus la destitution d'El-Assad comme « le préalable à tout ». Suit cet argument insolite : « Personne ne m'a présenté de successeur légitime. » L'inflexion procède d'un double dogme. Un, la primauté donnée à la lutte contre le djihadisme. Deux, le souci de normaliser le dialogue avec Moscou. La volonté élyséenne de revenir dans le jeu se heurte pourtant au principe de réalité. Témoin, le modeste écho que recueille le plaidoyer tricolore en faveur d'un « groupe de contact », supposé sortir de l'ornière les discussions genevoises. Cela posé, Paris persiste à souscrire au postulat occidental : Bachar el-Assad n'a pas d'avenir. Soit. Mais il a un passé, écrasant. Et un présent, injustifiable. ■

— Hier, Vladimir Poutine, sans qui rien ne se fait en Syrie, recevait ses homologues turc et iranien à Sotchi.

— À terme, il a le projet de réunir en Russie le Congrès de dialogue national syrien pour une solution politique en Syrie. Il a appelé l'opposition et régime de Damas à faire des concessions.

— Quel est l'objectif de la Russie en Syrie?

En Syrie, Vladimir Poutine veut, dit-il, passer à la phase politique, en gardant l'avantage acquis depuis ces deux dernières années sur le front militaire et consolider ainsi sa position et le retour de l'influence russe dans cette région. Pour mieux orchestrer la transition, le président russe a un sérieux atout: il est le seul chef d'État à parler directement avec tous les acteurs de la crise syrienne.

Autour d'une même table, il a ainsi retrouvé hier, dans sa résidence de Sotchi, les présidents turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan et iranien Hassan Rohani. Ses deux homologues, qui soutiennent des camps opposés, ont a priori des vues radicalement contradictoires, Téhéran étant avec Moscou le principal allié de Damas, Ankara exigeant au contraire jusqu'à peu le renversement du régime.

Cette rencontre à trois intervient juste après le tête-à-tête, toujours à Sotchi lundi soir, de Vladimir Poutine avec Bachar Al Assad. Ces retrouvailles surprises semblent avoir donné le ton: après avoir sauvé son régime sur le point de s'effondrer en 2015, le Kremlin veut inclure le président syrien dans le scénario de transition. En tout cas pour le moment... En coulisse, y compris lors de ses quatre heures d'entretien avec Bachar Al Assad, Vladimir Poutine a en effet peut-être commencé à or-

Vladimir Poutine a peut-être commencé à orchestrer une sortie à terme du président honni, mis au ban par les Occidentaux.

Le devenir de la Syrie entre les mains de la Russie

chestrer une sortie à terme du président honni par une large partie de l'opposition syrienne et mis au ban par les Occidentaux. Le Kremlin devra inclure cette perspective, ou du moins entretenir l'espoir de cette perspective, s'il veut mener à bien son projet de Congrès de dialogue national syrien.

Les autorités russes comptent organiser cette rencontre début décembre, toujours à Sotchi, en invitant les forces prorégime, mais aussi tout le spectre de l'opposition. Afin de préparer ce sommet, encore hautement hypothétique, Vladimir Poutine se démène sur le front diplomatique. Juste après son entretien avec Bachar Al Assad, il a tout de suite appelé les principaux adversaires de Damas. D'abord le président Donald Trump, à qui il a assuré vouloir « œuvrer activement en faveur d'un règlement à long terme du conflit », a insisté le Kremlin. Mais il a aussi appelé le roi Salmane d'Arabie saoudite, le président égyptien Abdel Fattah Al Sissi et le premier ministre israélien Benyamin Netanyahu. Sans surprise, aucun leader européen n'a figuré sur la liste de Vladimir Poutine.

— Que peuvent espérer de Poutine la Turquie et l'Iran?

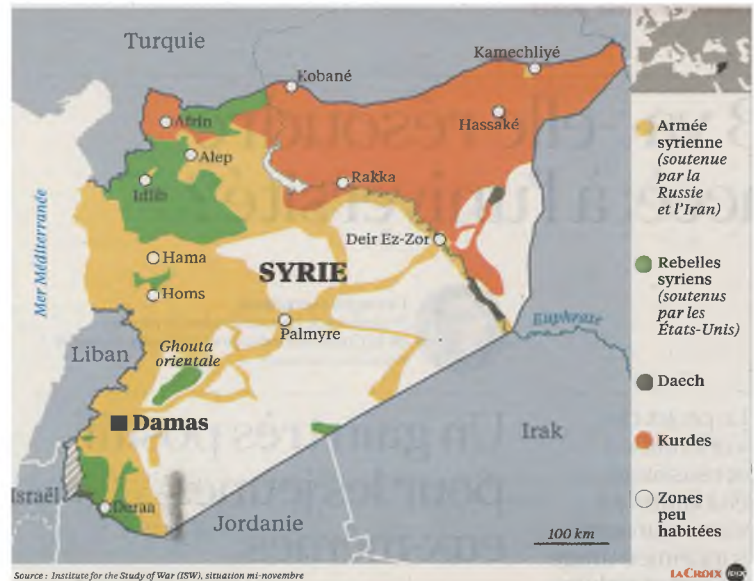
Les présidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan et Hassan Rohani ont chacun leur agenda. L'Iran cherche à obtenir une forme d'approbation pour la présence de ses troupes en Syrie, source de contentieux avec Israël et l'Arabie saoudite. La création – promise par la Russie à Israël – d'une zone tampon de 10 à 15 kilomètres le long de la ligne de contrôle israélienne dans le Golan, où la présence de forces iraniennes et du Hezbollah libanais serait interdite, ne s'est toujours pas concrétisée. De son côté, la Turquie veut obtenir le soutien de la Russie pour son plan visant à affaiblir les Kurdes dans le nord-est de la Syrie. Ankara a récemment appelé à « nettoyer » Afrin, le plus petit des trois cantons kurdes ●●●

●●● syriens, de toute présence des Unités de protection du peuple (YPG), la milice kurde syrienne.

Par ailleurs, Téhéran et Ankara



Bachar Al Assad et Vladimir Poutine sur une affiche à Alep. Le chef de l'État russe est le seul à parler directement avec tous les acteurs de la crise syrienne. Joseph Eid/AFP



sont associés au processus d'As-tana lancé par la Russie (*lire les repères*). Recep Tayyip Erdogan et Hassan Rohani soutiennent la proposition russe de Congrès de dialogue national syrien à Sotchi, mais ils doivent trouver un accord avec Vladimir Poutine sur la question épineuse de la participation des Kurdes syriens.

— Quel rôle pour l'Arabie saoudite?

Alors que Poutine réunissait à Sotchi les présidents iranien et turc, l'Arabie saoudite conviait hier

pas moins de 140 membres de l'opposition syrienne, très diverse, aux côtés du Haut Comité des négociations (HCN), qu'elle soutient et qui représentait jusqu'alors l'opposition aux pourparlers de Genève. Le but, cette fois, est d'élargir cette délégation qui se présentera aux négociations sur le lac Léman, à une opposition proche de Moscou.

« Ce qui est frappant, explique Thomas Pierret, maître de conférences à l'université d'Édimbourg, c'est que les plateformes de Moscou et du Caire, opposition proche de la Russie, ont été invitées avec un nombre de représentants bien

plus élevé que ce qu'elles représentent sur le terrain. » Un signe des concessions faites par Riyad – qui soutient le HCN – à Vladimir Poutine ?

D'autres concessions, comme celle de la permanence de Bachar Al Assad au pouvoir, ont entraîné une série de démissions au sein de l'opposition syrienne, dont celle de Riyad Hijab, le coordinateur du Haut Comité des négociations (HCN). Pour le chercheur, « les rencontres de Sotchi et de Riyad ne changeront pas grand-chose. »

Et pour l'ONU ?

« La tâche principale maintenant est de lancer le processus politique », insistait Vladimir Poutine, lundi, à Sotchi, en recevant Bachar Al Assad. Un processus politique qui devrait finalement être mis en œuvre sous les auspices de l'ONU. « Nous espérons que l'ONU rejoindra ce processus dans son

repères

De Genève... à Astana

Mars 2016. Début du premier round de pourparlers organisé à Genève pour tenter de mettre un terme à la guerre en Syrie. Conduits par l'envoyé spécial de l'ONU, Staffan de Mistura, les six rounds suivants n'ont pas permis de grandes avan-

étape finale », a insisté le président russe. Les Nations unies parraient le processus de Genève et son huitième cycle de pourparlers qui doit s'ouvrir le 28 novembre en présence de l'envoyé spécial des Nations unies pour la Syrie, Staffan de Mistura.

Les négociations doivent se concentrer sur la gouvernance, la rédaction d'un projet de nouvelle

cées. Le huitième et dernier se tient à partir du 28 novembre sur le lac Léman.

Janvier 2017. La première séance de pourparlers sur la Syrie, parrainée par la Russie et l'Iran, alliés de Damas, et la Turquie, se déroule à Astana au Kazakhstan. Ces discussions réunissent des représentants du gouvernement syrien et ceux de l'opposition, notam-

ment des rebelles armés.

Ils permettent la mise en place de quatre « zones de désescalade » sur le territoire syrien et l'ouverture de discussions entre représentants du régime et de l'opposition sur des questions militaires. La création d'une cinquième zone et le déploiement de troupes des trois pays garants de la zone de désescalade d'Idlib sont envisagés.

Constitution et la tenue d'élections conformément au mandat défini par la résolution 2254 du Conseil de sécurité, adoptée en 2015. Toute la question est de savoir comment les négociations de Genève peuvent ou non s'articuler sur la réunion de Sotchi et sur l'éventuel Congrès de dialogue national syrien, concocté par Moscou. Et le compromis qui pourrait en sortir :

« Vu le rapport de force déséquilibré sur le terrain, avec la faiblesse de l'opposition au plus mal militairement, souligne Thomas Pierret, l'exercice de négociations semble bien futile. »

François d'Alañçon, Benjamin Quénelle (à Moscou) et Agnès Rotivel

Le Point

17 novembre 2017

Dalkurd, le club suédois qui fait la fierté des Kurdes

Stockholm (AFP) - 17/11/2017
http://www.lepoint.fr

LASSÉS des guerres et des persécutions, les Kurdes du monde entier amoureux du ballon rond vibrent au rythme des succès de Dalkurd, un club fondé en Suède par leur communauté, et qui vient de rejoindre l'élite.

Créé il y a treize ans par des immigrants kurdes dans la petite ville de Borlänge au centre de la Suède entre lacs et forêts, Dalkurd a gagné fin octobre son billet pour la première division suédoise (Allsvenskan), sous les hourras de ses supporters déchaînés arborant fièrement le drapeau kurde.

Cette réussite a été acclamée par l'ensemble de la communauté kurde, un peuple touché par la répression en Turquie, et bouleversé par les conséquences du référendum controversé sur l'indépendance du Kurdistan irakien fin septembre.

"J'étais très heureux quand j'ai vu leurs bons résultats", se réjouit Ahmed Karim, habitant d'Erbil, la capitale du Kurdistan irakien.

"J'espère qu'ils représenteront le sport kurde dans le monde, parce que nous, au Moyen-Orient, nous n'avons pas notre propre équipe", souligne-t-il.

Les Kurdes, entre 25 et 35 millions de personnes réparties majoritairement dans quatre pays --le sud-est de la Turquie, le nord de la Syrie, l'Irak et l'Iran -- n'ont pas de statut reconnu dans aucun de ces pays.



Dalkurd, le club suédois qui fait la fierté des Kurdes © TT NEWS AGENCY/AFP/Archives / Ulf PALM TT NEWS AGENCY/AFP/Archives

"Des millions de Kurdes dansent de joie [...]. C'est tellement merveilleux de leur donner ce bonheur", s'était réjoui Rawez Lawan, l'auteur du but de la victoire synonyme d'accession (1-0 face au Gais Göteborg, le 28 octobre), auprès de l'agence de presse TT.

"C'est plus que du football", avait conclu ce milieu de terrain, qui fait partie d'une équipe composée à majorité de joueurs d'origine kurde, mais qui est également cosmopolite.

EN ROUTE POUR LA LIGUE DES CHAMPIONS ?

Pour l'entraîneur-adjoint Amir Azrafshan c'est le dynamisme de chacun, qu'ils soient Kurdes, Américains, Palestinien ou Gambien, qui a contribué à la victoire.

"Ils ont tous quelque chose en commun quand il s'agit de relever un défi[...]. Ils sont poussés par la pression", confit-il.

D'abord projet social destiné à aider les jeunes en difficulté à s'intégrer dans la société, le club est devenu une référence dans le football suédois.

"Cela nous prouve que nous pouvons réussir", se félicite le journaliste suédois d'origine kurde Kurdo Baksi.

En février 2016, le quotidien Aftonbladet révélait que 49 % du club avait été acheté par deux "frères milliardaires" kurdes, Kawa et Sarkat Junad.

"Nous voulons gagner et être dans la plus

haute division le plus rapidement possible, j'adorerais voir le Dalkurd en Ligue des champions", avait à l'époque déclaré Sarkat Junad.

DES MONTAGNES ORIENTALES AUX VALLÉES SUÉDOISES

Avec plus d'un million et demi de fans sur sa page Facebook, le club est devenu un symbole de l'unité kurdo-suédoise. En témoigne son drapeau qui mélange deux chevaux de Dalécarlie --des figurines en bois traditionnelles de la région-- sur un fond rouge, blanc et vert, les couleurs de drapeau kurde.

"La Suède nous a donné la possibilité de nous sentir en liberté et de recevoir une éducation que nous n'avions pas" dans notre pays d'origine, a déclaré le président du club Ramazan Kizil.

"On nous a beaucoup donné et nous allons le rendre à cette société", a-t-il ajouté.

Les Kurdes --qui habitent principalement dans des régions montagneuses au Moyen-Orient-- ont un vieil adage selon lequel ils n'ont "pas d'amis mais des montagnes".

De quoi faire dire à Kurdo Baksi que "ce n'est pas une coïncidence si les Kurdes ont quitté leurs montagnes et se sont retrouvés dans les vallées de Suède".

16 équipes disputeront la saison 2018-2019 du championnat de Suède de première division. Pour l'occasion, Dalkurd quittera Borlänge pour s'installer à Uppsala, à 70 km au nord de Stockholm. ●

Le Monde

24 NOVEMBRE 2017

En Syrie, Vladimir Poutine bute sur la question kurde

Hôtes du dirigeant russe à Sotchi, les présidents iranien et turc ont approuvé le projet d'un Congrès national syrien

SOTCHI (RUSSIE) - envoyée spéciale

Vladimir Poutine entrevoit une issue au conflit en Syrie et aimerait en récolter les lauriers. « Les combats à grande échelle contre les terroristes en Syrie touchent à leur fin, a-t-il déclaré, mercredi 22 novembre. Grâce aux efforts de la Russie, de l'Iran et de la Turquie, nous avons pu éviter la désintégration de la Syrie. » Reste à trouver les prémices d'un règlement politique, et cet objectif a fait l'objet d'une intense préparation par le chef du Kremlin, qui recevait ses homologues iranien et turc, Hassan Rohani et Recep Tayyip Erdogan, dans la station balnéaire russe de Sotchi.

L'étape suivante a déjà un nom, le Congrès du dialogue national syrien, dont le principe a été approuvé par les trois chefs d'Etat. Mais les conditions de son organisation ont échoué sur le profil des participants, alors qu'aucune date n'a été fixée. C'était pourtant la deuxième tentative, après l'annonce prématurée, par Moscou, de la tenue d'un tel congrès le 18 novembre à Sotchi, associant le régime syrien et l'ensemble des forces politiques de ce pays détruit par six années de guerre. Pour Poutine, ce projet est la « clé » du processus de négociations lancé en 2014 à Genève, sous l'égide de l'ONU, afin d'aboutir à la rédaction d'une nouvelle Constitution, puis à des élections en Syrie « sous le contrôle des Nations unies ».

Mais le Turc Erdogan est resté intransigeant, pour refuser qu'assiste au Congrès du PYD, un parti kurde syrien lié au Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), en guerre contre l'Etat turc. « Il est hors de question de nous trouver à la même table que des organisations terroristes », a martelé M. Erdogan devant la presse, ajoutant : « Il n'est pas possible de discuter avec des gens qui veulent diviser ce pays et semer la terreur. » Malgré deux heures de discussions dans



Les présidents russe, turc et iranien étaient réunis mercredi pour un sommet consacré à la crise syrienne. @ AFP

un ancien sanatorium stalinien rénové en complexe luxueux, le dirigeant turc, qui était venu avec sa propre liste de participants potentiels, n'a pas voulu en démordre. Or, le PYD et sa milice armée sont la principale composante des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), une coalition arabo-kurde qui a remporté les principaux succès militaires contre le groupe de l'Etat islamique (EI), notamment à Rakka, la « capitale » syrienne du califat djihadiste, avec le soutien actif de la coalition internationale dirigée par les Etats-Unis. Moscou veut s'assurer que le Congrès, à l'initiative duquel il se trouve, ne débouchera pas sur un échec, faute de représentativité de tous les acteurs qui pèsent sur le terrain.

Imposer Assad dans le jeu

Les opérations militaires « touchent à leur fin », avait expliqué un peu plus tôt en introduction M. Poutine, et la suite dépendra « des compromis et des concessions de tous, y compris, bien sûr, du gouvernement syrien ». Mais, au même moment, une autre déconvenue lui est parvenue d'Arabie saoudite : le chef du Kremlin a été informé par son représentant spécial pour la Syrie, Alexandre Lavrentiev, présent à Riyad, que les différents groupes de l'opposition syrienne réunis dans la capitale saoudienne refusaient de s'engager dans une transition politique dans laquelle Bachar Al-Assad jouerait encore un rôle. Ce dernier avait été reçu par Vladimir Poutine pendant plus de trois heures

Selon le chef du Kremlin, la suite dépendra « des compromis et des concessions de tous, y compris du gouvernement syrien »

dans la résidence présidentielle à Sotchi, à la veille du sommet tripartite de mercredi. Accolade à l'appui, le président russe escomptait bien, alors, en lui renouvelant ostensiblement son soutien, imposer son allié syrien dans le jeu.

Mercredi, aucun des trois chefs d'Etat présents à Sotchi ne s'est prononcé sur l'avenir de Bachar Al-Assad, allant même jusqu'à omettre de prononcer son nom. Du moins, le président russe peut-il se targuer d'avoir obtenu le soutien de ses partenaires iranien et turc sur le principe du Congrès, alors qu'un nouveau round de négociations pour la paix en Syrie, le cinquième depuis 2014, doit débuter à Genève le 28 novembre. Ce sera « un bon stimulant », a fait valoir M. Poutine, qui avait pris soin, au préalable, de s'entretenir au téléphone avec plusieurs dirigeants, dont son homologue américain Donald Trump. « Les bases de Daech [acronyme arabe de l'EI] ont été détruites, a approuvé l'Iranien Rohani. Le but principal, maintenant, est de [rassembler] toutes les couches

de la société syrienne afin d'établir une nouvelle Constitution. »

Parrains des accords d'Astana (Kazakhstan), qui ont permis de réduire la violence des combats en Syrie avec la création de quatre zones de « désescalade », la Russie et ses partenaires iranien et turc cherchent à pousser leur avantage sur le volet politique, alors que les groupes djihadistes sont aujourd'hui acculés dans des poches de plus en plus réduites.

Cela ne signifie pas pour autant que les forces militaires engagées par le trio en Syrie vont se retirer. Le sommet de Sotchi avait été précédé, la veille, par la réunion, au même endroit, du chef d'état-major de l'armée russe, Valeri Guerassimov, et de ses homologues turc, Hulusi Akar, et iranien, Mohammad Baqeri. « Des mesures ont été adoptées pour améliorer le niveau de coordination dans la zone de désescalade d'Idlib et pour éliminer les unités restantes en Syrie de l'Etat islamique et du Front Al-Nosra [lié à Al-Qaida et rebaptisé Fatah Al-Cham] », a fait savoir le ministère russe de la défense. La région d'Idlib est toujours soumise à des bombardements et l'armée russe a déjà annoncé qu'elle conserverait ses bases en Syrie.

A Sotchi, les discussions se sont poursuivies autour d'un dîner, mais c'est désormais à un « groupe de travail » mixte, mêlant diplomates et militaires, qu'a été confiée la mission de trouver les « compromis et concessions » nécessaires à la réunion du Congrès syrien souhaité par le Kremlin. ■

ISABELLE MANDRAUD

Gorran and PUK discuss 'interim government' in meeting

By Rudaw 22/11/2017

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Gorran and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) met in Sulaimani, their first meeting since the independence referendum.

Kurdish parties have been engaged in intensive talks after Baghdad rejected the vote and Iraqi forces pushed the Peshmerga back to 2003 borders. In the wake of the losses, Gorran has called for the establishment of an interim government tasked with talking to Baghdad and preparing for elections.

Hero Ibrahim, among other PUK leaders, met with Gorran's leadership and head Omar Sayeed Ali on Wednesday.

The PUK's Imad Ahmad told reporters they discussed "catastrophic" events that led to the loss of Kirkuk and other areas, among

other issues of concern.

Asked about Gorran's proposal for an interim government that has been officially presented to both the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Ahmad said cryptically, "This will become a project for all of us."

Gorran, which had initially called for the dissolution of the KRG, is now pushing for an "interim government" after the PUK and KDP refused the more drastic move.

Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and his deputy Qubad Talabani, who have been praised internationally as "new leadership," met with Gorran on Tuesday.

PM Barzani said he does not fully understand Gorran's position, saying the current KRG is "interim" itself. The parliament voted in October to postpone elections for



Gorran and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Kurdistan's second and third largest parties, meet in Sulaimani on November 22, 2017. The two share an alliance agreement and a joint leadership. Photo: Sbeiy

eight months and extend its own mandate until elections are held.

Gorran also put forward several proposals: addressing the delayed and reduced salaries of KRG employees, ensuring the protection of the sovereignty of the Kurdistan Region and preventing other countries from fighting proxy wars in the Kurdistan Region, and holding free and fair elections on time.

Barzani said he has listened to their demands. He was also expected to invite Gorran's ministers who

were suspended in 2015.

Gorran only returned to the parliament after Masoud Barzani resigned from the presidency on November 1. The party had called Masoud Barzani's term illegal, after it was twice extended. The dispute soured relations between Gorran and Barzani's KDP. ■

Gorran unveils 7-month interim government roadmap

By Rudaw.net 23/11/2017

SULAIMANI, Kurdistan Region – Gorran unveiled its roadmap for the establishment of an interim government the party wants tasked with preparing for talks with the Iraqi government, preparing for free and fair elections, and making changes to Kurdistan's financial, security, and diplomatic bodies.

The proposal set a seven-month time limit on the interim government, coinciding with the end of parliament's extended mandate, and mainly targets the finance and Peshmerga ministries that were run by the party before it was suspended from the government in 2015.

Gorran argued that an interim government is needed to establish a "strong and active" government capable of handling the "sensitive and dangerous" situation after the October 16 events that resulted in the loss of most of the disputed areas after the Kurdistan vote on independence.

The party did not support or oppose the referendum that saw nearly 93 percent support for leaving Iraq. The vote was opposed by Iraq, neighbouring countries, and most international allies.

Gorran has already presented its interim government roadmap to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the two main ruling parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party



(KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). None have officially committed to the plan, but the PUK's Imad Ahmad stated on Wednesday that it will become a joint project for all the parties, without giving further details.

Gorran backtracked from its initial demand that called for the KRG cabinet to be dissolved after it was rejected by both the PUK and the KDP.

The interim government must reflect a "true partnership" based on the outcome of the last parliamentary elections held in 2013, the Gorran roadmap stated.

Gorran is Kurdistan Region's second-largest party with 24 seats in the parliament following the KDP

with 38 seats. The PUK has 18 seats in the 111-seat chamber.

The would-be interim government has to establish a "strong" negotiation team from the interim government and the parliament tasked with holding dialogue with Baghdad on the basis of the Iraqi constitution.

Gorran said the Kurdistan parliament and the judiciary should continue to function as normal.

Getting into specifics, the roadmap set out a 4-month plan and a 7-month plan.

Within four months, Gorran said the following steps must be implemented: change oil policy within the framework of the Iraqi constitution and in light of Kurdistan's oil and gas law; restructure economic policy in such a way that ensures an accurate government payroll and restructure tariffs and taxes per the laws already in place; fight corruption by activating the integrity body and the office of the public prosecutor; change and restructure the foreign department to ensure a foreign policy that keeps a "balance" of Kurdish parties represented in missions abroad; remove "obstacles" that prevent ministers from using all their powers; and cancel "those illegal decisions and

actions" that were made while Gorran ministers and the parliament speaker were suspended.

The 7-month plan focuses on preparations for elections, including a "clean" voter list and amendments to the representation system. Under the current system, MPs represent just their party – not a constituency. Gorran wants the introduction of multiple electoral districts.

It also calls for the unification of the Peshmerga and the force's reorganizing in light of the Iraqi constitu-

tion and Iraqi defense system, giving the Peshmerga minister "all powers" to enact this; reactivation of the committee tasked with drafting a constitution for the Kurdistan Region and "applying the principles of the parliamentary system" in the constitution of the Kurdistan Region; and decentralization in order to give provinces financial and administrative powers.

Gorran met with a PUK delegation in Sulaimani on Wednesday to discuss the roadmap a day after

meeting with a KRG delegation headed by PM Barzani on Tuesday.

Kurdistan's largest Islamic party, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), with 10 seats in the parliament, has also called for an interim government to be established until elections are held.

The Kurdistan parliament in late October postponed the November 1 parliamentary and presidential elections and extended its term by eight months.

Gorran only returned to the par-

liament after Masoud Barzani resigned from the presidency on November 1. The party had called Masoud Barzani's term illegal after it was twice extended. The dispute soured relations between Gorran and Barzani's KDP. ■



26 November 2017

Inside Tuz Khurmatu: Kurdish homes targeted under Hashd rule

By Hunar Ahmed 26/11/2017
www.rudaw.net

KHURMATU, Kurdistan Region – Many houses in the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Tuz Khurmatu have been looted, burned and bombed, or appear to have been appropriated by the Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi.

Rudaw's war correspondent Hunar Ahmad and cameraman Mohammed Jawhar documented widespread destruction in the ethnically diverse town – the first investigative report by Kurdish media since the town fell to Iraqi forces and Shiite militia on October 16.

About 3,000 houses appear to have been confiscated – Shiite Turkmen slogans are scrawled on the walls. About 2,000 houses have been looted, according to figures from Kurdish parties. Some 400 houses have been set on fire and more than 50 have been bombed.

The home of an official looks like it was looted of all its contents before being bombed and burned. Just the basic structure remains.

The houses that were targeted mainly belong to volunteer Peshmerga or those who cooperated with the Peshmerga.

A local guide with Rudaw's team helped them to avoid Hashd checkpoints inside the city. Rudaw is banned from operating in Iraqi-controlled areas.

The guide described the tense situation of the now-abandoned Kurdish areas in Khurmatu, southeast of Kirkuk.

"The Kurds are afraid to come back," he said, driving the Rudaw team through scarred neighbourhoods.

"The Sunni Arabs from the town were told they will be safe if they returned to their homes. But to this day, they are being killed. There was a bombing the other day that killed 70 to 80 of them, and injured 90. This is what makes people afraid to return."

He said the Kurds are afraid they will suffer the same fate.

"Last night they bombed two more houses. One belongs to a Kurd who is called Jahangir," he



A burned-out Kurdish store in the town of Tuz Khurmatu alongside an untouched property marked as belonging to a member of the Shia Turkoman community.

added, explaining why it is hard for Kurds to trust the forces now based in the town.

Banners that paid tribute to fallen Peshmerga have been burned. Buildings of Kurdish parties have been burned or bombed, or turned into a base for Iraqi forces.

Graffiti on the wall of the moderate Islamic Kurdistan Union reads "No, no for the traitors. Yes, yes for united Iraq."

The destruction was also evident in one of the town's markets, Halwest Bazaar, where about 180

shops were looted and burned. Other large markets in Khurmatu suffered the same fate.

Hashd al-Shaabi fighters and the Federal Police prevent residents from moving to other areas, confiscating their belongings and giving no reason for stopping the people. ■





Iran reaps economic and strategic rewards from Iraqi-Kurdish dispute



Paul Iddon
24 November, 2017
Paul Iddon is a freelance journalist based in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan who writes about Middle East affairs

www.alaraby.co.uk

ANALYSIS: The rise of Iran-backed militias in northern Iraq gives Tehran a geopolitical opening, but there are no guarantees it will be able to consolidate power there, writes Paul Iddon.

Just over a month after Kirkuk and other areas disputed between Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan were seized by the Iraqi army and the Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) umbrella group of mostly Shia militias, Tehran looks set to become a major, if not the principal, benefactor - at least for now.

Iran reportedly helped Iraq seize Kirkuk so swiftly on October 16 by brokering a deal between Baghdad and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a major Kurdish party which constituted the predominant political entity in Kirkuk and whose Peshmerga fighters constituted the most significant Kurdish paramilitary force in the area.

Iran had threatened the PUK beforehand, reportedly also offering them incentives to surrender the entire province without a fight, as they subsequently did.

The next day, Kurdish Peshmerga loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) also withdrew from disputed areas they had controlled, including the Sinjar region where the Islamic State group had subjected the Yazidi minority to a campaign of genocide.

PMF forces, many loyal to Iran, had already seized some villages from IS in Sinjar and clearly coveted a significant foothold in that strategically important region for some time.

OIL-RICH KIRKUK

In Kirkuk, invariably described with the prefix "oil-rich", Iraq will supply crude oil to the refinery in the Iranian Kurdish city of Kermanshah as part of a new agreement.

"Under the new agreement," reported Reuters, "the first oil will be trucked across the border in the coming days. Initially Iran will receive 15,000 barrels per day, worth nearly \$1 million, rising gradually to 60,000 bpd, according to Iraqi officials and trading sources."

Most of Kirkuk's oil was hitherto piped to Ceyhan in Turkey and sold on the international markets. Iran hopes that the construction of a pipeline to its central provinces can give it easy access to the oil of that resource-rich region.

Tehran no doubt sees attaining a significant stake of Kirkuk's oil exports as significant and perhaps, at least partially, sees it through the lens of its cold war with Israel.

In 2015, the Financial Times reported that two-thirds of Israel's oil supply was independently exported by the Kurds. Iranian press out-



Iran-backed PMF militias were instrumental in the fight against IS [AFP]

lets and officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, routinely referred to the September 25 Kurdish independence referendum as an Israeli plot to divide Iraq and create a "new Israel".

Last month's retaking of Kirkuk by Baghdad put a major dent in Kurdistan's potential as a major independent oil exporter and, from the

Last month's retaking of Kirkuk by Baghdad put a major dent in Kurdistan's potential as a major independent oil exporter

Iranian regime's vantage point, therefore disadvantaged Israeli interests in the region.

The PMF presence in Sinjar could also give Tehran another strategic boost in the region and, ultimately, against Israel.

STRATEGIC SINJAR

Sinjar is significant in Tehran's eyes since it could provide a secure route stretching all the way from Iran's border with Iraq's Diyala province - of which Iran-backed PMF forces control large swathes for years - through Sinjar on the Syrian border, all the way to Syria's Mediterranean coastline, which also makes resupplying Hezbollah in Lebanon much easier.

Al-Monitor columnist Mahmut Bozarsian quoted the former deputy of the Kurdish Gorran (Change) Movement, who assesses the situation as follows: "For Iran, [Sinjar] is the key to an Iran-Syria connection via Iraq. If Iran can control [Sinjar], it will have easy access to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Also don't forget there are Sunni

areas in [Sinjar]. To keep Sunnis under observation is important for Iran."

Mount Sinjar itself is an area of immense strategic importance.

Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein attempted to use the high ground of the region to build an artillery super-gun to target Israel. This never materialised, largely due to his military defeat in the 1991 Gulf War.

PMF fighters quickly took position on the mountain shortly after taking over Sinjar last month. One anonymous Kurdish official has said that control over the mountain could give Tehran "control of the area", adding that it could even "launch an attack on Tel Aviv".

Israel has launched numerous pre-emptive airstrikes since January 2013 to destroy advanced missile silos in Syria, which the Israelis claim Hezbollah could have obtained and used against them in a future war. Were Iran to send heavy weapons or missiles capable of targeting Israel to its proxies in Sinjar, the Israelis may well extend their intermittent Syrian airstrikes across the border into northern Iraq.

It's much more likely that Tehran will, at most, use Sinjar as a transit route as described by Bozarsian.

DISPUTED TERRITORIES

Kirkuk, Sinjar and the other territories retaken by the Iraqi army and PMF from the Peshmerga last month are constitutionally disputed between Baghdad and Erbil, the legal status of which can only be conclusively resolved through implementation of the Iraqi Constitution's Article 140.

On October 20, the US State Department released a statement which unequivocally asserted this.

The Kurds completely controlled Kirkuk following the Iraqi army's retreat in the face of the lightning IS advance in June 2014. Sinjar, on the other hand, has been under Kurdish control since 2003, as was Khanqin and other territories seized by the Iraqi/PMF forces last month.

Given the nature of these territories, Iran's proxies may not be able to feasibly justify a permanent presence there, especially if the political situation in Iraq changes in the near future. Baghdad would likely accept power-sharing agreements with the Kurds in the near

Were Iran to send heavy weapons or missiles capable of targeting Israel to its proxies in Sinjar, the Israelis may well extend their intermittent Syrian airstrikes across the border into northern Iraq

◆ future, something the United States, allied as it is with both sides, would doubtlessly welcome.

This could potentially limit Iran's ability to move proxy forces and weapons to Syria through these territories.

These aren't the only circumstances whereby Iran may find it difficult to entrench their proxies. Kirkuk is a Sunni-majority region, save

for some Shia Turkmen, which cannot feasibly be controlled and/or policed and stabilised by PMF militias. It certainly cannot remain a stable province without the participation - especially in regards to the administration of the region - of the Kurdish-majority there.

Also, as Bozarsian points out, Iran has "no religious or ethnic ties to Sinjar", which could make it harder for it to retain a significant foothold there in the long term.

So, while Iran has a lot to gain from the Iraqi takeover of these territories, these are still early days and the ultimate outcome from last month's tumultuous events is far from clear. The situation may again change in the foreseeable future - and not necessarily to Tehran's advantage. ◆



23 November 2017

KRG asks Baghdad to respect Federal Court ruling on referendum

By Rudaw 23/11/2017

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has asked the Iraqi government to act on the Federal Court ruling that cancelled the Kurdistan referendum on independence.

Monday's court ruling demands that "all unjust procedures, outcomes and consequences be cancelled that were taken by the Iraqi government and the parliament against the Kurdistan Region solely in response to the referendum," KRG spokesperson Saeed Dizayee on Thursday said in a published statement interpreting the court verdict.

He named some of Baghdad's punitive measures against the Kurdistan Region: the international flight ban, slashing the budget share, and efforts in the Iraqi parliament to punish Kurdish MPs who voted for independence.

Other measures announced by the Iraqi parliament on September 27, including the deployment of federal forces to disputed areas, must be reversed, he demanded.

The government spokesperson did not indicate whether the KRG would also respect the ruling, as Baghdad has demanded.

The court ruled on Monday that the September 25 independence referendum is "unconstitutional" and therefore its results and "all of its consequences" are null and void.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Tuesday that he welcomes the ruling.

The Kurdistan Region parliament has rejected the court ruling, deputy speaker Jaafar Imniki told Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency on Wednesday.

In remarks also published by the official website of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Imniki took a similar stance to former President Masoud Barzani.

He said the Federal Court was established before the constitution came into effect and, as such, does not have the power to decide on the constitutional validity of the referendum.

"The decision by the Federal Court with regard to annulling the referendum of the Kurdistan Region is political, has no constitutional basis. The Kurdistan parliament rejects it," he stated.

Imniki headed parliament's September 15 session that voted to hold the referendum. The motion states that the government must consult the parliament with respect to the result of the plebiscite.

The KRG has so far offered to freeze the results of the referendum in exchange for unconditional dialogue with Baghdad.

Dizayee criticized Abadi of "mere words" without action on issues like committing Baghdad to pay the salaries of KRG state employees.

The KRG said on November 1 that it is willing to send Baghdad its list of state employees collected over the past year through biometric registration aimed at combatting ghost employees and double entries. The final payroll includes 1.2 million employees with a cost of \$772 million a month.

Dizayee said Thursday that Baghdad has so far refused to accept the biometric list.

Abadi has said several times that Baghdad would pay state salaries, but he has questioned the KRG's numbers. He said on Tuesday that an audit would have to be done.

The KRG spokesperson also demanded Abadi and his government use the official name of the "Kurdistan Region," as any other "invented word for the Kurdistan Region is clearly unconstitutional and we reject it."



Members of a Kurdish Peshmerga battalion showing their ink-stained fingers in front of a Kurdish flag after voting in the Kurdish independence referendum in Erbil. File photo: AFP / Safin Hamed

Abadi said defended the official use of "the provinces of the Kurdistan region."

"There are provinces in the Kurdistan Region," he said in a press conference on Tuesday. He added though that the official name of "Kurdistan Region," remains in place.

The people of Kurdistan with all of its components are unanimous in their intent to "protect the constitutional unity of the Kurdistan Region and will never compromise in this regard," Dizayee said.

Both Erbil and Baghdad insist that the constitution is on their side. The KRG argues that the central government violated almost one third of the constitution, thereby pushing Kurdistan to hold the referendum.

Erbil's main objections are Baghdad's failure to implement Article 140, addressing the disputed areas, and the draft 2018 budget bill that attempts to cut the KRG's share of the 2018 budget and downgrade

the official status of the Kurdistan Region.

Abadi insists that his demands, including extending federal authority to the 2003 borders and Kurdistan Region's international borders, are constitutional and Erbil must cooperate.

Dizayee also criticized Baghdad's failure to pay Peshmerga salaries. The Kurdish forces are part of the official Iraqi defense system, yet the post-Saddam Hussein government in Baghdad has never covered their payroll, even after Abadi praised their contribution to the war against ISIS.

He provided the latest figures for the Peshmerga casualties in the war on ISIS: 1,082 killed, 10,233 injured, and 62 missing. ■

L'après-Daech s'annonce explosif pour el-Assad, pressé par les Kurdes et les Turcs

JACQUES MASSEY — 24.11.2017

<http://www.slate.fr>

Tandis que Vladimir Poutine a échafaudé, depuis Sotchi, des plans de paix avec ses homologues turcs et iraniens, Bachar el-Assad s'active pour reprendre le contrôle des territoires qu'il a perdus dans le nord de la Syrie. Avec deux gros obstacles sur son chemin: les Kurdes et les Turcs.

«Une chose à la fois. Notre priorité opérationnelle reste la guerre contre les djihadistes, pas contre les Kurdes...» Celui qui s'exprime dans un vaste bureau aux fenêtres obturées, dans le quartier résidentiel de Mazzè, non loin de l'aéroport militaire de Damas, est un ami d'enfance de Bachar el-Assad. Son point de vue est aussi celui des généraux, même si le petit cercle de conseillers politiques du président syrien ne se confond pas avec celui des patrons de la sécurité. Leur raisonnement est adossé à un constat simple:

«Les Américains ne savent pas eux-mêmes ce qu'ils feront lorsque Daech aura définitivement perdu la partie. Mais ils pourraient vite se retirer de Syrie. Alors leurs alliés du moment, les Kurdes, viendront tranquillement discuter avec nous du statut des territoires qu'ils tiennent depuis quatre ans; on parle là de 30% du territoire syrien et de près de trois millions d'habitants.»

Il est aussi vrai que le souvenir des relations passées entre le mouvement kurde et le régime de Damas peut encore servir de garantie... Reste cette interrogation: «Les Russes récusent bien sûr la présence durable de forces américaines dans le nord du pays, mais nous ne savons pas tout de leurs échanges avec Washington. Notamment à propos du statut réservé aux



Kurdes. Cette question fait-elle déjà partie ou pas de leurs "deals"?

L'ÉPINEUX PROBLÈME DU DÉSARMEMENT

Pas plus qu'il n'imagine quitter le pouvoir, le président syrien n'entérine en tout cas aucun des bouleversements démographiques provoqués par les combats. Selon notre interlocuteur, il n'est donc pas question d'accepter que les Kurdes perpétuent la gouvernance qu'ils exercent actuellement sur les villes de la Djézireh, cette grande plaine qui court le long de la frontière avec la Turquie et l'Irak. «Ils n'y ont jamais été majoritaires de toute façon.» Dont acte!

Difficile dès lors d'imaginer que la création de l'Assemblée civile prônée par les Unités de protection du peuple (YPG) et leur parti (le PYD), assortie d'élections locales et d'un référendum sur une large autonomie, soit validée en l'état. En outre, la démilitarisation de cette force constituerait un préalable. Or, son désarmement n'est vraiment pas d'actualité. Après tout, les YPG –quelques 30.000 combattants et combattantes en comptant les Arabes musulmans et chrétiens enrôlés dans leurs rangs– ont payé le prix fort pour gagner leur liberté. Dans leurs récentes offensives anti-Daech, 1.200 des leurs auraient été tués, dont 434 lors de la seule prise de Raqqa. Et plus du double auraient été blessés, selon des estimations de la coalition internationale.

VERS UNE «LARGE DÉCENTRALISATION»?

Pour éviter d'agacer les alliés russes qui s'activent en coulisse autour d'un plan de paix, le ministre des Affaires étrangères Walid Moallem a évoqué l'hypothèse d'une négociation sur un statut fédéral pour les Kurdes dès le 25 septembre sur une chaîne de télévision moscovite. La formule dite «de large décentralisation» –qui a les faveurs de Moscou– est assurément la seule qui permettrait d'éviter des affrontements durables entre ces protagonistes. Sans aucun hasard, les autorités kurdes ont ensuite été invitées à participer à une conférence pour traiter du sujet. L'idée d'un Congrès des peuples de Syrie, auquel seraient conviées une trentaine d'organisations politiques a été lancée par Vladimir Poutine lors d'un forum universitaire.

Seul problème: ce rendez-vous prévu le 18 novembre à Sotchi n'a pas été du goût du président turc Recep Tayyip Erdogan, associé au processus. À la place, le Kremlin a dû opter pour une rencontre au sommet, quatre jours plus tard, avec l'autocrate turc et l'Iranien Hassan Rohani – qui se sont finalement ralliés à l'agenda proposé. Difficile de se défilier quand, entre quatre yeux, Poutine assène: «Je pense qu'il est maintenant temps de passer au processus politique...»

Pour autant, la tension reste forte entre les Kurdes et l'armée de Bachar autour de Deir-ez-Zor, où l'Euphrate coule jusqu'à la frontière irakienne. Malgré une commune détermination pour coincer ce qui reste de l'organisation État islamique dans une enclave quasi désertique en bordure de la frontière syro-irakienne, un rude bras de fer est engagé pour contrôler les territoires repris aux terroristes. Sur la rive orientale du fleuve, sont positionnés les Kurdes et des Arabes ralliés aux Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS). Nom de code de cette opération soutenue par les forces spéciales américaines et l'aviation des pays de la coalition internationale: «Cizire Storm»

LA TURQUIE SUR LA DÉFENSIVE

Pour leur part, les troupes syriennes, iraniennes et russes tiennent la rive ouest jusqu'à Al-Boukamal, à la frontière irakienne. Une «ligne de déconfliction» a bien été établie pour éviter que les frictions ne dégèrent. Mais la retenue n'est pas toujours à l'ordre du jour quand il s'agit de décider du sort des importants champs pétroliers d'Al-Jufra et d'Al-Omar –où opéraient avant la guerre Shell et Total–, et du gisement gazier de Conoco. Un compromis qui rétablirait l'autorité de l'État syrien sur les sites pétrolifères disputés reste à ce jour une simple hypothèse de sortie de crise. En pareil cas, les Kurdes syriens montreraient qu'ils préfèrent éviter une longue confrontation, se contentant des gisements à bout de souffle de Rmeilane et de Karatchouk situés sur «leur» Rojava, près d'Hassaké.

Même si elle trouve son origine dans un compromis passé par Vladimir Poutine avec Erdogan en 2016, la présence de forces turques aux confins des territoires passés sous domination kurde préoccupe plus encore les dirigeants syriens. Et là aussi Bachar el-Assad va devoir jouer finement s'il veut retrouver ses prérogatives. Depuis leur opération Bouclier de l'Euphrate engagée en août 2016, des troupes d'Ankara sont cantonnées sur un saillant d'une trentaine de kilomètres de profondeur allant de la ville frontière de Jarabulus jusqu'à la localité d'Al Bab, au nord d'Alep.

À partir de la mi-octobre, un autre contingent –quelque 500 hommes épaulés par des blindés, selon les médias turcs– a pris position dans la province d'Idlib, située entre la Rojava kurde et la frontière syro-turque. Ankara doit en principe y tenir 14 postes d'observation –en fait de véritables camps retranchés– selon le point 6 des



Frappe aérienne en Syrie, le 23 novembre - Amer ALMOHIBANY / AFP

accords tripartites (Russie, Iran, Turquie) scellés à Astana sous la houlette du chef de la délégation russe Alexandre Lavrentiev. Une initiative que la Syrie a d'abord récusée en dénonçant une «agression turque».

«ÉVACUEZ LES LIEUX APRÈS AVOIR FAIT LE MÉNAGE»

Et pour cause. Dans cette zone dite «de dés-escalade» où 800.000 personnes vivent dans des camps de réfugiés et où se sont repliés beaucoup d'amateurs d'associations civiles après la chute d'Alep, la Turquie soutient ouvertement des milices islamiques depuis le début de la guerre civile. Celles-ci sont aujourd'hui dominées par Fateh al-Cham –devenue Hayat Tahrir al-Cham (HTS) en début d'année. L'ex-Front al-Nostra a officiellement rompu son allégeance à al-Qaïda en juillet 2016, mais des liens perdureront notamment via son mufti Abdulrahim Atoun, selon des experts comme le journaliste Hassan Hassan.

Depuis Damas, un message sans ambiguïté aurait toutefois été transmis à Erdogan avec lequel des émissaires de Bachar el-Assad assurent un contact aussi discret que régulier: «La présence de forces étrangères sur notre territoire étant illégale, vous devrez évacuer les lieux après y avoir fait le ménage». Ce qui n'exclut pas des arrière-pensées du côté syrien: «En cas de rupture du cessez-le-feu, nous nous autorisons à traiter les rebelles et à les liquider.» En clair, toute provocation fournira un prétexte pour rompre la trêve et reprendre les bombardements contre ce «nid de rebelles».

Pour lever toute ambiguïté, dès le 27 octobre, l'état-major de l'armée syrienne a annoncé que l'offensive au nord de Hama contre les ultras de Tahrir al-Cham (HTS) se poursuivrait vers Idleb. Objectif avoué: la reprise de l'aéroport militaire d'Abu al-Dhuhour. Des frappes de l'aviation russe, début octobre, ont déjà éliminé douze de ses commandants réunis pour un conseil de guerre, et blessé leur chef, Mohammad al-Joulani, resté proche des Saoudiens.

UNE TURQUIE AUX VISÉES EXPANSIONNISTES?

En réalité, le régime craint plus que tout de voir les Turcs s'incruster dans la région. Un conseiller de Bachar el-Assad rappelle que, dans ses harangues, comme à Bursa le 24 octobre 2016, Erdogan n'hésite pas renouveler le serment national de Mustafa Kemal Pacha. Or, Atatürk a toujours placé Alep (comme Mossoul en Irak) dans la sphère d'influence régionale ottomane... D'où cette sourde inquiétude:

«Maintenant qu'ils sont installés comme une prétendue force d'interposition, il sera difficile d'obtenir un retrait effectif des Turcs. Il n'est pourtant pas question que cette partie du territoire syrien soit aussi longue à récupérer que l'est Chypre-Nord, occupé depuis 1974.»

Bref, à Damas, on ne croit pas un instant à cette fiction qui ferait d'Erdogan l'un des garants de l'intégrité de la Syrie!

À court terme, tout dépendra de la marge de manœuvre qui sera laissée ou pas à Ankara pour neutraliser, en l'assiégeant, le canton d'Afrine qui voisine Idleb. L'objectif est de le débarrasser des



Combattants des YPG - DELIL SOULEIMAN / AFP

combattants kurdes des YPG. Ceux-ci sont liés aux dirigeants du PKK, le parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, un mouvement qui mène depuis trente-quatre ans une rébellion armée pour arracher, sinon l'indépendance, tout au moins une large autonomie dans les régions de l'Est de la Turquie où vivent une majorité des 15 millions de Kurdes de nationalité turque.

Pour y parvenir, dès septembre, les députés réunis en session extraordinaire ont entériné le prolongement d'un an du mandat autorisant l'envoi de troupes en Syrie. Dans le même temps, selon le renseignement français, James Mattis, le patron du Pentagone, avait été prévenu que des initiatives seraient prises contre Afrine «dès après la défaite d'EI à Raqqa».

ALLIANCES DE CIRCONSTANCE

Sans aucun hasard, dès leur arrivée sur zone fin octobre, les troupes turques ont choisi d'implanter des postes fortifiés au nord d'Idleb sur des positions hautes bien utiles pour surveiller la plaine qui court jusqu'à Afrine. Une note de la Direction générale des relations internationales et des affaires stratégiques résume ainsi la situation:

«Vu de Moscou, le dialogue avec Ankara vise à emmener la partie de l'opposition syrienne qui est sous influence turque à participer aux négociations de paix. Vu d'Ankara, le rapprochement avec Moscou permet aux troupes turques de s'implanter durablement au nord de la Syrie afin de s'y octroyer un droit de poursuite face au PKK et ses affidés, les YPG.»

Seul (vrai) problème pour Erdogan: la médiocre prestation de ses unités lors de l'opération Bouclier de l'Euphrate en 2016 fait douter de leur capacité à affronter durablement des milices Kurdes très motivées. En début d'année, le saillant d'al-Bab n'avait ainsi été pris à Daech par les Turcs qu'avec l'appui décisif de l'avion russe dont



Idleb frappé par le ciel en mars dernier Omar haj kadour / AFP

50% des frappes avaient alors été dirigées sur ce secteur.

Des «partenaires» de Bachar soufflent aussi sur les braises. Selon des sources concordantes, les Gardiens de la révolution iraniens auraient donné carte blanche à Erdogan, lors de son déplacement à Téhéran le 4 octobre. Eux veulent éviter la propagation de l'influence irrédentiste dans le nord de l'Iran où vivent 6 millions de Kurdes iraniens et où s'active un mouvement frère du PYD, le Parti pour une vie libre au Kurdistan (PJAK).

PREMIERS ACCROCHAGES

À Les implications pratiques d'une telle alliance de circonstance sont assez simples à deviner, si l'on s'en tient à l'histoire récente. Des kamikazes islamistes seront recrutés pour tenter de déstabiliser la Rojava avec des attentats à répétition, tandis que les groupes djihadistes sous tutelle turque, désireux de s'assurer ainsi les faveurs d'Erdogan, seront mobilisés contre l'enclave d'Afrine. Depuis plus d'un an, des éléments de l'Armée syrienne libre s'y confrontent déjà régulièrement aux YPG. Autour des bourgades d'Azaz et de Tal Rifat, les terres sont régulièrement visées par des obus qui incendient les champs de blé, principale ressource de cette riche région agricole. Le sort de ces localités frontalières que les Turcs rêvent de soumettre est aussi l'enjeu des tractations en cours entre Ankara et les émissaires russes.

La direction du mouvement kurde n'ignore rien de ces manœuvres. «Dans la nouvelle phase de confrontation à laquelle nous nous attendons, les affrontements seront aussi rudes que l'ont été ceux contre Daech», résume l'un de ses représentants. Dès la fin des combats à Raqqa, les YPG ont d'ailleurs repositionné en conséquence des milliers de combattant(e)s, avec l'appui des Asayech, les services de sécurité du mouvement. Pour prévenir des infiltrations.

C'est dans ce contexte qu'à la mi-novembre le «général» Talal Sello aurait fait défection –une information non confirmée officiellement. Ce porte-parole des forces arabes pro-Kurdes aurait rejoint l'antenne du MIT (les services secrets turcs) de Jarablus après avoir traversé les lignes au volant de son 4x4 Toyota. En 2015, ce personnage haut en couleurs avec son crâne rasé et ses épaules épaisses avait rallié les Kurdes avec son groupe de rebelles sunnites Liwa ak-Salajika pour chasser Daech de la ville de Manbij.

Tous les protagonistes du conflit syrien ont aujourd'hui leurs fusils pointés les uns sur les autres, avec des arrière-pensées et des planifications opérationnelles menaçantes. L'élimination de Daech n'est désormais plus qu'une variable d'ajustement d'un «grand jeu» à l'échelle régionale où Bachar el-Assad n'est finalement qu'un protagoniste parmi d'autres. Et où tout dérapage risque de mettre en difficulté les arbitrages laborieux voulus par Moscou pour appliquer son plan de paix. Par exemple, en cas d'accrochages entre forces syriennes et turques autour d'Idleb, ou encore entre Kurdes et rebelles soutenus par Ankara. Les coups tordus en Rojava imaginés par les Iraniens avec la Turquie pourraient pareillement gêner le «partenariat stratégique» conclu entre Poutine et ses «amis» à Téhéran pour maintenir Bachar au pouvoir à Damas. ●

U.S. cutting off supply of weapons to Kurds fighting in Syria



By Associated Press Nov 25, 2017
Ankara, Turkey

The United States will cut off its supply of arms to Kurdish fighters in Syria, a move by President Trump that is sure to please Turkey but further alienate Syrian Kurds who bore much of the fight against the Islamic State group.

In a phone call Friday with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump said he'd "given clear instructions" that the Kurds receive no more weapons — "and that this nonsense should have ended a long time ago," said Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. The White House confirmed the move in a cryptic statement about the phone call that said Trump had informed the Turks of "pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners on the ground in Syria."

The White House called the move "consistent with our previous policy" and noted the recent fall of Raqqa, once the Islamic State's self-declared capital but recently liberated by a largely Kurdish force. The Trump administration announced in May it would start arming the Kurds in anticipation of the fight to retake Raqqa.

"We are progressing into a stabilization phase to ensure that ISIS cannot return," the White House said, using an acronym for the extremist group.

The move could help ease strained tensions between the U.S. and Turkey, two NATO allies that have been sharply at odds about how best to wage the fight against Islamic State. Turkey considers the Kurdish Syrian fighters, known by the initials YPG, to be terrorists because of their affiliation to outlawed Kurdish rebels that have waged a three decade-long insurgency in Turkey. Yet the U.S. chose to partner with the YPG in Syria anyway, arguing that the battle-hardened Kurds were the most effective fighting force available.

Cavusoglu, who said he was in the room with Erdogan during Trump's call, quoted the U.S.

president as saying he had given instructions to U.S. generals and to national security advisor H.R. McMaster that "no weapons would be issued."

"Of course, we were very happy with this," Cavusoglu said.

Yet for the Kurds, it was the latest demoralizing blow to their hopes for greater recognition in the region. Last month, the Kurds in neighboring Iraq saw their recent territorial gains erased by the Iraqi military, which seized the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and other disputed areas from the Kurdish regional government in retaliation for a Kurdish independence referendum that the U.S. ardently opposed.

Trump's decision appeared to catch both the Pentagon and the U.S. State Department off guard. Officials at both agencies, who would normally be informed of changes in U.S. policy toward arming the Syrian Kurds, said they were unaware of any changes. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity.

It was unclear whether the Trump administration notified the Kurds of the move before telling the Turks. Nor was it how much significance the change would have on the ground, considering the fight against Islamic State is almost over.

The United States has been arming the Kurds in their fight against Islamic State through an umbrella group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, which is comprised of Kurdish as well as Arab fighters. But the retreat of Islamic State, which has lost nearly all its territory in Syria, has altered the dynamics in the region and a U.S. Defense official said he was unaware of any additional arms scheduled to be transferred to the Kurds, even before the Turkish announcement.

Last week, Col. Ryan Dillon, the chief spokesman for the U.S. coalition that is fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, said there has yet to be any reduction in the number of U.S. advisors

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters ride atop military vehicles as they celebrate victory in Raqqa, Syria, on October 17, 2017. | Photo Credit: REUTERS

working with the SDF. His comments appeared to suggest the possibility that changes in the level and type of U.S. military support for the Syrian Kurds could be coming.

As the fight against IS has waned in recent months, the U.S. has pledged to carefully monitor the weapons it provides the Kurds, notably ensuring that they don't wind up in the hands of Kurdish insurgents in Turkey known as the PKK.

Both Turkey and the U.S. consider the PKK a terrorist group. But the United States has tried to draw a distinction between the PKK and the Syrian Kurds across the border, while Turkey insists they're essentially the same.

In both Syria and Iraq, the U.S. relied on Kurdish fighters to do much of the fighting against Islamic State, but those efforts have yet to lead to a realization of the Kurds' broader aspirations, most notably an independent state.

Washington's support for the Syrian Kurds, in particular, has been a major thorn in U.S.-Turkish relations for several years, given Turkey's concerns about the Kurds' territorial aspirations. In particular, Turkey has feared the establishment of a contiguous, Kurdish-held canton in northern Syria that runs along the Turkish border.

Relations between NATO allies Turkey and the United States have also soured recently over a number of other issues, including Turkey's crackdown on dissent following a failed coup attempt last year. Ankara has demanded that the U.S. extradite a Pennsylvania-based cleric that it blames for fomenting the coup, but the U.S. says Turkey lacks sufficient proof. ♦

Syrian Kurdish Official to US: Don't Turn Your Back on Us

NOV. 28, 2017 - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
<https://www.nytimes.com>

BEIRUT — A senior Syrian Kurdish official said Washington would undermine the campaign against Islamic State militants and Americans would lose their place in the region's fight against terrorism if they "turn their back" on their only ally in Syria — the Kurds.

The comments by Ilham Ahmed, a member of the political arm of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, were in response to the U.S. administration's suggestion that military aid to the Kurdish-led forces may be halted.

Over the weekend, the White House and the Pentagon said there will be "pending adjustments to the military support" to the SDF, though there was no specific confirmation the arms flow would stop altogether.

Ahmed said nothing in the statements specifically indicates the arms supply would stop, but she added that the "vague" phrasing appears

aimed at appeasing Turkey. Ankara sees the Syrian Kurdish fighters as an extension of its own insurgent group it labels "terrorists."

Such vague statements can be a double-edged sword, Ahmed said. She spoke to The Associated Press in a series of text messages from northern Syria late on Monday.

The U.S. said it will maintain its "presence to fight Daesh and to reinforce stability in liberated areas." This means, Ahmed said, the administration is "starting a new phase focused on stability and administration." Daesh is the Arabic name for IS.

"We can't judge what the Americans are thinking," Ahmed said. "But one thing is obviously clear, and that is if the Americans turn their back on their only partners (in Syria), it means they will withdraw from the fight against Daesh in the Middle East."

"If they really decide to stop the support, this means they are giving a chance for Daesh to re-appear and spread," she added.

The Trump administration announced in May it would start arming the Kurds in anticipation of the fight to retake the city of Raqqa, the de-facto capital of IS.

The Kurdish-led SDF liberated the city last month. They have been pushing down the Euphrates River Valley, chasing IS militants along the border with Iraq and east of the river, capturing oil and gas fields and securing the Kurdish forces' hold in northern and eastern Syria.

Following a call between President Donald Trump and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday, the White House said there will be "pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners on the ground in Syria, now that the battle of Raqqa is complete."

"We are progressing into a stabilization phase to ensure that ISIS cannot return," the White House said. ISIS is an alternative acronym for IS.

The SDF is now believed to be in control of about 25 percent of Syria and they fear that a U.S. withdrawal may pit them against Syrian government troops and their allies, in the absence of a political agreement.

There are now about 1,500 U.S. troops in Syria that initially came to train and support the SDF in the anti-IS campaign. ●



NOVEMBER 29, 2017

Turkey to expand its military mission to Afrin: Top security council

ANKARA / November 29, 2017
<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com>

The National Security Council (MGK) on Nov. 28 discussed expanding the Turkish military's operation in Syria to Afrin and Aleppo, according to a statement issued after the meeting.

The statement particularly stressed Ankara's objection to the presence of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), "especially in border territory."

"It was assessed that the Turkish Army Forces (TSK) has been successfully carrying out its 'observatory mission' in Idlib's de-escalation zones, and an environment of peace and safety can be obtained by continuing this mission in western Aleppo and around Afrin," it said.

Turkey on Nov. 19 completed construction of its third "observatory spot" inside Idlib as a part of its three-way deal with Russia and Iran, which stipulates the establishment of de-escalation zones in war-torn Syria.

Turkey is expected to form 12 observation spots in total, in order to monitor the ongoing truce between the Syrian regime and armed opposition groups. The first of these spots was set up on Oct. 13.

The deal envisages cementing the truce between fighting groups and allowing humanitarian aid to reach needy groups inside the country, as well as paving the way for launching an effective political process to end the civil war in Syria.

The Turkish, Russian and Iranian presidents came together in Sochi on Nov. 22 to outline a fresh roadmap toward a political solution, which includes convening a national dialogue congress with the participation of various warring groups.

The Turkish government has repeatedly expressed opposition to the inclusion of the PYD and the YPG at the negotiation table for a political process, saying the group is the Syrian offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

"The PKK/PYD-YPG terrorist organization



is changing Syria's demographic structure by conducting covert ethnic cleansing. This is against international law and human rights and is unacceptable," the MGK statement read on Nov. 28.

"Turkey will continue to take all kinds of measures, especially at border territories, in order to ensure its safety," it added.

Meanwhile, PYD forces sprayed a Turkish border post in the southeastern province of Kilis, on the border with Syria, with gunfire late on Nov. 28, wounding one soldier, Doğan News Agency has reported.

The gunfire reportedly came from Afrin province in northwest Syria and Turkey responded with artillery fire.

The wounded soldier was taken to the Kilis State Hospital for treatment. ◆

Poutine, maître du jeu en Syrie

DANIEL VERNET — 28.11.2017
www.slate.fr

La Russie avance ses pions pour la résolution du conflit syrien. Et il n'y a pas grand monde pour l'en empêcher.

Vladimir Poutine a passé une bonne semaine diplomatique. Lundi, il a reçu dans sa résidence de Sotchi, sur les bords de la mer Noire, Bachar el-Assad. Deux jours plus tard, il s'y est réuni avec les présidents turc Erdogan et iranien Rohani. Une première.

À l'ordre du jour, l'avenir de la Syrie. Deux ans après l'intervention massive de la Russie dans la guerre civile, qui dure depuis six ans et demi et a fait plus de 400.000 morts, le chef du Kremlin s'est placé en position de principal artisan d'une solution politique.

MOSCOU, DERNIÈRE PUISSANCE À PESER SUR LE PLAN POLITIQUE

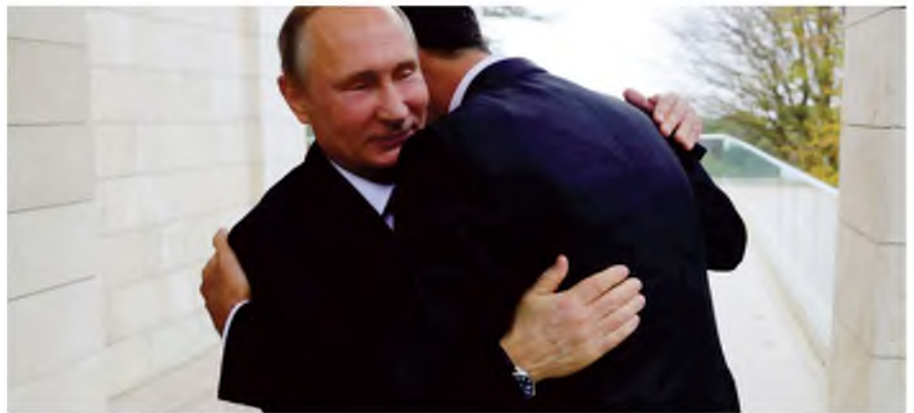
Vladimir Poutine veut gagner la paix après avoir gagné la guerre, en apportant une contribution majeure à l'écrasement de l'opposition au dictateur de Damas, sous couvert de lutte contre le terrorisme. La coalition internationale formée par les Occidentaux et leurs alliés a certes participé à l'élimination du «califat» de Daech dans l'espace irako-syrien, mais en Syrie elle-même, c'est bien la conjonction de l'engagement militaire russe –aérien et terrestre– et de l'intervention des milices iraniennes avec le Hezbollah qui ont empêché l'effondrement du régime.

Donald Trump se désintéresse de la Syrie, après avoir donné l'impression de vouloir s'y engager avec la frappe, en avril dernier, contre une base militaire syrienne, qui faisait suite à l'utilisation d'armes chimiques par le régime. Une décision isolée qui soulignait davantage l'absence de stratégie que l'affirmation d'une volonté politique. Quant aux Européens, il y a longtemps qu'en Syrie, ils ne comptent plus. Moscou est maître du jeu.

Vladimir Poutine a convoqué Bachar el-Assad en Russie pour le lui rappeler, au cas où il l'aurait oublié. Une partie de la rencontre a été filmée. Les téléspectateurs russes ont donc pu entendre leur président déclarer sans détour devant une brochette de généraux en grand uniforme: «J'ai prié le président de la Syrie de venir [...]. Je veux lui présenter les gens qui ont joué un rôle décisif dans le sauvetage de la Syrie.» Assad a ravalé l'humiliation et les a remerciés les uns après les autres. Il s'est dit content de les savoir sur le sol syrien.

UNE GUERRE DEVENUE EMBARRASSANTE

Le chef du Kremlin avait un autre message à faire passer. Selon lui, l'engagement militaire touche à sa fin. «Le plus important maintenant



Vladimir Poutine et Bachar el-Assad à Sotchi (Russie), le 20 novembre 2017. | Mikhail Klimentyev / Sputnik / AFP.

est de passer aux questions politiques», a-t-il dit à son obligé, en laissant clairement entendre que les décisions n'appartenaient pas à Assad mais à ceux qui l'ont soutenu pour qu'il reste au pouvoir. «Le processus politique ne sera pas facile, a souligné publiquement Poutine. Il demandera des compromis et des concessions de toutes les parties, y compris du gouvernement syrien.» Et pour être sûr qu'Assad avait bien compris ce qu'il attendait de lui, il a ajouté: «Je note avec satisfaction votre disponibilité à travailler avec tous ceux qui veulent la paix et une solution au conflit.»

À quelques mois de l'élection présidentielle prévue en mars 2018, Vladimir Poutine veut se débarrasser de la guerre en Syrie. Au début, elle lui a apporté un regain de popularité et a détourné l'attention de l'intervention en Ukraine. Mais un succès diplomatique témoignant du retour de la Russie parmi les «Grands» est plus gratifiant qu'un conflit qui s'enlise.

Le nombre de victimes russes augmente. Il provoque des remous dans la population –on parle de cent à deux cents morts–; le chiffre est tenu secret et les familles des soldats tués sont contraintes au silence.

D'autre part, le corps expéditionnaire russe est composé de plusieurs milliers de mercenaires appartenant à une entreprise «privée» de sécurité appartenant à un proche de Poutine, Evgueni Prigogine, qui est aussi le traître du Kremlin et le dirigeant de la plus grande usine de trolls russes, près de Saint-Petersbourg.

Il n'empêche: la guerre n'est pas très populaire, elle coûte cher (quelque 3 millions d'euros par jour) et sa prolongation favorise l'implantation et l'influence grandissantes de l'Iran dans la région, ce qui n'est pas dans l'intérêt de la Russie.

L'ONU COURT-CIRCUITÉE?

Poutine envisageait la convocation d'un «Congrès des peuples de Syrie» chargé

d'adopter une nouvelle Constitution. Il aurait dû se tenir le 18 novembre à Sotchi, mais la Turquie s'est opposée à la présence de représentants de Kurdes de Syrie, qu'elle considère comme des avatars du PKK. La réunion est maintenant prévue pour début décembre.

L'objectif de la diplomatie russe est de prendre de court les diverses forces d'opposition syriennes à Bachar el-Assad. Celles-ci se sont réunies à Riyad sous la houlette de l'Arabie saoudite, pour préparer une éventuelle reprise des négociations de Genève sous l'égide de l'envoyé spécial de l'ONU, Staffan de Mistura. Mais elles peinent à trouver un accord entre elles.

Moscou voudrait que la délégation comprenne aussi un groupe «d'opposants» à Assad qui lui soit proche. Si le Kremlin réussissait à réunir ce «Congrès des peuples» avant Genève, les négociations officielles à l'ONU ne seraient alors plus qu'un décor destiné à légitimer un accord ficelé par la Russie.

Donald Trump a accepté de laisser la main à Vladimir Poutine, en marge du sommet de l'organisation asiatique APEC qui s'est tenu plus tôt dans le mois, au Vietnam.

Emmanuel Macron avait souhaité la création d'un «groupe de contact» des puissances concernées par la guerre en Syrie, une façon de remettre la France dans le jeu, mais sa proposition a fait long feu. Les Occidentaux ont mis une sourdine à leur revendication d'un départ d'Assad comme préalable à un accord politique.

RETOUR EN FORCE DE LA RUSSIE DANS LES ÉQUILIBRES DU MOYEN-ORIENT

De ce côté, la route semble être dégagée. Les obstacles qui subsistent pour la Russie tiennent plutôt aux divergences d'intérêt des trois principaux «alliés»: outre Moscou, Téhéran et Ankara. Recep Tayyip Erdogan est obsédé par la question kurde. Les Iraniens soutiennent Bachar el-Assad plus fermement que les Russes, car ils craignent qu'une diminution de

son pouvoir n'entraîne à terme un affaiblissement de leur influence sur la Syrie.

Vladimir Poutine a en revanche convaincu Assad qu'il n'avait d'autre choix que de faire des concessions. Il a encore besoin de lui à Damas, mais son soutien n'est pas inconditionnel. Si la Russie a bloqué une résolution du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU condamnant l'utilisation d'armes chimiques, ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle approuve les méthodes de son protégé. Elle a empêché une condamnation pour des raisons d'opportunité, pour que son protégé garde un certain semblant de légitimité internationale. Il en aura besoin pendant la période transitoire qui mènera à la mise en place d'une nouvelle Constitution. Les

Russes laissent entendre que celle-ci devrait prévoir une limitation des pouvoirs présidentiels.

Ne serait-ce que pour des raisons économiques et financières, la Syrie de l'après-guerre ne peut apparaître comme un protectorat russe. Ce n'est pas l'objectif de Vladimir Poutine. Pour la reconstruction, les capitaux occidentaux, et notamment européens, seront indispensables. En attendant, le chef du Kremlin veut faire la démonstration que la Russie est devenue une grande puissance avec laquelle il faut compter, capable d'intervenir militairement quand ses intérêts sont en jeu, et suffisamment influente pour trouver des issues à des conflits.

Après le sommet de Sotchi avec Erdogan et Rohani, il a informé Donald Trump – en quelque sorte son alter ego comme chef d'une grande puissance –, le roi Salmane d'Arabie saoudite et le maréchal égyptien Sissi, protecteurs des sunnites, ainsi que Benjamin Netanyahu, qui ne veut pas que les milices chiites stationnent sur le Golan, à la frontière avec Israël. Si aucun dirigeant européen ne figurait parmi ses interlocuteurs, la liste témoigne du retour en force de la Russie dans les équilibres du Moyen-Orient. ●



Syrie: futur "ajustement" dans la coopération avec Washington

QAMICHLI (SYRIE), 27 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

WASHINGTON va procéder à un "ajustement" dans la livraison d'armes à une alliance antijihadiste dominée par les Kurdes en Syrie, selon un responsable kurde dont les propos ont été confirmés par le Pentagone.

La Turquie a réaffirmé avoir reçu des assurances de la Maison Blanche pour l'arrêt de la livraison d'armes aux Unités de protection du peuple kurde (YPG), la principale milice kurde en Syrie.

La Maison Blanche avait semblé moins explicite en évoquant de prochains "ajustements".

Classées comme "terroristes" par Ankara, les YPG sont le noyau dur des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), alliance soutenue par Washington et fer de lance de la lutte contre le groupe ultraradical Etat islamique (EI).

"Il n'y a pas de changements dans les rapports entre les Forces démocratiques syriennes et l'administration américaine", a assuré à l'AFP Abdel Karim Amr, un responsable de l'administration semi-autonome kurde en Syrie.

"Evidemment, il y aura un ajustement dans la livraison d'armes aux FDS après l'élimination de l'EI, mais il n'y a pas de changement dans la politique des Etats-Unis concernant la coordination avec" l'alliance, a-t-il souligné.

"Le soutien va se poursuivre jusqu'à ce que l'on élimine ce qui reste de (l'EI) dans toute la région où il y a coordination entre l'administration américaine" et

les FDS, a précisé ce responsable des relations extérieures.

Il a qualifié l'annonce turque d'"incorrecte" et de "pas précise".

"Nous sommes les partenaires d'une coalition internationale officielle qui lutte contre le terrorisme, ce partenariat se poursuit", a renchéri un responsable des médias des FDS, Mustafa Bali.

"Nous avons encore beaucoup à faire avec nos partenaires de la coalition", a-t-il souligné.

Interrogé à ce sujet, un porte-parole du Pentagone, le colonel Rob Manning, a confirmé que les Etats-Unis étaient en train de "réévaluer les ajustements à venir dans le soutien apporté à nos partenaires kurdes".

Il a refusé de dire si les livraisons d'armes avaient été interrompues.

"Nous avons été très clairs avec la Turquie sur le fait que nous donnerions aux Forces démocratiques syriennes, qui comptent des éléments kurdes, des armes en nombre limité, spécifiquement calibrées pour la mission et distribuées petit à petit afin d'atteindre notre objectif, qui est de vaincre l'EI", a-t-il ajouté.

La Turquie considère les YPG comme une émanation en Syrie du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan turc (PKK), classé "organisation terroriste" par Ankara et ses alliés occidentaux.

Ankara avait assuré avoir obtenu vendredi des assurances du président américain Donald Trump selon lesquelles Washington cesserait de fournir des armes aux YPG.

Estimés à 15% de la population syrienne et longtemps opprimés par le régime de Damas, les Kurdes ont profité de la guerre ravageant la Syrie depuis 2011 pour établir une autonomie de facto dans les territoires qu'ils contrôlent, dans le nord et nord-est du pays. ●



Syrie: Ankara veut installer une mission d'observation à Afrine

ANKARA, 28 NOVEMBRE 2017 (AFP)

LA TURQUIE ENVISAGE d'étendre sa mission d'observation dans le nord de la Syrie à Afrine, contrôlée par des milices kurdes soutenues par les Etats-Unis contre le groupe jihadiste Etat islamique (EI) mais considérées comme terroristes par Ankara, ont déclaré mardi les autorités turques.

"La mission d'observation (à Idleb, nord-ouest) s'est déroulée avec succès, et pour réellement garantir un environnement paisible et sûr, cette mission doit être étendue à la région d'Afrine et dans l'ouest d'Alep", a déclaré mardi la présidence turque dans un communiqué cité par l'agence étatique Anadolu, à l'issue d'une réunion du conseil de sécurité nationale, dirigé par le président Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

La Turquie a déployé mi-octobre des troupes ayant une mission d'observation dans la province d'Idleb, voisine d'Afrine, dans le cadre de la mise en place des "zones de désescalade" décidées lors du processus d'Astana, parrainé par la Russie et l'Iran, alliés du régime de Damas, et la Turquie, soutien des rebelles syriens.

Mais M. Erdogan a affirmé mi-novembre vouloir "nettoyer Afrine" de la présence du Parti de l'Union démocratique (PYD) et de son aile armée, les Unités

de protection du peuple (YPG), et a plusieurs fois menacé d'y lancer une opération militaire.

Peu après la déclaration du conseil de sécurité nationale mardi soir, un soldat turc posté à Kilis, près de la frontière syrienne, a été blessé par des tirs provenant d'Afrine et attribués aux YPG, a rapporté l'agence privée Dogan, selon laquelle l'armée turque a immédiatement répliqué par des tirs d'artillerie.

Classées comme "terroristes" par Ankara, les YPG sont le noyau dur des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), alliance soutenue par Washington pour lutter contre l'EI.

Accusant les YPG de "nettoyage ethnique" en Syrie, le communiqué de la présidence ajoute que "la Turquie continuera de prendre toutes les mesures nécessaires pour garantir sa sécurité, surtout dans la région frontalière".

La Turquie a déjà mené entre août 2016 et mars 2017 une offensive terrestre dans le nord de la Syrie pour repousser l'EI vers le sud et empêcher les YPG de relier les territoires qu'ils contrôlent dans le nord de la Syrie.

Ankara a affirmé la semaine dernière avoir reçu des assurances de Washington pour l'arrêt de la livraison d'armes aux YPG, mais la Maison Blanche avait semblé moins explicite en évoquant de prochains "ajustements".

L'ONU a commencé mardi ses discussions à Genève avec l'opposition syrienne pour tenter de régler le conflit qui dure depuis 2011 en Syrie, mais les déclarations de l'opposition réclamant une nouvelle fois le départ du président Bachar al-Assad ont braqué le gouvernement syrien, déjà peu enclin à faire des concessions alors qu'il a pratiquement gagné la guerre contre les rebelles et les jihadistes. ●

Liban, Syrie, Irak : comment l'Iran étend son emprise

L'Iran est devenu une puissance régionale dont l'influence s'étend de la frontière afghane jusqu'à la Méditerranée. Sa rivalité avec l'Arabie saoudite fracture les pays du Levant.

GEORGES MALBRUNOT @Malbrunot

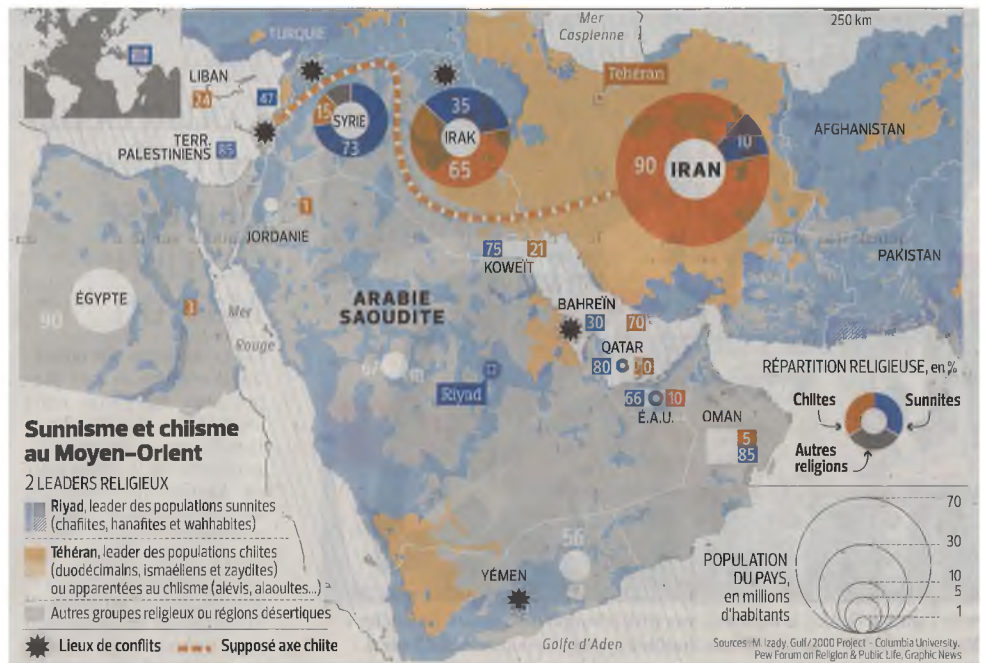
AU LEVANT, il y aura un avant et un après Abu Kamal. Cette ville - la dernière de Syrie aux mains de Daech le long de l'Euphrate à la frontière avec l'Irak - a été reprise, mi-novembre, par l'armée de Bachar el-Assad et ses alliés iraniens des gardiens de la révolution, épaulés par des miliciens chiïtes libanais et irakiens. Ainsi s'ouvrait pour la première fois depuis l'avènement de la République islamique d'Iran en 1979 un corridor territorial reliant Téhéran, Bagdad, Damas et Beyrouth.

Dans une course effrénée, les alliés kurdes des États-Unis dans le nord de la Syrie ont tenté, en vain, de bloquer l'avancée de leurs adversaires. Tandis que les djihadistes sunnites s'enfuyaient dans le désert irakien d'al-Anbar, la création de ce « croissant chiïte », redouté dès 2004 par le roi Abdallah de Jordanie, voyait le jour dans les sables du désert. Au grand dam de l'Arabie saoudite, leader du monde sunnite, qui affronte par procuration son ennemi chiïte iranien en Irak et en Syrie, mais aussi au Liban au Yémen et à Bahreïn. Une guerre politique pour le contrôle du Moyen-Orient, qui instrumentalise les tensions religieuses entre les frères ennemis de l'islam.

Minoritaires parmi les musulmans du monde entier, mais majoritaires en Irak, les chiïtes ont repris la main depuis que les États-Unis de George Bush leur ont offert l'ancienne Mésopotamie en 2003 et que son successeur Barack Obama a refusé de s'engager militairement aux côtés des rebelles sunnites syriens qui cherchent à renverser Bachar el-Assad, depuis 2011.

Dans cette guerre qui se joue dans des États faibles, le modèle iranien est incontestablement plus efficace. Il repose sur des milices locales, parfois plus puissantes que les armées nationales. « Le génie iranien est d'avoir su tisser un réseau de relais locaux qui permet à Téhéran de contrôler sans avoir besoin d'être massivement déployé sur place », commente un expert militaire.

Il en va du Hezbollah libanais créé pour résister à l'invasion israélienne du Liban en 1982, et des milices chiïtes irakiennes, les membres de la Mobilisation populaire établie en 2014 pour contrer Daech : 80 000 à 100 000 Irakiens, pas tous pro-iraniens, mais dont les trois principales formations - Organisation Badr, Kataëb Hezbollah et Assaïb al-Haq - sont directement liées à la Force al-Qods. Ce bras armé de l'Iran hors



de ses frontières est doté d'une chaîne de commandement sous les ordres de Qassem Soleimani, lui-même relié au numéro un iranien, l'ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Recréer l'Empire perse

Une telle homogénéité fait cruellement défaut au camp sunnite, divisé et sans leadership, depuis les printemps arabes. L'Égypte peine à reprendre sa position de phare. L'Irak a basculé côté iranien. Certes, l'Arabie saoudite se réveille sous l'impulsion du jeune prince héritier, Mohammed Ben Salman (MBS), mais son offensive anti-iranienne est risquée. Quant au concubinage des monarchies sunnites du Golfe avec Israël, il ne peut encore changer la donne.

C'est ce que MBS semblait pourtant croire, quand il a déclenché une crise le 4 novembre, en forçant à la démission le premier ministre libanais, son allié sunnite Saad Hariri, trop complaisant, selon Riyad, envers le Hezbollah. « MBS a cru qu'une attaque américaine et israélienne contre le Hezbollah au Liban était imminente », décrypte un diplomate en contact avec lui.

Jared Kushner, le gendre de Donald Trump qui entend rognier les ailes de l'Iran hors de ses frontières, venait de se rendre à Riyad, où MBS convoqua le chef de l'Autorité palestinienne, Mahmoud Abbas, pour lui transmettre le message que « les réfugiés palestiniens du Liban ne devraient pas

prendre position en faveur du Hezbollah en cas d'attaque américano-israélienne ». Mais Tsahal n'a pas lancé ses avions pour défendre l'Arabie, fût-ce contre l'ennemi commun, le Hezbollah.

En Irak et en Syrie, où les communautés sunnites sont marginalisées, Daech a été, dans une large mesure, la réponse à leur malaise. Mais une mauvaise réponse, relève la revue américaine *Foreign Policy* pour qui « favorisés par l'Arabie, les efforts des sunnites d'aider les rebelles se soldèrent par un chaos et la poussée des groupes salafites ». Celle-ci ne fait qu'aggraver un sentiment de revanche, profondément ancré. En pleine guerre civile irakienne en 2006-2007, l'Iran est allé jusqu'à assassiner - via ses relais irakiens à Bagdad - les pilotes de l'armée de Saddam Hussein qui avaient bombardé, vingt ans plus tôt, Téhéran. De la même manière, les Saoudiens n'oublieraient jamais Ahmed Ibrahim al-Mugassil, le cerveau de l'attentat anti-américain d'al-Khobar en 1996 que leurs alliés libanais sunnites des Forces de sécurité intérieure livrèrent à Riyad après l'avoir intercepté en 2015 lorsque le chef de la branche saoudienne du Hezbollah sortit de l'aéroport de Beyrouth à son retour d'Iran.

Nul ne peut contester que l'interventionnisme iranien se creuse au Bahreïn et au Yémen, où des insurgés vont se former au Liban auprès du Hezbollah. Mais nul ne peut nier, non plus, que les bombarde-

ments saoudiens contre les rebelles yéménites houthistes soutenus par Téhéran, ajoutés à l'incapacité de la monarchie sunnite bahreïnienne à répondre aux demandes de la majorité chiite, ne font que durcir cette polarisation qui menace de plonger la région dans l'abîme. « Sur chacun de ces théâtres, l'Iran et ses alliés ont gagné la partie », constate *Foreign Policy*. Que cherche l'Iran en poussant si loin ses pions ? Défendre ses intérêts, mais aussi « retrouver l'influence régionale que l'Iran du chah avait avant 1979 », reconnaissent des diplomates iraniens devant leurs interlocuteurs français. Revigoré par l'accord nucléaire de 2015, Téhéran donne parfois l'impression de vouloir recréer l'Empire perse.

« L'axe de la résistance »

Dans les villes saintes chiites irakiennes de Karbala et Nadjaf, la présence iranienne est souvent pesante. « Nous sommes encerclés », confie l'ayatollah irakien Jawad al-Khoïe à Nadjaf, où les pèlerins iraniens sont protégés par des Iraniens. Mais si le nationalisme des chiites irakiens est un frein à l'expansionnisme iranien, le rapport de forces n'est pas en leur faveur.

Même loin de son environnement, l'Iran pousse son avantage. « Des émissaires iraniens ont été envoyés à Tunis pour convaincre le pouvoir de renouer avec Assad », s'étonne un diplomate onusien. Objectif : que le maximum de pays arabes réhabilite le maillon syrien, essentiel sur « l'Axe de la résistance » à la nouvelle alliance sunnito-américano-israélienne.

« Freiner l'Iran, directement ou en s'alliant avec des forces locales, ne pourra être réalisé, ni par l'Arabie ni par son voisin émirien, mais par une implication américaine et, dans le cas du Liban, israélienne », estime *Foreign Policy*, « mais il est impossible de dire jusqu'où les États-Unis et l'État hébreu sont prêts à aller. »

Alors que les perspectives de dialogue direct entre Saoudiens et Iraniens sont inexistantes à court terme, des gestes d'apaisements ont récemment été enregistrés par plusieurs alliés de l'Iran. Si le désarmement du Hezbollah est « non négociable », a prévenu le chef des gardiens de la révolution, le cheikh Nasrallah, le patron de la milice libanaise, a affirmé, de son côté, que ses hommes pourraient quitter bientôt l'Irak et la Syrie, si les pouvoirs le lui demandaient. En Irak, une autre milice chiite, al-Nujaba, s'est dite prête à remettre ses armes au premier ministre, Haïdar al-Abadi. « Nos hommes seront intégrés dans les forces de sécurité », répond au *Figaro* Hadi al-Améri, chef de l'Organisation Badr. En attendant, si une guerre frontale Iran-Arabie paraît exclue, une intensification des tensions reste le scénario le plus probable. ■



Des forces progouvernementales irakiennes brandissent le portrait de l'ayatollah Ali Khamenei, guide suprême de la révolution islamique iranienne, le 1^{er} juillet 2016, à Bagdad.

Téhéran sponsor d'un piratage massif contre le gouvernement de Hariri

PATRICK SAINT-PAUL @psaintpaul

INSPIRÉ par les méthodes de son nouvel allié russe, l'Iran s'est lancé dans des opérations de cyberpiratage de grande ampleur, pour tenter d'étendre son influence au Moyen-Orient. Ainsi, un groupe de hackers iraniens sponsorisés par Téhéran aurait attaqué les serveurs des bureaux du président et du premier ministre libanais pendant la récente crise provoquée par la démission surprise de Saad Hariri à Riyad, de même que ceux des ministères de la justice et des affaires étrangères, de l'armée et de plusieurs banques libanaises, selon un service de renseignement occidental.

« En réalité cela fait six mois que les hackers iraniens appartenant à l'opération "Oilrig" piratent les serveurs libanais. Ils ont eu accès notamment aux comptes e-mail de Saad Hariri et du président, Michel Aoun, explique-t-on au sein de ce service de renseignement très actif au Moyen-Orient. À l'approche des élections prévues en mai 2018 au Liban, l'intention est évidente : tenter de peser sur le scrutin et favoriser le Hezbollah en cherchant à recueillir des informations embarrassantes sur ses rivaux. »

Au premier chef, les candidats sunnites soutenus par l'Arabie saoudite et leur leader, Saad Hariri. Les hackers auraient rassemblé des documents et des mots de passe, qui pourront être utilisés au moment opportun. En pesant sur les élections, l'Iran chercherait à faire basculer en douceur le fragile équilibre des pouvoirs au Liban, en faveur des chiites et du Hezbollah, le mouvement confessionnel sponsorisé par les mollahs de Téhéran.

Les hackers iraniens ont aussi tenté d'infiltrer plusieurs serveurs du gouvernement américain

« Nous l'avons constaté : il ne s'agit pas de quelques hackers isolés qui jouent sur leurs ordinateurs. Ce sont des attaques coordonnées et d'un niveau stratégique », selon la source de renseignement. Ces attaques seraient la preuve de l'implication directe de l'Iran dans le très complexe jeu politique libanais, soulignent ces services. Des accusations portées par Saad Hariri lors de ses interventions depuis Riyad et niées fermement par le secrétaire général du Hezbollah,

Hassan Nasrallah, dans un discours télévisé prononcé à la mi-novembre.

Les cyberpirates de l'opération « Oilrig » seraient des civils, ce qui permettrait au gouvernement iranien de réfuter toute implication. Cependant les services de renseignement occidentaux ont établi qu'ils sont financés par les minis-

tères iraniens de la Défense et de la Sécurité intérieure. Le groupe « Oilrig » est actif depuis un an et demi. Il s'est illustré dans de nombreuses attaques de serveurs dans la région, notamment contre l'Arabie saoudite et lors d'une opération massive contre 120 sites israéliens, révélée en avril 2017. Les hackers iraniens ont aussi tenté

d'infiltrer plusieurs serveurs du gouvernement américain, pour récolter des informations secrètes sur les positions de négociations de l'Administration Obama lors des négociations sur le nucléaire iranien, puis sur d'éventuelles sanctions envisagées par Washington. ■

LE FIGARO 27 novembre 2017

« Le régime syrien est aujourd'hui redevable au Hezbollah libanais »

AURÉLIE DAHER* est enseignante à Paris-Dauphine (Irisso) et à Sciences Po Paris.

LE FIGARO. – En quoi le Hezbollah diffère-t-il des autres acteurs paraétatiques ?

Aurélié DAHER. – Le Hezbollah est paraétatique dans sa dimension militaire, dans le sens où celle-ci n'est pas placée sous l'autorité du ministère de la Défense libanais, le pays auquel l'organisation appartient. Pour autant, d'un point de vue politique, le Hezbollah est un acteur inséré dans le jeu institutionnel au même titre que les autres partis. Il compte deux ministres au gouvernement, une dizaine de députés au Parlement, et ses institutions d'action sociale sont enregistrées auprès du ministère de l'Intérieur.

Quelles sont ses forces et ses faiblesses ?
Sur le plan militaire, il dispose d'unités qui ne sont pas nécessairement très bien armées, surtout comparées à l'armée israélienne, mais qui sont très bien formées et entraînées. Sur le plan politique, le Hezbollah est surtout fort de ses alliances et de sa base populaire. Plus de la moitié de la population libanaise le soutient. Il a noué de solides alliances avec Amal, l'autre parti chiite libanais, et des partis chrétiens comme le Courant patriotique libre de Michel Aoun et les Marada de Soleïman Frangié. Ses faiblesses sont plus difficiles à déterminer pour l'instant. Le vrai point de débat concerne son intervention en Syrie, mais la peur d'un débordement de l'État islamique au Liban, après l'attaque massive de l'EI et de Jabhat al-Nosra contre la localité d'Ersal en août 2014 dans la Bekaa libanaise a beaucoup atténué les critiques populaires, notamment chez les chrétiens, contre la présence du Hezbollah en Syrie.

Cette intervention syrienne a-t-elle contribué à transformer le Hezbollah ?
Transformé, non. Mais le Hezbollah en

Syrie a renforcé ses compétences militaires et modifié la teneur de sa relation avec le régime de Bachar el-Assad, qui lui doit sa survie et lui est aujourd'hui redevable. Cette dette limite les capacités de Damas à contrarier le Hezbollah et ses intérêts propres.

Quelle est sa marge de manœuvre vis-à-vis de l'Iran ?

Le Hezbollah n'est pas et n'a jamais été un simple pion iranien. Il a été créé par des Libanais, avec des objectifs libanais, dans un contexte libanais. Contrairement à l'idée très répandue d'un Hezbollah qui résulterait d'une volonté des Iraniens d'« exporter » leur révolution islamique, ce type de projet était déjà officiellement abandonné par Téhéran



AURÉLIE DAHER

« Le Hezbollah n'est pas et n'a jamais été un simple pion iranien »

dès 1980-1981, donc avant la création du Hezbollah, en 1982. Les pasdarans ont été envoyés au Liban à la condition formelle qu'ils se contenteraient de former les Libanais sans combattre eux-mêmes.

La Ligue arabe a qualifié le mouvement de « terroriste », terme jusqu'à présent utilisé surtout par Israël et les États-Unis. Comment en est-on arrivé là ?

Depuis la montée récente des tensions entre l'Arabie et l'Iran, la Ligue arabe est avant tout la voix des Saoudiens. Elle ne reflète pas le point de vue des pays arabes pris un à un. Au printemps 2016, la Ligue avait déjà qualifié le Hezbollah de terroriste à la demande de l'Arabie. Quelques jours plus tard, plusieurs pays arabes, dont l'Irak, l'Algérie et la Tunisie, avaient fait savoir que « non seulement le Hezbollah n'est pas une organisation terroriste, mais un parti

Il est hors de question d'accepter que le Hezbollah adopte des positions qui nuisent à nos frères arabes ou visent la sécurité et la stabilité de ces pays

SAAD HARIRI,
PREMIER MINISTRE LIBANAIS

respectable, pour avoir notamment défait Israël à deux reprises ».

Quel est son rôle réel au Yémen ?

On ne dispose pas d'informations fiables à ce sujet. Le Hezbollah a dès le début reconnu son engagement en Syrie et dernièrement sa présence en Irak. Mais il nie agir au Yémen et au Bahreïn. Des rapports font état de « conseillers » du Hezbollah au Yémen, mais rien n'est sûr.

Au Liban, que révèle la récente crise autour de la démission de Saad Hariri ?

La coalition à laquelle appartient le Hezbollah (le 8 Mars) reste majoritaire au Parlement. Sa politique actuelle est de soutenir le « compromis » conclu fin 2016 avec les sunnites de Saad Hariri et les chrétiens menés par Michel Aoun. La crise a surtout montré que le Hezbollah et ses alliés maîtrisaient parfaitement la situation. À l'annonce de la démission surprise de Hariri, ils ont immédiatement choisi le discours de la modération et de la patience, ont appelé à la retenue. En pratique, il n'y a eu aucune tension sur le terrain, pas une rue n'a été bloquée, pas un pneu n'a été brûlé, pas un mort n'a été déploré. ■

A. J. (À BEYROUTH)

*Le Hezbollah. Mobilisation et pouvoir, PUF.

Barzani: Current Crisis Temporary

Basnews English 28/11/2017
<http://www.basnews.com>

ERBIL — Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani has reiterated that the current difficulties faced by the Kurdistan Region will not last very long, and that the people of Kurdistan will be victorious.

Concerning the fall of Kirkuk into the hands of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias of Hashd al-Shaabi, Barzani reiterated that it cannot be interpreted into a failure for Kurds, but rather a treason against the people of Kurdistan.

Barzani made the comments in a meeting with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) officials from Sulaymaniyah and Halabja province.

He said that the Iraqi government would have overrun Kirkuk even if no independence referendum was held by Kurdistan. "We said, even before the vote, that Baghdad intends to destroy Kurdistan's legitimate achievements," Barzani pointed out, noting that, however, the betrayal of a small faction within a Kurdish political party helped the central government with its plan.

"The Kurdish identity of Kirkuk and other disputed territories may not be altered through treason, weapons and military attacks."

However, Barzani once again said that the Kurdish political leadership favours peaceful talks between Erbil and Baghdad to resolve their differences. ●



Despite Claims of US Concessions on Kurds, Turkey Rebukes Washington

Dorian Jones / November 27, 2017
<https://www.voanews.com>

ISTANBUL — Senior Turkish ministers have strongly criticized the United States and its policies toward Turkey and the region. The criticisms come after Turkish officials said the Trump administration met a key Turkish demand to end the arming of a Syrian Kurdish militia.

U.S. officials have not confirmed the Turkish government's claim and have only said that President Donald Trump informed Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan of "pending adjustments" to the military support provided to U.S. partners on the ground in Syria.

Turkey accuses the YPG militia of supporting Kurdish insurgents inside the country and officials were enraged by what they saw as U.S. support of a group Turkey considers a terrorist organization. Despite Turkish reports of a concession by Trump, Turkish ministers have continued to criticize Washington. On Sunday, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu issued a thinly veiled threat.

"I am talking to the Western powers who are trying to play games over Turkey. You are going to suffer a historic slap and you will be sorry; you cannot trick Turkey," Soylu said.

The angry words followed remarks by Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, who spoke at a rally of party supporters Sunday and said the U.S. will, in his words, be educated on how to talk to Turkey. Anti-U.S. rhetoric plays well with ruling AK Party voters ahead of elections in two years; but, international relations expert Soli Ozel of Istanbul's Kadir Has University sees the rhetoric as a sign of the deep distrust that exists between the NATO allies.

"Overall, there is a problem specifically between the U.S. and Turkey," Ozel said. "Trust is a word that has been struck out of the shared vocabulary of the two countries, neither side trusts the other. And that is not really a good way of keeping an alliance or keeping a partnership."

While several ministers have called for the U.S. leadership to honor what they interpret as Washington's commitment to stop arming the Syrian Kurdish militia, observers say Ankara remains uneasy about what Washington has actually said, compared to Ankara's takeaway from conversations between U.S. and Turkish leaders, which was that the U.S. would end support for the Kurdish militia immediately.

A White House statement last week said that consistent with previous U.S. policy, President Trump had "informed President Erdogan of pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners on the ground in Syria," a move the statement said was possible "now that the battle of Raqqa is complete" and the effort has progressed into a "stabilization phase to ensure that ISIS cannot return."

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim stepped up pressure on Washington, calling for it to take back the arms it has already given to the Kurdish group, something he said the U.S. had earlier promised.

Even if differences over Syria are resolved, other issues of tension remain.

Turkish government spokesman Bekir Bozdag on Monday alleged that an Iranian sanction-busting trial in New York against Turkish-Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab was a plot against Turkey.

"They want to impose certain sanctions on



Turkish Minister of Interior, Suleyman Soylu, speaks to journalists in Ankara, Turkey, Dec. 19, 2016.

Turkey through the Zarrab case, but the trade between Iran and Turkey is in line with our laws and international laws," Bozdag said.

Zarrab, along with a senior state Turkish banking official and former ministers, are accused of circumventing U.S. sanctions to avoid paying billions of dollars. Jury selection for the trial started Monday with proceedings scheduled to begin Dec. 4.

The trial comes as Ankara and Tehran are increasingly cooperating in Syria and the wider region. On Sunday, the two countries signed a deal to enhance trade with Qatar and help ease Saudi Arabia's blockade of the Gulf state. Deepening Turkish-Iranian cooperation will cause unease in Washington, analysts say, especially as Turkey is seen as key to curbing Iran's growing regional influence. ◆

À l'ONU, Bernard-Henri Lévy défend la cause kurde

Par Etienne Jacob le 29/11/2017
www.lefigaro.fr

Le philosophe français s'est exprimé mardi au siège des Nations unies à New York, avant la projection de son documentaire, Peshmerga, dans lequel il suit au plus près les combattants kurdes face à Daech.

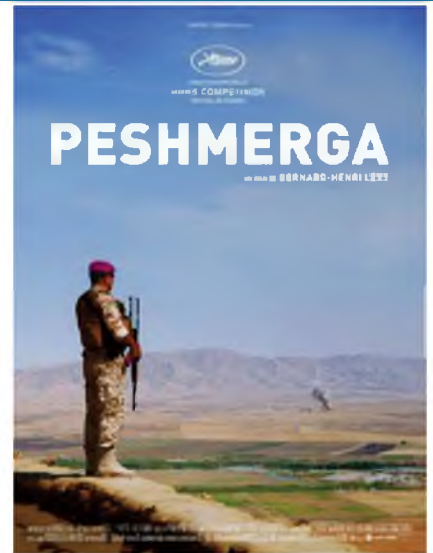
Un symbole fort. Bernard-Henri Lévy a présenté mardi son documentaire Peshmerga devant l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies, à New York. Dans ce film, réalisé en 2016, le philosophe français suit au plus près les combattants kurdes en Irak, en guerre contre le groupe État islamique. Cette projection, organisée par les missions permanentes de la France et du Royaume-Uni, a été vue par plus de 700 personnes mardi, ambassadeurs, journalistes et public compris.

Peu avant le début du film, «BHL» s'est exprimé pour évoquer son œuvre et dénoncer la situation au Kurdistan: «Ce film brosse le portrait d'un peuple qui a défendu, contre Daech, sa liberté et la nôtre - mais qui a eu l'audace de se rêver souverain et qui a payé ce rêve au prix le plus fort». Le philosophe a notamment fustigé



les «blocus» aériens, «l'attaque» et le «dépeçage» du territoire kurde, ou encore «l'humiliation sans précédent» des dirigeants de la région. «BHL» a également pointé du doigt «l'abandon par la communauté des nations», estimant que «notre reconnaissance» avait «manqué au peuple kurde». «Oui, la juste protection contre l'agression lui a été refusée», a-t-il clamé.

Le philosophe a ensuite abordé le référendum kurde. Fin septembre dernier, le «oui» à l'indépendance avait recueilli 92,73% de suffrages, provoquant l'isolement de la région. Le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU s'était opposé à ce référendum. «Ils avaient troqué les armes de la guerre pour celles de la démocratie. Mais nous n'avons pas pris la mesure de leur geste magnifique. Nous avons rejeté ce partage de valeurs et d'espérance qu'ils étaient en train de nous offrir», a regretté Bernard-Henri Lévy. Et d'a-



L'affiche du film Peshmerga, réalisé par BHL. Bernard-Henri Lévy

jouter: «Nous leur avons honteusement tourné le dos (...) La flamme du Kurdistan, que vous allez voir brûler dans ces images, ne s'éteindra pas et, un jour, renversera les montagnes du Kurdistan jusqu'au Tigre.»

Avec Peshmerga, Bernard-Henri Lévy n'en est pas à son premier documentaire. Il a déjà tourné Bosna! (1994) dans Sarajevo assiégée et Le Serment de Tobrouk (2011) sur la Libye. Brocardé pour ce dernier film, dans lequel il se mettait en scène à de nombreuses reprises, il se fait cette fois plus discret, montrant d'après batailles et des images tournées avec des drones, au-delà des lignes ennemies. Ce plaidoyer pour le Kurdistan avait été globalement salué par la critique et avait été présenté lors d'une séance spéciale au Festival de Cannes 2016. ■



29 novembre 2017

«La flamme du Kurdistan ne s'éteindra pas»

Par Bernard-Henri Lévy,
philosophe, cinéaste
29 novembre 2017
<http://www.liberation.fr>

Bernard-Henri Lévy a lancé, mardi 28 novembre, une «adresse aux Nations unies sur l'abandon du Kurdistan», en préambule à la projection de son film Peshmerga à l'ONU, à New York.



Bernard-Henri Lévy entouré de général Serwan Sabir Barzani et du lieutenant-général Mustafa Ali Jaafar à Cannes lors de la projection du film « Peshmerga ». © AFP

LE DISCOURS DE BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY À L'ONU :

C'est avec une joie remplie d'amertume que je viens ce soir montrer le courage, la vaillance et l'abnégation de ces combattantes et combattants qui faisaient l'admiration du

monde et qui, il y a un an, ouvrirent les portes de Mossoul aux forces irakiennes avec lesquelles ils combattaient, alors, au coude à coude.

Ce grand petit peuple a défendu, contre Daech, sa liberté et la nôtre - mais, à l'heure de la victoire, au terme d'un siècle de luttes et de



souffrances, a eu l'audace de se rêver souverain et qui a payé ce rêve au prix le plus fort : blocus ; attaque et dépeçage de son territoire ; humiliation sans précédent de ses dirigeants dont les représentants, soit dit en passant, ont été empêchés de se trouver, ce soir, comme ils l'auraient souhaité, parmi nous ; image stupéfiante des armes lourdes que leur allié de toujours, les Etats-Unis d'Amérique, avait fournies à l'Irak dans le cadre de la lutte commune contre Daech et que l'Irak retournait soudain contre eux ; et, face à ce spectacle désolant, l'abandon, pardon de le dire, ici même, par la communauté des nations.

Oui, notre reconnaissance a manqué au peuple kurde. Oui, la juste protection contre l'agression lui a été refusée. Et, quand les derniers pays amis, comme la France, tentaient de rappeler les droits historiques du Kurdistan, les apôtres de la loi du plus fort et de l'éternelle raison d'Etat, les hommes forts de la région, ceux pour qui les hommes sont faits pour obéir, les peuples pour se soumettre et les frontières pour être tracées dans le vif de la chair de l'humanité, ont eu, hélas, le dernier mot.

Je suis revenu au Kurdistan, après le tournage de ce film, ce fameux 25 septembre où s'est tenu le référendum. Je suis retourné

jusqu'à l'ancienne ligne de front, sur les hauteurs de Bachiqa dominant la plaine de Ninive, où j'ai retrouvé le bataillon de peshmergas dont j'avais, à l'époque, accompagné et documenté les offensives.

Les hommes, et les femmes, finissaient de voter, là même où ils avaient combattu et vaincu – et, à la clôture du scrutin, fusils posés au pied, ils levèrent tous la main vers le ciel, leur index taché d'encre pour preuve qu'ils avaient fait leur devoir de citoyens.

Ils avaient troqué, mesdames et messieurs les ambassadeurs, les armes de la guerre pour celles de la démocratie. Mais nous n'avons pas

pris la mesure de leur geste magnifique. Nous avons rejeté ce partage de valeurs et d'espérance qu'ils étaient en train de nous offrir. Et, comme souvent dans notre histoire commune, nous leur avons honteusement tourné le dos.

L'avenir, mesdames messieurs les ambassadeurs, chers amis, dure longtemps. On n'arrête pas la longue marche de l'histoire et la volonté d'émancipation qui, plus forte que tout, ne meurt jamais.

La flamme du Kurdistan, que vous allez voir brûler dans ces images, ne s'éteindra pas et, un jour, renversera les montagnes du Kurdistan jusqu'au Tigre. ♦



28 November 2017

Barzani adviser: Kurdish secession is inevitable

by Farah Najjar 28 Nov 2017
<http://www.aljazeera.com>

Amid rising regional tensions and international opposition, Iraqi Kurds voted in a controversial secession referendum in September, setting off a chain of events that resulted in a military confrontation between Erbil and Baghdad.

Central government troops quickly regained control of Kirkuk, home to more than one million people and the hub of a major oil-producing area. Kurdish Peshmerga forces withdrew from the city, which had been in their control since 2014, and government troops also pushed the Peshmerga out of Nineveh and Diyala provinces.

Baghdad has since deployed troops along the semi-autonomous region's borders, in a move Kurds describe as unconstitutional.

Kifah Mahmoud, an Iraqi Kurdish political analyst and former Kurdish President Masoud Barzani's media adviser, spoke with Al Jazeera about the ongoing conflict and the ultimate fate of Iraq's Kurds.

Al Jazeera: What are the difficulties you face as Masoud Barzani's adviser?

Kifah Mahmoud: On a personal level, I do not refer to challenging times as difficulties. Rather, I would say my job entails a lot of pressure from the media for several reasons.

We're regularly asked to give interviews, and during these media appearances, we have to maintain a certain narrative and level of dialogue. President Barzani is a national leader, and for years he managed to be an influential figure both regionally and internationally.

Al Jazeera: Given the recent backlash - both

locally and internationally - do you think that it was too soon to hold a referendum on Kurdish secession?

Mahmoud: Quite the contrary. In fact, I think we were very much delayed in our decision to carry out a referendum on secession. Personally, I had been advocating and fighting for this step since the United States toppled [late Iraq] President Saddam Hussein's regime back in 2003.

This step should have been taken directly after April 2003, instead of having gone to Baghdad to negotiate. We're still paying the price for opting to negotiate.

Al Jazeera: What are the main challenges facing the Kurdish region now that the oil-rich city of Kirkuk has been retaken by the central government?

Mahmoud: Kirkuk will not be gone forever. For more than four decades, Saddam Hussein's government and his predecessors tried to change the city's demographics, but it was reclaimed by the Kurds in a matter of four hours.

Among our biggest challenges at the moment is Baghdad's lack of faith in the power of dialogue, and its inclination to deal with the Kurdish question through military force. This has been the case with previous governments as well, but they fell, and we remained.

Al Jazeera: What are the main existing internal divisions within the Kurdish parliament that may hinder potential negotiations?

Mahmoud: The Kurdish parliament is not divided; it is actually practising democracy by the mere fact that it is facing real opposition. The fact that the majority party has its opinions and views, while other parties also have their opposing positions, reflects a healthy and diverse process adopted by the regional parliament.



A referendum on Kurdish secession in northern Iraq resulted in a military confrontation between Erbil and Baghdad [Courtesy of Kifah Mahmoud]

Al Jazeera: Do you hope to see a successful Kurdish secession in the near future?

Mahmoud: Independence is a notion that stems from the minds and hearts of the Kurdish people. Manifesting this on the ground has come in the form of policies pushed by the parliament and the Kurdish judicial body. The notion is a reality that cannot be disputed among any Kurd in the [Iraq] region.

If there is one thing that the Kurdish people and the government are not in sync with - I would say it is merely the means of executing this, or perhaps a matter of timing. I am optimistic because the referendum proved the will of the Kurdish people and their determination to make secession a reality.

Al Jazeera: In your opinion, what steps should the central government in Baghdad adopt moving forward?

Mahmoud: Today, the central government does not have much of a choice, except to speed up the dialogue process and stop its punitive measures against the Kurdish people. It also needs to pull out its armed troops from along the Kurdish region's borders, as their presence has violated various articles of the constitution. ●

DICTIONNAIRE

Un monument linguistique qui tombe à point nommé

Préfacé par Alain Rey, le dictionnaire franco-kurde de Kendal Nezan constitue un événement éditorial, une étape pour la reconnaissance d'une langue et d'un peuple.

DICTIONNAIRE KURDE-FRANÇAIS

Kendal Nezan

Institut kurde et éditions Riveneuve, 1 995 pages, 60 euros

Est-ce un hasard ? Cette œuvre monumentale de près de 2 000 pages est publiée au moment où le peuple kurde sort de l'ombre épaisse où l'avait plongé l'histoire tourmentée du Proche-Orient. C'est le fruit d'un travail considérable qui a duré des décennies : Kendal Nezan, le directeur de l'Institut kurde de Paris, qui en a dirigé la réalisation ces trente dernières années, explique qu'il a repris les travaux entrepris avant lui par un célèbre linguiste et journaliste, enseignant de la langue kurde à Paris, l'émir Kamuran Bedir Khan. « Il avait collecté 23 000 mots. Nous avons poursuivi son travail jusqu'à aboutir à 85 000 entrées. Cent quarante personnes y ont travaillé. Nous avons fait venir ici, pour une semaine deux fois par an, des linguistes kurdes, mais aussi des écrivains, des journalistes, des bergers pour récolter et expliquer leurs mots. Nous ne nous contentons pas d'une simple traduction. Nous donnons des exemples d'emploi de ces mots, des citations tirées de la littérature, des chants et des contes, des proverbes, du parler populaire. Ce dictionnaire permet de comprendre autant le kurde du XV^e siècle que celui d'aujourd'hui. »

Le dictionnaire inclut les trois dialectes - kurmanci, sorani, zaza - parlés dans les différentes parties du Kurdistan, pays meurtri que l'histoire a divisé entre Turquie, Irak, Iran et Syrie, ainsi que certains parlers provinciaux. Il fait justice aux emprunts

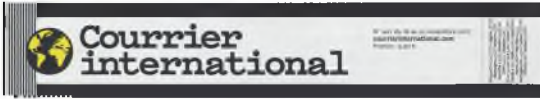


nombreux du kurde à d'autres langues : le persan, dont il est le plus proche, l'arabe, langue de la religion, le français pour les termes techniques et artistiques, ou encore le grec. Comme le souligne Alain Rey dans la préface, « il constitue une étape majeure dans la description d'une langue malmenée par l'histoire ». Une langue riche et subtile, parlée par 40 millions de Kurdes dispersés. Une participation majeure au combat pour la reconnaissance de leurs droits culturels et nationaux. ●

FRANÇOISE GERMAIN-ROBIN



Erbil, capitale du Kurdistan irakien. Safin Hamed/AFP



Qui veut d'une guerre au Moyen-Orient ?

Dans le conflit qui oppose l'Iran et ses alliés chiites à l'alliance israélo-saoudienne, les acteurs prêts au combat savent qu'ils risquent gros, tant sur le terrain qu'à l'intérieur de leurs pays.

—Ha'Aretz Tel-Aviv

Les rumeurs se multiplient quant à une guerre entre la coalition emmenée par l'Iran et une improbable alliance anti-iranienne israélo-saoudienne, mais on peine à en imaginer le scénario. Chacune des parties aimerait en finir avec son adversaire respectif, mais aucune n'a pour le moment intérêt à déclencher elle-même une confrontation militaire. Passage en revue de ces acteurs qui voudraient une bonne guerre... menée par procuration.

L'Iran. Depuis plus de six ans, les responsables des Gardiens de la révolution islamique (GRI) à Téhéran se sont lourdement investis en Syrie dans le soutien au régime Assad. Ce soutien a pris plusieurs formes : envoi de "conseillers militaires" de la Sepah-e Qods ["Force de Jérusalem", unités spéciales des GRI], déploiement de plusieurs milliers de combattants du Hezbollah [libanais], débarquements aériens d'armement neuf à l'aéroport

de Damas, recrutement par les milices chiites de dizaines de milliers de civils (essentiellement des réfugiés afghans) et octroi de crédits à hauteur d'un milliard de dollars pour garantir la solvabilité du clan Assad. Cependant, tout cela s'est révélé insuffisant pour assurer une victoire décisive du régime syrien et n'a permis que de le maintenir à flot jusqu'au débarquement des Russes en septembre 2015. Maintenant que la survie d'Assad est assurée, l'Iran est bien décidé à se servir sur la bête en obtenant des concessions minières hautement stratégiques en Syrie ainsi que le droit d'y bâtir une base aérienne et un port militaire en eaux profondes sur la Méditerranée.

Face à l'Iran, Israël alterne entre pressions diplomatiques et menaces militaires pour empêcher Téhéran d'ériger un bastion permanent en Syrie. Cette politique israélienne semble jouer dans les luttes intestines au sein du régime iranien, où certaines factions estiment que les milliards investis dans la mise sur pied des infrastructures

handicaperont la relance économique iranienne. Pour l'instant, Téhéran n'a aucun intérêt à déclencher, en Syrie et au Liban, une guerre entre ses alliés locaux et Israël. L'Iran préférerait entraîner Israël sur un théâtre plus "commode" : la frontière sud entre Israël et la bande de Gaza. Une délégation du Hamas [qui dirige encore Gaza] est en ce moment en visite à Téhéran, et une seconde devrait s'y rendre d'ici quelques semaines.

Le Hamas et l'Iran avaient vu leurs relations se refroidir au début de la guerre de Syrie, l'Iran aidant le régime syrien à massacrer des centaines de milliers de sunnites, y compris les Frères musulmans, alliés du Hamas. Au plus fort de la guerre civile, l'Iran avait même intensifié son soutien à l'adversaire du Hamas, le Jihad islamique palestinien (JIP). Mais, depuis, des relations ont été renouées, et l'Iran verrait d'un bon œil le Hamas et le Jihad joindre leurs forces pour provoquer des incidents sur la frontière d'Israël et détourner l'attention israélienne du théâtre [syrien].

La bande de Gaza. Nonobstant les ingérences iraniennes, la bande de Gaza a ses propres problèmes et, même si le Hamas est ravi de rétablir ses relations avec Téhéran, les intérêts du Mouvement de la résistance islamique se trouvent pour l'instant au Caire, où a été signé en octobre l'accord de réconciliation avec le Fatah [et l'Autorité palestinienne (AP)]. L'Égypte veut que le Hamas maintienne l'ordre à Gaza et que ce territoire ne serve pas de sanctuaire logistique aux combattants de Daech dans le Sinaï. S'il y avait un doute, en particulier en Israël, que la réconciliation interpalestinienne ne soit qu'un énième fiasco, la destruction (le 30 octobre) par Israël d'un tunnel du JIP provoquant la mort de 14 combattants du JIP et du Hamas est venue le lever. En d'autres temps, une telle opération aurait immédiatement déclenché des représailles palestiniennes, mais il n'y a finalement eu aucune escalade. Au contraire, le Hamas a contraint le JIP à respecter l'armistice officieux négocié avec Israël à l'été 2014.

Les rescapés de Daech s'implantent dans la Libye voisine, et le groupe terroriste va développer ses bastions dans le Sinaï.

Le Hamas. Au pouvoir à Gaza depuis juin 2007, le mouvement islamiste ne s'est certes pas converti au sionisme. Mais le blocus permanent imposé à la bande de Gaza par Israël et l'aggravation de la situation économique ont amené le nouveau "Premier ministre" du Hamas, Yahya Sinwar, à la conclusion douloureuse qu'il fallait trouver au plus vite un terrain d'entente avec l'Égypte voisine et l'AP. C'était ça ou voir la situation dans la bande de Gaza échapper à tout contrôle. Sinwar est un faucon ayant passé de longues années dans les prisons israéliennes, mais c'est aussi un natif de Gaza, et il n'en connaît que trop bien les jeux politiques.

Et la délégation du Hamas envoyée à Téhéran n'a aucun poids à Gaza.

L'Arabie Saoudite. Les événements de ces derniers jours à Riyad ont surpris les observateurs les plus avertis : arrestations massives de responsables saoudiens de haut rang, y compris des princes héritiers, accusés de corruption ; nomination à des postes clés de proches du prince héritier Mohammed ben Salmane (alias MBS) ; accident d'hélicoptère mystérieux [causant la mort d'un prince] ; mise sous pression des amis des Saoudiens, comme le Premier ministre libanais, Saad Hariri (qui a annoncé sa démission en direct de Riyad), et le président de l'OLP (Organisation de la libération de la Palestine), Mahmoud Abbas ; etc. Face à ces événements, les experts se perdent en conjectures quant aux motivations réelles de MBS, qui seraient plus ambitieuses que sa volonté affichée de consolider son emprise sur le royaume saoudien.

Une théorie en vogue quant à la démission de Hariri est qu'il aurait reçu l'ordre de s'enfuir à Riyad, de façon à ce qu'il ne soit pas embarqué dans une opération imminente d'Israël soutenue par les Saoudiens contre le Liban, voire d'une attaque israélienne contre le Hezbollah. Le fait que le Hezbollah ait été accusé de tentative d'assassinat contre Hariri n'a fait que renforcer cette théorie. Les Saoudiens seraient certainement ravis de voir leurs ennemis iraniens sévèrement châtiés et, à cet égard, le Hezbollah constituerait une cible toute désignée. Le fait est aussi que Riyad n'est pas en mesure de déclencher lui-même une guerre contre Téhéran. Cela fait deux ans et demi que les Saoudiens sont englués dans une guerre au Yémen contre les houthistes soutenus par l'Iran. Le fiasco est tel que ces derniers sont même parvenus à tirer un missile qui a frappé [au début de novembre] l'aéroport international de Riyad. On voit donc mal les Saoudiens se lancer dans une offensive dans le Golfe contre des Iraniens bien plus puissants et aguerris. Surtout à un moment où MBS est accaparé par des enjeux de politique intérieure.

Le Hezbollah. Après six ans de combats menés en Syrie pour le compte de l'Iran, le Hezbollah peut s'enorgueillir de victoires impressionnantes et de l'acquisition d'une expérience militaire accrue grâce au recours à un armement de pointe et à l'exercice du commandement sur d'importantes brigades paramilitaires syriennes. Mais l'organisation a perdu au moins 800 hommes au combat et plusieurs milliers d'autres ont été gravement blessés, soit le quart de ses troupes au début de la guerre de Syrie. Des milliers de nouveaux conscrits ont certes été recrutés, entraînés et envoyés sur le front syrien, mais cela ne s'est pas fait sans un certain ressentiment au sein de la communauté chiite libanaise, où beaucoup estiment que le Hezbollah a depuis trop longtemps renoncé à son rôle de "résistance libanaise", pour faire du Liban un otage de l'Iran.

Sur le plan militaire, le Hezbollah n'est plus en état de fournir un effort de guerre contre Israël. Il est toujours en train de combattre sur plusieurs fronts syriens et devrait reconstituer ses brigades avant de s'engager dans une nouvelle guerre.

Dix-huit mois se sont écoulés depuis l'assassinat de son chef militaire, Mustafa Badreddine, un assassinat dont le commanditaire serait Hassan Nasrallah, le propre chef du Hezbollah, et ce sous la pression de l'Iran. Badreddine n'a pas encore été remplacé. Par ailleurs, Nasrallah a perdu le statut dont il jouissait dans le monde arabe depuis la deuxième guerre du Liban [opposant Israël au Hezbollah en 2006]. Désormais, il n'est plus vu comme le courageux fer de lance de la résistance anti-israélienne, mais comme l'assassin des résistants syriens au régime Assad. Nasrallah pourrait être tenté de déclencher une nouvelle guerre contre Israël dans l'espoir de redorer son image, mais il semble conscient que ses hommes n'y sont pas prêts et que, surtout, des représailles israéliennes dévastatrices ciblant les infrastructures civiles du Liban déboucheraient sur un résultat contraire à celui escompté. Nasrallah serait tenu par les Libanais pour responsable de leurs nouvelles souffrances. Mais, si le Hezbollah est dans une position si vulnérable, Israël pourrait-il être tenté d'en tirer profit ?

Israël. Une chose est quasi certaine. Même si Hariri et les Saoudiens pensent qu'une attaque israélienne au Liban est imminente, cela ne sera pas possible avant la fin de novembre. Israël est pour l'instant le théâtre des manœuvres militaires internationales les plus ambitieuses de toute son histoire en ce qu'elles impliquent les forces

En dépit de sa rhétorique anti-iranienne, Benjamin Nétanyahou préfère s'en tenir à des frappes chirurgicales.

aériennes de sept pays étrangers. Cet exercice de musculation militaro-diplomatique est planifié depuis plus d'un an, et les forces aériennes israéliennes n'ont pour l'instant pas de temps à consacrer à autre chose. Israël ne pourra donc pas déclencher une guerre avant la fin du mois de novembre, et encore, à condition que les tensions aient diminué sur ses autres fronts.

Pour l'instant, Israël doit à tout prix s'assurer que le calme règne autour de la bande de Gaza. Son nouveau système de défense souterrain contre des attaques menées à partir des tunnels du Hamas et du JIP est encore en phase de déploiement et ne sera pleinement opérationnel que d'ici à la fin de 2018. Par ailleurs, Israël ne veut pas interférer dans l'effort diplomatique mené par l'Égypte pour pacifier la bande de Gaza. Par contre, sur la frontière israélo-libanaise, le cas du Hezbollah est

bien plus complexe. Certes, Israël attaque régulièrement des cibles en territoire syrien, le plus souvent des convois du Hezbollah tentant d'importer au Liban de l'armement de pointe. À plusieurs reprises, la Syrie a tenté de riposter en tirant des missiles plutôt inefficaces contre les avions israéliens, mais ni le régime d'Assad ni le Hezbollah n'ont choisi l'escalade. Au sein de la communauté militaire israélienne, certaines



UN ACTE DE GUERRE

"Acte de guerre", titre **Arab News**. C'est en effet ainsi que le ministre saoudien des Affaires étrangères Adel Al-Jubeir, a qualifié le tir de missile sur la capitale, Riyad, samedi 4 novembre.

Les Saoudiens ont attribué cette attaque aux rebelles houthistes du Yémen, contre lesquels le royaume est en guerre, les accusant d'agir sur ordre de l'Iran. Si l'engin n'a pas fait de victimes sur le coup, il semble désormais qu'il pourrait avoir des conséquences dramatiques. En effet, l'Arabie saoudite "se réserve le droit de répondre en temps voulu à l'action hostile du régime iranien", a déclaré Adel Al-Jubeir, toujours selon **Arab News**.



voix plaident certes en faveur d'une large opération préventive en territoire libanais contre des rampes de missiles du Hezbollah, mais ces voix restent pour l'instant minoritaires.

En dépit de sa rhétorique anti-iranienne, Benjamin Nétanyahou se garde bien d'étendre les hostilités au principal homme de main de l'Iran, le Hezbollah, et il préfère s'en tenir à des frappes chirurgicales et ponctuelles. Les leçons de [la guerre de 2006 qui avait duré plusieurs semaines] sont encore fraîches dans les mémoires des responsables militaires israéliens et, dans le fond, le vrai Nétanyahou est bien moins va-t-en-guerre que l'image qu'il aime à donner de lui. Il n'a jamais été un fanatique de ces opérations militaires à grande échelle qui nécessitent la mobilisation de l'armée tout entière, au risque de baisser sa garde sur les autres fronts. Bien sûr, Nétanyahou serait plus que ravi de voir quelqu'un d'autre foncer tête baissée contre l'Iran (les Américains, pour ne pas les nommer). Mais, bien que l'administration Trump ne rate jamais une occasion d'asséner sa rhétorique anti-iranienne, Washington ne semble pas saliver à l'idée d'une guerre qui passerait de la rhétorique à la pratique.

Le 6 novembre, à Chatham House, l'ancien secrétaire d'État [de Barack Obama] John Kerry a déclaré que les dirigeants israéliens, saoudiens et égyptiens avaient tous supplié Obama de bombardier l'Iran. Il en a conclu qu'aucun de ces dirigeants n'osait s'y coller directement. C'est un bon résumé de la situation.

—Anshel Pfeffer
Publié le 8 novembre

UN VASTE CHAMP DE BATAILLE

D'un territoire qui s'étend de l'Irak au Liban et qui regroupe quatre pays sous contrôle iranien, des missiles peuvent être lancés contre Israël, pour prouver au monde la puissance de Téhéran.

—Al-Modon *Beyrouth*

Après quarante ans d'une rupture historique entre l'Irak et la Syrie sous le règne du parti Baas [les deux pays étaient dirigés par deux partis Baas rivaux], puis d'une hostilité féroce, la frontière irako-syrienne est aujourd'hui sous le contrôle de deux régimes, alliés stratégiques de l'Iran. Des membres des milices chiites irakiennes auraient même traversé la frontière, prêtant main-forte aux forces syriennes et à leurs alliés pour libérer la ville syrienne de Deir Ez-Zor [qui se trouvait sous la domination de Daech]. Qassem Soleimani, le chef de la brigade Al-Qods [force iranienne

des chars T90, alors que des T90A, plus efficaces et dotés de canons Chilka, auraient été vus aux mains du Hezbollah et des milices chiites irakiennes. Cela indiquerait que les armes disponibles sont partagées, comme les frontières internationales, mais cela rappelle surtout la supériorité, voulue par la politique iranienne, des milices sur les armées nationales.

La continuité géographique de l'axe de la résistance [anti-israélien et antisauvien] est devenue source de fierté pour les responsables iraniens qui l'exploitent sur le plan intérieur. Ali Akbar



spéciale impliquée dans les guerres en Irak et en Syrie], s'est montré sur le terrain pour saluer les combattants des milices irakiennes. Il passe aisément d'un côté à l'autre de la frontière, tout comme les dirigeants iraniens, pour inspecter le front et se fait prendre en photo avec les soldats.

Le Liban n'est pas en reste, puisque le Hezbollah [pro-iranien] est lui aussi présent des deux côtés de la frontière. Au cours des dernières semaines, des chars performants aux couleurs de la milice libanaise ont été aperçus dans le nord de l'Irak, près de la Syrie, et il semble que ces blindés aient été pris aux forces syriennes. Selon l'agence russe Sputnik, l'armée irakienne ne posséderait que

Velayati, le conseiller du guide de la révolution Ali Khamenei, a annoncé à Alep [en Syrie], devant des combattants pro-iraniens, que les prochaines batailles viseraient le reste de l'Est syrien, signifiant ainsi une extension de la zone de confrontation. Plusieurs responsables iraniens ont répété que l'axe de la résistance partait de Téhéran et passait par Bagdad, Damas et Beyrouth pour arriver en Palestine. Il ne s'agit pas là d'un simple affichage politique mais bien d'une stratégie militaire qui s'est concrétisée quand, notamment, un avion israélien a été visé, au-dessus du territoire libanais, par un missile sol-air tiré du côté syrien de la frontière.

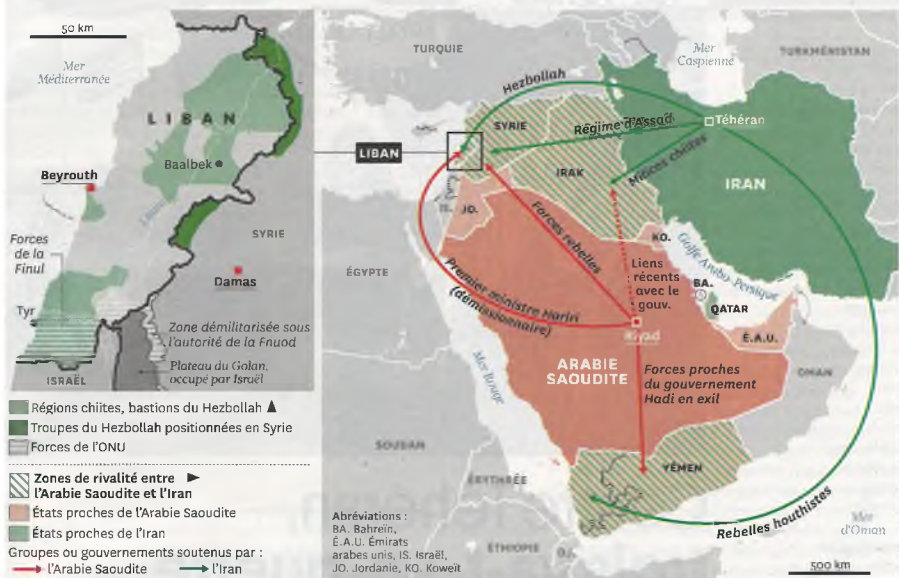
Comment l'Iran compte-t-il opérer sur ces champs de bataille ouverts les uns sur les autres, en cas de guerre totale contre Israël ?

Premièrement, les missiles balistiques seraient tirés de différents endroits et de manière plus intense, paralysant ainsi le système de défense antiaérienne appelé "dôme de fer" pour atteindre des cibles sensibles. Deuxièmement, les attaques multiples limiteraient la puissance de feu israélienne. Enfin, la continuité géographique faciliterait le mouvement des combattants arabes et étrangers au sol, même si cela n'est pas vraiment utile compte tenu de la supériorité aérienne israélienne et de sa capacité à stopper les colonnes au sol.

Il reste que cette continuité géographique contribue à assurer une mission régionale en faisant passer le message [sur la force de l'Iran], en permettant de mener des guerres et des conflits par procuration, et en fournissant des cartes de négociations dans les dossiers [notamment celui du nucléaire] entre l'Iran et le monde extérieur.

—Mohanad Hage Ali
Publié le 10 novembre

Au cœur de la confrontation Arabie Saoudite-Iran



Situation en novembre 2017

DES MILICES TOUJOURS PLUS PUISSANTES

—Al-Hayat *Londres*

Il est rare qu'une milice devienne aussi puissante qu'une armée. En général, elle est infiniment plus faible que l'armée de son État. Prenons les apôtres de la suprématie blanche aux États-Unis, ou les colons extrémistes juifs en Cisjordanie. Les milices qu'ils forment ne sauraient tenir tête à la puissance publique. Qui plus est, les causes qu'elles défendent sont suffisamment choquantes et sectorielles pour que personne ne puisse croire qu'elles parlent au nom d'un collectif plus vaste. Leur racisme étant ouvertement assumé, elles n'ont pas la prétention d'associer les autres à leur posture de supériorité ou



Contre l'Iran perfide Neutraliser Riyad

de leur imposer un unanimité autour de leur discours. D'ailleurs, personne n'a l'indécence de les adopter comme modèles. Il s'agit par conséquent de milices "minimales".

Mais il existe également des milices "maximales". Ce sont par exemple les Gardiens de la révolution en Iran, ou le Hachd Al-Chaabi irakien [milices chiïtes]. Plutôt que de faire contrepoids à l'armée de leur État, elles en sont complémentaires. Elles suivent le modèle des régimes totalitaires européens en ce qu'elles exécutent les tâches que leur assignent les régimes en place. Elles bénéficient pour cela de budgets considérables, alloués au nom d'une rhétorique idéologique sur la défense de la patrie, la lutte pour déjouer les perfides complots étrangers ou intérieurs, etc.

Il fut un temps où le Hezbollah était une milice du premier genre, "minimale". C'était à l'époque des entraînements menés par les Gardiens de la révolution dans la plaine libanaise de la Bekaa [dans les années 1980], quand il promouvait le slogan "Ton voile m'est plus cher que mon sang", jetait de l'acide sur des femmes [non voilées], etc. Mais, très vite, il est devenu une milice "maximale". Pour cela, il s'est drapé dans les habits de la "résistance", en disant qu'il n'était mû que par le désir de libérer les terres arabes occupées [par Israël]. Ensuite, il a été reconnu et légitimé par les accords interlibanais de paix. Puis il est entré dans les rouages gouvernementaux, avec ses députés et ses ministres. Et, pour finir, il s'est imposé en tant qu'acteur dans la guerre en Syrie.

La désignation de Michel Aoun comme président du Liban, son alliance jamais démentie avec le Hezbollah, le fait que ce dernier puisse dicter au pays sa politique étrangère... Tout cela a renforcé son statut de milice "maximale". Ce mouvement s'est toujours érigé en protecteur des frontières. Il l'a fait au sud face à Israël, puis de manière plus grossière encore à l'est, avec la Syrie. Mais, en réalité, il n'était pas tant mû par des préoccupations pour les frontières extérieures que par des considérations de politique intérieure. Car cette posture lui a permis non seulement de prétendre incarner la "résistance", mais également de se considérer comme assez légitime pour se prononcer sur tous les grands sujets politiques. Et in fine de s'imposer au pouvoir et de devenir plus puissant que l'armée libanaise.

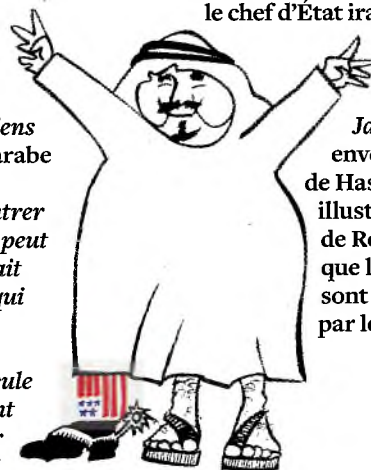
Aujourd'hui, nous en payons le prix. Le monde traite le Liban et le Hezbollah comme s'ils étaient deux cerveaux de la même entité. C'est le propre des pieuvres d'avoir plusieurs cerveaux, et c'est probablement ainsi que le reste du monde voit ce pays. Les pieuvres, on tend à les tuer. Au même titre qu'on tend à faire la guerre à un pays qui se présente comme l'équivalent d'une milice. Les récentes sanctions américaines ainsi que la demande européenne de ne plus faire la distinction entre la branche "politique" et la branche "militaire" du Hezbollah constituent peut-être un premier pas vers une action hostile, à l'ombre des tensions entre les États-Unis et l'Iran.

—Hazem Saghieh
Publié le 31 octobre

● "Au cours de semaines stupéfiantes, nous avons assisté à la reconstitution de la mécanique gouvernementale saoudienne, qui avance maintenant à grande vitesse, alors qu'on la croyait en panne : des réformes légales, des projets économiques énormes et une politique étrangère déterminée", écrit Asharq Al-Awsat. "D'aucuns considéraient que l'Arabie Saoudite était un cadavre qui attendait d'être dévoré par le grand voisin iranien et nargué par le petit voisin qatari. [...] Le prince héritier Mohammed ben Salmane n'est pas le genre d'hommes qui évitent l'affrontement, que ce soit avec le Qatar et les houthistes au Yémen, ou avec les extrémistes [Frères musulmans] ou encore pour combattre la corruption. Et il a dit lui-même récemment : tout cela n'est qu'un début." "Le temps est venu de réagir", écrit pour sa part le journal de Djeddah, en Arabie Saoudite, Okaz. "Est-ce que les bruits de botte ont commencé à résonner ? Tout indique qu'il y aura des frappes militaires contre les milices que l'Iran a implantées un peu partout dans la région. L'Iran a déclaré la guerre aux Saoudiens en fournissant des missiles aux houthistes au Yémen pour viser la capitale saoudienne Riyad. L'Iran croit pouvoir faire de l'Irak un protectorat, de la Syrie une colonie et du Liban une annexe, le tout pour achever le croissant chiïte. Mais le régime des mollahs à Téhéran doit se rendre compte que quand l'Arabie Saoudite a décidé quelque chose, elle le fait. Les Saoudiens ne sont pas du genre à avoir la main qui tremble. L'Iran va comprendre ce que cela coûte d'échafauder des complots perfides et de transplanter ses cellules cancéreuses dans les pays de la région. On va lui couper la main, lui arracher ses griffes et lui faire avaler le poison qu'il a lui-même voulu répandre." Pour Al-Hayat, c'est la perspective du "maintien de Bachar El-Assad au pouvoir en Syrie" qui change la donne. "Les administrations américaines successives ont consacré leurs efforts à combattre Daech, et pas assez à contenir les Iraniens en Syrie", écrit le journal panarabe à capitaux saoudiens. Et de constater : "Si Trump veut contrer l'expansionnisme iranien, il ne peut pas le faire au Liban. Israël avait essayé de le faire [en 2006], ce qui avait abouti à la destruction du pays, mais avait renforcé la présence du Hezbollah. La seule chance de réussir l'affrontement avec l'Iran consiste à renverser le régime de Bachar El-Assad."

● Depuis la démission surprise, le 4 novembre à Riyad, du Premier ministre libanais Saad Hariri, la possibilité d'une confrontation entre Téhéran et Riyad est au centre des débats abordés par les journaux iraniens. Pour le quotidien réformateur Bahar, "la raison principale des tensions se trouve en Israël. Aux États-Unis et en Israël, les ultras veulent une guerre et il y a une grande chance qu'ils réussissent." Sur le même ton, le quotidien réformateur Shargh évoque une phase "néfaste et destructrice, parrainée par les États-Unis de Trump, Israël, et les Saoudiens". Le quotidien Ebtekar souligne que Washington, Riyad et Tel-Aviv ne supportent pas "la montée et la percée de l'Iran dans la région grâce à sa lutte victorieuse contre Daech". Ces capitales veulent "contenir Téhéran tout en évitant toute confrontation directe", en utilisant des méthodes soft et des "lutttes par intermédiaires", au Liban et en Syrie. "Mais Téhéran doit éviter toute réaction hystérique face aux manœuvres de Riyad et de Washington, et de leurs alliés. La retenue et la mesure dont fait preuve l'Iran pourront neutraliser le jeu de Riyad", conclut Ebtekar. Le quotidien ultraconservateur Kayhan a, le 6 novembre, suscité une vague de critiques en appelant les rebelles houthistes (pro-iraniens) au Yémen à viser Dubaï, quelques heures après que ces derniers ont tiré un missile vers l'Arabie Saoudite. Le 7 novembre encore, ce quotidien a continué à défendre son approche agressive, dénonçant ses détracteurs, qui, selon lui, sont trop tendres envers les ennemis de l'Iran. Un autre quotidien ultraconservateur, Javan, proche des Gardiens de la révolution, a publié en première page le 11 novembre les déclarations du président iranien Hassan Rohani, qui mettent en garde l'Arabie Saoudite et ses alliés. "Des plus grands que vous se sont cassés les dents", a déclaré le chef d'État iranien sur un ton

provocateur, ajoutant : "Vous ne comptez même pas." Chose rare pour Javan, d'habitude critique envers la politique de Hassan Rohani, l'article est illustré par une grande photo de Rohani, preuve, s'il en faut, que les propos du président sont dans la ligne défendue par les conservateurs.



← Dessin de Hajo paru dans As-Safir, Beyrouth.

Quel territoire pour les Kurdes dans le conflit syrien ?

Le 25 septembre 2017, les Kurdes ont voté à 92,7 % en faveur de l'indépendance du territoire qu'ils contrôlent en Irak. En Syrie, acteurs de la lutte contre l'organisation de l'État islamique (EI ou Daech), ils installent une administration autonome dans le nord, où ils constituent la seule grande minorité présente sur un vaste espace de peuplement (2 millions d'âmes). Quelle stratégie peuvent-ils adopter pour créer une entité durable dans un pays en guerre ?

Dès 1916, à la suite des négociations secrètes de Sykes-Picot avec le Royaume-Uni, les Français obtinrent une zone qui allait de la Méditerranée à la frontière perse et qui comprenait la Syrie, la région de Mossoul et une grande partie du Kurdistan du nord, alors appelé « Territoire de l'est » (cf. carte 2 p. 40). La plupart des régions kurdes du nord et de l'ouest (actuellement en Turquie et en Syrie) entrèrent dans la zone d'influence française – administrées avec la Cilicie, alors que les régions kurdes du sud (actuel Kurdistan irakien) furent rattachées à la zone d'influence britannique. Le massacre des Arméniens (1915-1916) puis leur déportation vers la Syrie et le Liban aboutirent à un changement démographique dans de nombreux secteurs de l'Anatolie orientale.

TRAUMATISME GÉOGRAPHIQUE

À partir de 1920, les opérations militaires tournèrent en faveur de la Turquie. Avec l'appui

des chefs de tribus kurdes, méfiants envers la politique proarménienne de Paris au Levant, l'armée de Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) reprit le contrôle de la Cilicie. La France, qui voulait éviter un conflit, recula partout dans la région, cédant des pans entiers de territoire aux Turcs comme toutes les grandes villes de Gaziantep à Mardin (accord de paix d'Ankara, le 20 octobre 1921). La Turquie établit alors sa frontière méridionale plus au sud que ce qui était prévu lors du traité de Sèvres (10 août 1920). Avec celui de Lausanne (24 juillet 1923), les Kurdes n'eurent plus aucune terre alors que, trois ans plus tôt, un territoire leur avait pourtant été attribué ; pis encore, la population fut divisée entre la Turquie kémaliste et la Syrie mandataire.

Du côté syrien, ces zones formèrent le « Kurdistan de Syrie » ou « Kurdistan occidental » (Rojava en kurde), bien que cette appellation fût bannie durant toute la période qui suivit l'indépendance syrienne (1946), tant le nationalisme arabe refu-

sait toute référence identitaire divergente. Les nationalistes arabes à Damas – dont le régime baasiste à partir de 1963 –, ayant bien compris les enjeux liés à une telle situation, essayèrent de rompre cette continuité démographique en arabisant les régions kurdes le long de la frontière turque. Cette présence kurde en Syrie était considérée par le pouvoir central comme dangereuse pour l'intégrité territoriale du pays.

PREMIÈRE MARCHÉ VERS UNE AUTONOMIE

La révolution syrienne de mars 2011 ouvrit une phase de militarisation des acteurs en présence dès l'automne. Le régime de Bachar al-Assad (depuis 2000), pragmatique, mit tout en œuvre pour diviser l'opposition qui le menaçait : dans le nord de la Syrie, pour éviter que les Kurdes ne participent au mouvement de contestation, il se retira des secteurs qu'ils occupaient, préférant jouer la carte communautaire. Cette liberté donnée aux Kurdes permit au Parti de l'union démocratique (PYD) de s'imposer seul, au détriment de ses concurrents, comme garant de la sécurisation des secteurs libérés par l'armée syrienne, et comme initiateur d'un nouveau projet politico-spatial qui repose sur l'autonomie territoriale, avec la formation d'une administration locale de substitution aux autorités centrales. Les principales agglomérations tenues par les Kurdes servirent alors dans un premier temps de laboratoire à un projet d'autogestion dès le tournant 2012 (cf. carte 1).

Depuis, construire un territoire viable est réellement ce à quoi les Kurdes de Syrie tentent de s'atteler. L'objectif ultime demeure l'accession à une région autonome reconnue, sur le modèle irakien, caractérisée par une continuité spatiale. Cette représentation territoriale, un temps ré-



vée, devient possible avec le retrait de l'armée syrienne et la militarisation du conflit. S'ouvre alors un nouveau champ de questionnement, comme le devenir des zones non kurdes qui se retrouveraient incluses dans les limites de ce territoire. Car, outre les secteurs à majorité arabe qui segmentent les poches de peuplement kurde, cette partie de la Syrie accueille aussi une forte présence chrétienne, turkmène et arabe, localement importante au sein même des zones tombées sous contrôle kurde.

La victoire, à l'été 2013, des miliciens kurdes des Unités de défense du peuple (YPG), à Ras el-Ain, eut un retentissement énorme sur le moral des combattants et des populations d'un Rojava naissant encore fragile. Elle constitua un acte fondateur du projet territorial kurde avant même le succès de Kobané en janvier 2015. Dans la province de Hassaké, les victoires des combattants des YPG permirent de gagner progressivement du terrain pour constituer le canton de Djézireh autour de Qamishliyé. Lorsque le PYD annonça unilatéralement, en novembre 2013, la création d'une administration autonome au Rojava, les instances administratives étaient pensées comme pluriconfessionnelles afin de rallier les minorités locales comme les chrétiens et les Arabes. Fin 2013, les Kurdes ne contrôlaient que les secteurs dans lesquels ils étaient majoritaires : Afryn et ses alentours, Kobané et une zone autour de Qamishliyé. À cette époque, trois cantons furent déclarés autonomes par les forces politiques présentes sur le terrain.

L'EXPANSION DU ROJAVA : JUSQU'OU ET POURQUOI ?

Depuis 2014, la quasi-totalité des opérations militaires des YPG se déroule dans les zones de peuplement arabe. Populaires dans les zones kurdes, elles se sont renforcées par la mise en place d'une circonscription obligatoire dans

les secteurs administrés, aidée par la qualité de l'encadrement militaire dispensé par des membres expérimentés du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK). Avec la création d'une administration autonome, l'effort militaire n'a plus seulement été le fait de la population kurde, comme le montrent le ralliement des organisations paramilitaires syriaques et la formation, dès 2013, d'un bataillon arabe. Issus des zones rurales au sud-est de Ras el-Ain, des membres des tribus Sharabiyeh et Baggara ont été intégrés aux YPG ; la composante arabe est primordiale pour permettre aux Kurdes d'évoluer dans les zones mixtes et dans celles reconquises sur l'EI, là où ils pourraient être rejoints, en 2014, par des combattants de la tribu Shammar (région de Tell Alo) regroupés dans une milice tribale, la Jaysh al-Sanadid, soit l'« Armée des héros ».

L'entrée en jeu de la coalition internationale (fin 2014) et les victoires répétées des YPG ont incité, à partir de l'automne 2015, au ralliement de groupes armés qui ne trouvaient plus leur place auprès d'une rébellion dominée par des islamistes. Sur le modèle d'une vaste coalition, les Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS) ont été créées en octobre 2015 sous tutelle américaine, qui fournit formation militaire et armes. Les milices kurdes en constituent toujours le socle principal, mais l'alliance contre l'EI favorise l'adhésion de groupes armés arabes proches de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL), qui pensent avoir un intérêt à se rapprocher des Kurdes et des Américains.

S'adaptant au jeu géopolitique régional, les Kurdes et leurs alliés ont accepté l'alliance américaine contre Daech au nord de l'Euphrate et celle de la Russie dans la région d'Afryn dans l'espoir de jouer un rôle lors des pourparlers de paix déjà

engagés. Conscients que leur effort de guerre ne sera pas nécessairement récompensé par leurs tuteurs (la Turquie, avec qui Américains et Russes doivent compter, s'oppose à toute négociation avec les Kurdes) et donc que la reconnaissance d'un Rojava autonome dans le cadre d'une Syrie fédérale est loin d'être acquise, les Kurdes tentent d'avancer sur le terrain. Leur stratégie consiste à diffuser auprès des populations arabes leur projet d'autogestion basé sur des conseils locaux imbriqués (communes, districts, cantons). L'alliance locale, militaire dans un premier temps, entre Kurdes et Arabes devient politique, offrant à cette « fédération du nord » syrien plus de force pour négocier avec Damas et plus de poids pour sortir de son isolement. Il s'agit donc de lever toute suspicion sur la création d'un projet qui serait vu comme uniquement ethnique. Le procédé s'avère d'une portée stratégique essentielle, car, localement, il est présenté comme un premier pas vers le pluralisme. Il s'agit d'associer les communautés dans un projet de « vivre ensemble » et dans une tentative de « démocratie » locale. Les populations arabes et leurs représentants, loin de partager l'idéologie du PYD, mais dont la distribution de postes commence à être convoitée, peuvent y trouver un intérêt certain qui réside dans la protection américaine et la garantie qu'ils ne retomberont pas sous la coupe de Damas et des milices chiites. Le projet kurde s'en trouve légitimé, devenant une alternative crédible.

De facto, une fédération de régions s'est constituée sans reconnaissance extérieure, mais, localement, elle se substitue à l'État absent. Kurdes et Arabes y participent, de nouvelles entités pouvant venir s'y ajouter au gré des compromis locaux et des avancées militaires. Par exemple,

les secteurs à majorité arabe, comme Raqqa ou Manbij, pourraient rejoindre la fédération en tant que « région autonome » si les conseils locaux le souhaitent (ou par consultation de la population). Une région nouvelle, nommée « Euphrate », a été créée par le regroupement de Kobané la Kurde et de Tel Abyad l'Arabe.

Nul ne peut prédire les futurs contours de ce territoire en formation, même si les forces kurdo-arabes sont contenues sur la rive nord de l'Euphrate par l'armée syrienne, qui a reconquis les territoires de steppe entre Palmyre et Deir ez-Zor. Les Kurdes demeurent les alliés naturels des Occidentaux contre les djihadistes et un élément de stabilisation dans le nord de la Syrie ; pourtant, aucune alternative politique ne leur est proposée alors qu'ils escomptent tirer parti de leur lutte contre l'EI en échange de leur implication militaire auprès des forces de la coalition internationale. ●

A. HESSO ET C. ROUSSEL

