



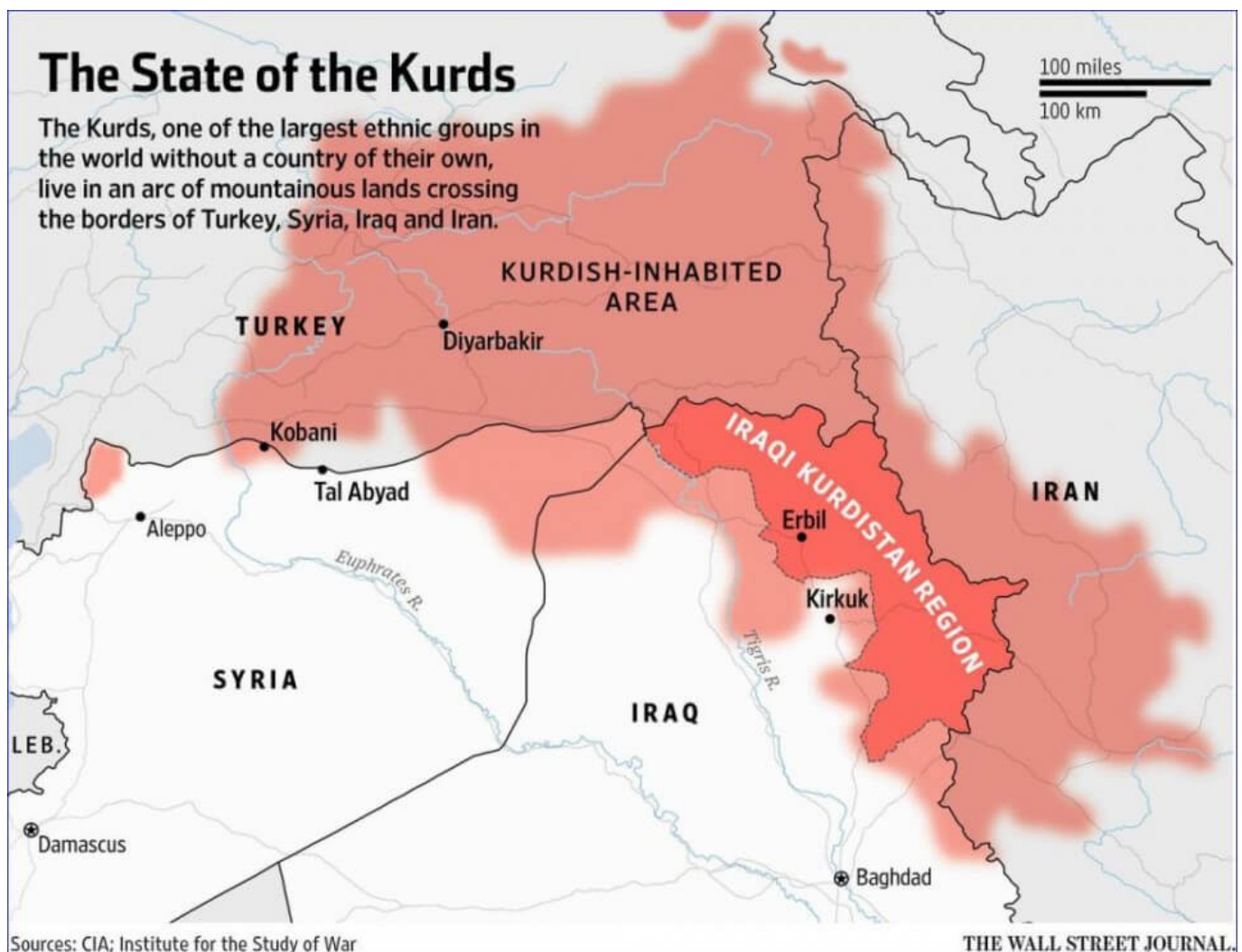
The Myth of the Kurdish YPG's Moral Excellence

by

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on

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A barbed criticism aimed at the International Socialist Organization, shown nearby, under the heading "If the ISO Existed in 1865" encompasses a truth about the orientation of large parts of the Western Left to the Arab nationalist government in Damascus. The truth revealed in the graphic is that the ISO and its cognates will leave no stone unturned in their search for an indigenous Syrian force to support that has taken up arms against Damascus, even to the point of insisting that a group worthy of support must surely exist, even if it can't be identified.

Of course, Washington lends a hand, helpfully denominating its proxies in the most laudatory terms.

Islamist insurgents in Syria, mainly Al Qaeda, were not too many years ago celebrated as a pro-democracy movement, and when that deception proved no longer tenable, as moderates. Now that the so-called moderates have been exposed as the very opposite, many Leftists cling to the hope that amid the Islamist opponents of Syria's secular, Arab socialist, government, can be found votaries of the enlightenment values Damascus already embraces. Surely somewhere there exist armed anti-government secular Leftists to rally behind; for it appears that the goal is to find a reason, any reason, no matter how tenuous, to create a nimbus of moral excellence around some group that opposes with arms the government in Damascus; some group that can be made to appear to be non-sectarian, anti-imperialist, socialist, committed to the rights of women and minorities, and pro-Palestinian; in other words, a group just like Syria's Ba'ath Arab Socialists, except not them.

Stepping forward to fulfill that hope is the PKK, an anarchist guerrilla group demonized as a terrorist organization when operating in Turkey against a US ally, but which goes by the name of the YPG in Syria, where it is the principal component of the lionized "Syrian Democratic Force." So appealing is the YPG to many Western Leftists that some have gone so far as to volunteer to fight in its units. But is the YPG the great hope it's believed it to be?

Kurds in Syria

It's difficult to determine with precision how many Kurds are in Syria, but it's clear that the ethnic group comprises only a small percentage of the Syrian population (less than 10 percent according to the CIA, and 8.5 percent according to an estimate cited by Nikolaos Van Dam in his book *The Struggle for Power in Syria*. [1] Estimates of the proportion of the total Kurd population living in Syria vary from two to seven percent based on population figures presented in the CIA World Factbook. Half of the Kurd community lives in Turkey, 28 percent in Iran and 20 percent in Iraq. A declassified 1972 US State Department report estimated that only between four and five percent of the world's Kurds lived in Syria [2]. While the estimates are rough, it's clear that Kurds make up a fairly small proportion of the Syrian population and that the number of the group's members living in Syria as a proportion of the Kurd community as a whole is very small.

The PKK

Kurdish fighters in Syria operate under the name of the YPG, which is "tied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a radical guerrilla movement combining [anarchist ideas] with Kurdish nationalism. PKK guerrillas [have] fought the Turkish state from 1978" and the PKK is "classified as a terrorist organization by the European Union, Turkey and the U.S." [3]

Cemil Bayik is the top field commander of both the PKK in Turkey and of its Syrian incarnation, the YPG. Bayik "heads the PKK umbrella organization, the KCK, which unites PKK affiliates in different countries. All follow the same leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who has been in prison in Turkey" [4] since 1999, when he was apprehended by Turkish authorities with CIA assistance.

Ocalan "was once a devotee of Marxism-Leninism", according to Carne Ross, who wrote a profile of the Kurdish nationalist leader in *The Financial Times* in 2015. But Ocalan "came to believe that, like capitalism, communism perforce relied upon coercion." Imprisoned on an island in the Sea of Marmara, Ocalan discovered "the masterwork of a New York political thinker named Murray Bookchin." Bookchin "believed that true democracy could only prosper when decision-making belonged to the local community and was not monopolized by distant and unaccountable elites." Government was desirable, reasoned Bookchin, but decision-making needed to be decentralized and inclusive. While anarchist, Bookchin preferred to call his approach "communalism". Ocalan adapted Bookchin's ideas to Kurd nationalism, branding the new philosophy "democratic confederalism." [5]

Labor Zionism has similar ideas about a political system based on decentralized communes, but is, at its core, a nationalist movement. Similarly, Ocalan's views cannot be understood outside the framework of Kurdish nationalism. The PKK may embrace beautiful utopian goals of democratic confederalism but it is, at its heart, an organization dedicated to establishing Kurdish self-rule-and, as it turns out, not only on traditionally Kurdish territory, but on Arab territory, as well, making



the parallel with Labour Zionism all the stronger. In both Syria and Iraq, Kurdish fighters have used the campaign against ISIS as an opportunity to extend Kurdistan into traditionally Arab territories in which Kurds have never been in the majority.

The PKK's goal, writes The Wall Street Journal's Sam Dagher, "is a confederation of self-rule Kurdish-led enclaves in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey" [6] countries in which Kurdish populations have a presence, though, as we've seen, an insignificant one in Syria. In pursuit of this goal "as many as 5,000 Syrian Kurds have died fighting alongside the PKK since the mid-1980s, and nearly all of YPG's top leaders and battle-hardened fighters are veterans of the decades-long struggle against Turkey." [7]

In Syria, the PKK's goal "is to establish a self-ruled region in northern Syria", [8] an area with a significant Arab population.

When PKK fighters cross the border into Turkey, they become 'terrorists', according to the United States and European Union, but when they cross back into Syria they are miraculously transformed into 'guerrilla' fighters waging a war for democracy as the principal component of the Syrian Democratic Force. The reality is, however, that whether on the Turkish or Syrian side of the border, the PKK uses the same methods, pursues the same goals, and relies largely on the same personnel. The YPG is the PKK.

An Opportunity

Washington has long wanted to oust the Arab nationalists in Syria, regarding them as "a focus of Arab nationalist struggle against an American regional presence and interests", as Amos Ma'oz once put it. The Arab nationalists, particularly the Ba'ath Arab Socialist party, in power since 1963, represent too many things Washington deplores: socialism, Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Zionism. Washington denounced Hafez al-Assad, president of Syria from 1970 to 2000, as an Arab communist, and regards his son, Bashar, who succeeded him as president, as little different. Bashar, the State Department complains, hasn't allowed the Syrian economy-based on Soviet models, its researchers say-to be integrated into the US-superintended global economy. Plus, Washington harbors grievances about Damascus's support for Hezbollah and the Palestinian national liberation movement.

US planners decided to eliminate Asia's Arab nationalists by invading their countries, first Iraq, in 2003, which, like Syria, was led by the Ba'ath Arab Socialists, and then Syria. However, the Pentagon soon discovered that its resources were strained by resistance to its occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and that an invasion of Syria was out of the question. As an alternative, Washington immediately initiated a campaign of economic warfare against Syria. That campaign, still in effect 14 years later, would eventually buckle the economy and prevent Damascus from providing education, health care and other essential services in some parts of the country. At the same time, Washington took steps to reignite the long-running holy war that Syria's Islamists had waged on the secular state, dating to the 1960s and culminating in the bloody takeover of Hama, Syria's fourth largest city, in 1982. Beginning in 2006, Washington worked with Syria's Muslim Brotherhood to rekindle the Brother's jihad against Assad's secular government. The Brothers had two meetings at the White House, and met frequently with the State Department and National Security Council.

The outbreak of Islamist violence in March of 2011 was greeted by the PKK as an opportunity. As The Wall Street Journal's Yaroslav Trofimov recounts, "The PKK, once an ally of...Damascus...had long been present among Kurdish communities in northern Syria. When the revolutionary tide reached Syria, the group's Syrian affiliate quickly seized control of three Kurdish-majority regions along the Turkish frontier. PKK fighters and weapons streamed there from other parts of Kurdistan." [9] The "Syrian Kurds", wrote Trofimov's colleagues, Joe Parkinson and Ayla Albayrak, viewed "the civil war as an opportunity to carve out a self-governing enclave-similar to the one established by their ethnic kin in neighboring Iraq." [10] That enclave, long backed by the United States and Israel, was seen as a means of weakening the Iraqi state.



Damascus facilitated the PKK take-over by withdrawing its troops from Kurdish-dominated areas. The Middle East specialist Patrick Seale, who wrote that the Kurds had "seized the opportunity" of the chaos engendered by the Islamist uprising "to boost their own political agenda" [11] speculated that the Syrian government's aims in pulling back from Kurd-majority areas was to redirect "troops for the defence of Damascus and Aleppo;" punish Turkey for its support of Islamist insurgents; and "to conciliate the Kurds, so as to dissuade them from joining the rebels." [12] The PKK, as it turns out, didn't join the Islamist insurgents, as Damascus hoped. But they did join a more significant part of the opposition to Arab nationalist Syria: the puppet master itself, the United States.

By 2014, the PKK had "declared three self-rule administrations, or cantons as they call them, in northern Syria: Afrin, in the northwest, near the city of Aleppo; Kobani; and Jazeera in the northeast, which encompasses Ras al-Ain and the city of Qamishli. Their goal [was] to connect all three." [13] This would mean controlling the intervening spaces occupied by Arabs.

A Deal with Washington

At this point, the PKK decided that its political goals might best be served by striking a deal with Washington.

The State Department had "allowed for the possibility of a form of decentralization in which different groups" - the Kurds, the secular government, and the Islamist insurgents - each received some autonomy within Syria. [14] Notice the implicit assumption in this view that it is within Washington's purview to grant autonomy within Syria, while the question of whether the country ought to decentralize, properly within the democratic ambit of Syrians themselves, is denied to the people who live and work in Syria. If we are to take seriously Ocalan's Bookchin-inspired ideas about investing decision-making authority in the people, this anti-democratic abomination can hardly be tolerated.

All the same, the PKK was excited by the US idea of dividing "Syria into zones roughly corresponding to areas now held by the government, the Islamic State, Kurdish militias and other insurgents." A "federal system" would be established, "not only for Kurdish-majority areas but for all of Syria." A Kurd federal region would be created "on all the territory now held by the" PKK. The zone would expand to include territory the Kurds hoped "to capture in battle, not only from ISIS but also from other Arab insurgent groups." [15]

The PKK "pressed U.S. officials" to act on the scheme, pledging to act as a ground force against ISIS in return. [16] The group said it was "eager to join the U.S.-led coalition against Islamic State in return for recognition and support from Washington and its allies for the Kurdish-dominated self-rule administrations they [had] established in northern Syria." [17]

The only people pleased with this plan were the PKK, the Israelis and the Americans.

"US support for these Kurdish groups" not only in Syria, but in Iraq, where the Kurds were also exploiting the battle with ISIS to expand their rule into traditionally Arab areas, helped "to both divide Syria and divide Iraq", wrote The Independent's veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk. [18] Division redounded to the benefit of the United States and Israel, both of which have an interest in pursuing a divide and rule policy to exercise a joint hegemony over the Arab world. Patrick Seale remarked that the US-Kurd plan for Kurdish rule in northern Syria had been met by "quiet jubilation in Israel, which has long had a semi-clandestine relationship with the Kurds, and welcomes any development which might weaken or dismember Syria." [19]

For their part, the Turks objected, perceiving that Washington had agreed to give the PKK a state in all of northern Syria. [20] Meanwhile, Damascus opposed the plan, "seeing it as a step toward a permanent division of the nation." [21]

Modern-day Syria, it should be recalled, is already the product of a division of Greater Syria at the hands of the British and French, who partitioned the country into Lebanon, Palestine,

Transjordan, and what is now Syria. In March, 1920, the second Syrian General Congress proclaimed "Syria to be completely independent within her 'natural' boundaries, including Lebanon and Palestine." Concurrently "an Arab delegation in Palestine confronted the British military governor with a resolution opposing Zionism and petitioning to become part of an independent Syria." [22] France sent its Army of the Levant, mainly troops recruited from its Senegalese colony, to quash by force the Levantine Arabs' efforts to establish self-rule.

Syria, already truncated by British and French imperial machinations after WWI "is too small for a federal state", opines Syria's president Bashar al-Assad. But Assad quickly adds that his personal view is irrelevant; a question as weighty as whether Syria ought to become a federal or confederal or unitary state, he says, is a matter for Syrians to decide in a constitutional referendum, [23] a refreshingly democratic view in contrast to the Western position that Washington should dictate how Syrians arrange their political (and economic) affairs.

Tip of the US Spear

For Washington, the PKK offers a benefit additional to the Kurdish guerrilla group's utility in advancing the US goal of weakening Syria by fracturing it, namely, the PKK can be pressed into service as a surrogate for the US Army, obviating the necessity of deploying tens of thousands of US troops to Syria, and thereby allowing the White House and Pentagon to side-step a number of legal, budgetary and public relations quandaries. "The situation underscores a critical challenge the Pentagon faces", wrote The Wall Street Journal's Paul Sonne; namely, "backing local forces...instead of putting American troops at the tip of the spear." [24]

Having pledged support for Kurdish rule of northern Syria in return for the PKK becoming the tip of the US spear, the United States is "providing "small arms, ammunition and machine guns, and possibly some nonlethal assistance, such as light trucks, to the Kurdish forces." [25]

The arms are "parceled out" in a so called "drop, op, and assess" approach. The shipments are "dropped, an operation [is] performed, and the U.S. [assesses] the success of that mission before providing more arms." Said a US official, "We will be supplying them only with enough arms and ammo to accomplish each interim objective." [26]

PKK foot soldiers are backed by "more than 750 U.S. Marines", Army Rangers, and US, French and German Special Forces, "using helicopters, artillery and airstrikes", the Western marionette-masters in Syria illegally, in contravention of international law. [27]

Ethnic Cleansing

"Large numbers of Arab residents populate the regions Kurds designate as their own." [28] The PKK has taken "over a large swath of territory across northern Syria-including predominantly Arab cities and towns." [29] Raqqa, and surrounding parts of the Euphrates Valley on which the PKK has set its sights, are mainly populated by Arabs, observes The Independent's veteran foreign correspondent Patrick Cockburn-and the Arabs are opposed to Kurdish occupation. [30]

Kurdish forces are not only "retaking" Christian and Muslim Arab towns in Syria, but are doing the same in the Nineveh province of Iraq-areas "which were never Kurdish in the first place. Kurds now regard Qamishleh, and Hassakeh province in Syria as part of 'Kurdistan', although they represent a minority in many of these areas." [31]

The PKK now controls 20,000 square miles of Syrian territory [32], or roughly 17 percent of the country, while Kurds represent less than eight percent of the population.

In their efforts to create a Kurdish region inside Syria, the PKK "has been accused of abuses by Arab civilians across northern Syria, including arbitrary arrests and displacing Arab populations in the name of rolling back Islamic State." [33] The PKK "has expelled Arabs and ethnic Turkmen from large parts of northern Syria", reports The Wall Street Journal. [34] The Journal additionally notes that human rights "groups have accused [Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish fighters] of preventing Arabs from

returning to liberated areas." [35]

Neither Syrian nor Democratic

The PKK dominates the Syrian Democratic Forces, a misnomer conferred upon a group of mainly Kurdish fighters by its US patron. The group is not Syrian, since many of its members are non-Syrians who identify as Kurds and who flooded over the border from Turkey to take advantage of the chaos produced by the Islamist insurgency in Syria to carve out an area of Kurdish control. Nor is the group particularly democratic, since it seeks to impose Kurdish rule on Arab populations. Robert Fisk dismisses the "Syrian Democratic Forces" as a "facade-name for large numbers of Kurds and a few Arab fighters." [36]

The PKK poses as a Syrian Democratic Force, and works with a token force of Syrian Arab fighters, to disguise the reality that the Arab populated areas it controls, and those it has yet to capture, fall under Kurd occupation.

A De Facto (and Illegal) No Fly Zone

In August, 2016, after "Syrian government bombers had been striking Kurdish positions near the city of Hasakah, where the U.S. [had] been backing Kurdish forces" the Pentagon scrambled "jets to protect them. The U.S. jets arrived just as the two Syrian government Su-24 bombers were departing." This "prompted the U.S.-led coalition to begin patrolling the airspace over Hasakah, and led to another incident...in which two Syrian Su-24 bombers attempted to fly through the area but were met by coalition fighter jets." [37]

The Pentagon "warned the Syrians to stay away. American F-22 fighter jets drove home the message by patrolling the area." [38]

The New York Times observed that in using "airpower to safeguard areas of northern Syria where American advisers" direct PKK fighters that the United States had effectively established a no-fly zone over the area, but noted that "the Pentagon has steadfastly refused to" use the term. [39] Still, the reality is that the Pentagon has illegally established a de facto no-fly zone over northern Syria to protect PKK guerillas, the tip of the US spear, who are engaged in a campaign of creating a partition of Syria, including through ethnic cleansing of the Arab population, to the delight of Israel and in accordance with US designs to weaken Arab nationalism in Damascus.

An Astigmatic Analogy

Some find a parallel in the YPG's alliance with the United States with Lenin accepting German aid to return from exile in Switzerland to Russia following the 1917 March Revolution. The analogy is inapt. Lenin was playing one imperialist power off against another. Syria is hardly an analogue of Imperial Russia, which, one hundred years ago, was locked in a struggle for markets, resources, and spheres of influence with contending empires. In contrast, Syria is and has always been a country partitioned, dominated, exploited and threatened by empires. It has been emancipated from colonialism, and is carrying on a struggle-now against the contrary efforts of the PKK-to resist its recolonization.

The PKK has struck a bargain with the United States to achieve its goal of establishing a Kurdish national state, but at the expense of Syria's efforts to safeguard its independence from a decades-long US effort to deny it. The partition of Syria along ethno-sectarian lines, desired by the PKK, Washington and Tel Aviv alike, serves both US and Israeli goals of weakening a focus of opposition to the Zionist project and US domination of West Asia.

A more fitting analogy, equates the PKK in Syria to Labor Zionism, the dominant Zionist force in occupied Palestine until the late 1970s. Like Ocalan, early Zionism emphasized decentralized communes. The kibbutzim were utopian communities, whose roots lay in socialism. Like the PKK's Syrian incarnation, Labor Zionism relied on sponsorship by imperialist powers, securing their patronage by offering to act as the tips of the imperialists' spears in the Arab world. Zionists

employed armed conquest of Arab territory, along with ethnic cleansing and denial of repatriation, to establish an ethnic state, anticipating the PKK's extension by armed force of the domain of a Kurdish state into Arab majority territory in Syria, as well as Kurd fighters doing the same in Iraq. Anarchists and other leftists may have been inspired by Jewish collective agricultural communities in Palestine, but that hardly made the Zionist project progressive or emancipatory, since its progressive and emancipatory elements were negated by its regressive oppression and dispossession of the indigenous Arab population, and its collusion with Western imperialism against the Arab world.

Conclusion

Representing an ethnic community that comprises less than 10 percent of the Syrian population, the PKK, a Kurdish anarchist guerrilla group which operates in both Turkey and Syria, is using the United States, its Air Force, Marine Corps, Army Rangers and Special Forces troops, as a force multiplier in an effort to impose a partition of Syria in which the numerically insignificant Kurd population controls a significant part of Syria's territory, including areas inhabited by Arabs in the majority and in which Kurds have never been in the majority. To accomplish its aims, the PKK has not only struck a deal with a despotic regime in Washington which seeks to recolonize the Arab world, but is relying on ethnic cleansing and denial of repatriation of Arabs from regions from which they've fled or have been driven to establish Kurdish control of northern Syria, tactics which parallel those used by Zionist forces in 1948 to create a Jewish state in Arab-majority Palestine. Washington and Israel (the latter having long maintained a semi-clandestine relationship with the Kurds) value a confederal system for Syria as a means of weakening Arab nationalist influence in Arab Asia, undermining a pole of opposition to Zionism, colonialism, and the international dictatorship of the United States. Forces which resist dictatorship, including the most odious one of all, that of the United States over much of the world, are the real champions of democracy, a category to which the PKK, as evidenced by its actions in Syria, does not belong.

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