

The Arab World and the Kurds

Michael Collins Dunn

Michael Collins Dunn is Editor of *The Middle East Journal*. He is also Editor of *The Estimate*, a biweekly newsletter on the Islamic world.

It is often said that the Kurds have no friends but the mountains. Certainly, time after time, they have accepted support from countries who are opposed to the Turkish, Iraqi or Iranian governments for their own reasons, and who have chosen to support the Kurds for tactical reasons; often, as in the 1975 agreement which ended Iranian and US support for Mustafa Barzani in Iraq, they have found themselves left high and dry when their allies, true to their own distinct interests, cut their own deals.

My purpose here today is to provide an overview of the Arab world and its relations and attitudes toward the Kurdish issue. Because Iraq is so directly involved in the question and this Conference includes a separate panel dealing with Iraq, I will be dealing with the *rest* of the Arab world, leaving Iraq to a separate discussion.

I must emphasize, first of all, that I am an Arabist, not a Kurdish specialist; I am therefore going to be offering a somewhat broad analysis of the policy and geopolitical implications of various Arab policies. I should also add that I am not attempting to be comprehensive. The Arab world's interest in the issue dwindles with distance; most of the Maghreb states probably rarely address Kurdish issues except in the context of their relations with Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria.

And that raises another point. After Iraq, the Arab country most embroiled in Kurdish issues is Syria, which has a substantial Kurdish minority of its own, and was, at least until 1998, engaged in covertly (and not so covertly) supporting the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in its fight against the Turkish state. For that reason, this paper will focus on, first, Syria, and secondly, the rest of the Arab world.

While my primary goal here is to address the Arab world and the Kurds, I believe we should also note that, besides the neighboring countries addressed by this panel and those addressed in separate panels, one other regional country has played a role in the Kurdish drama in the past. That is Israel. In addition to having a small population of Kurdish-speaking Jews from Iraq and Syria, Israel has at times, like the superpowers and the regional states, Israel has also sought to play the Kurds against Arab governments, particularly in Iraq. During the period of US and Iranian support for Mustafa Barzani in the early 1970s, an Israeli military mission was also reportedly present. But after the US and Iran ended their support for Barzani in 1975, reports of Israeli involvement also ended.

Syria and the Kurds

While Syria is not as directly involved as a player in the Kurdish drama as Iraq, Turkey, or Iran, it both has a significant Kurdish minority of its own, and was for many years a primary supporter of the PKK, as mentioned earlier. Abdullah Ocalan lived in Damascus until expelled in 1998. Syria has also often provided haven and support for Iraqi Kurds, particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the 1970s. Thus, like other countries in the region (particularly Iran in the 1970s), Syria has been willing to support Kurdish insurgencies against neighboring states while rejecting any special status for Kurds within Syria. This has sometimes been called exporting the Kurdish question, deflecting Kurdish aspirations against neighboring regimes. In fact some young Syrian Kurds were reportedly encouraged to become PKK fighters, and there have been claims that some were released from their military service requirement in Syria if they would fight for the PKK, during the period prior to late 1998.

It is somewhat difficult to obtain firm information about Syria's Kurds. Most sources estimate the number at something over one million, out of a population today of perhaps 17 million, though some estimates range higher, suggesting 10% of Syria's population might be Kurdish. As in every country with a Kurdish population, numbers are themselves a matter of dispute. It is clear enough that most of Syria's Kurds are concentrated either along the Turkish border or in the northeast, in the Hasakah (especially)

and Deir al-Zor areas. One result is that the Kurdish population of Syria, unlike that of other countries with Kurdish minorities, do not live in a geographically contiguous region. Those along the Turkish border are separated by large empty areas from those along the Euphrates and the Iraqi border. This division has probably been a contributing factor to the relative lack of successful political organization among Syrian Kurds.

Complicating matters further is the fact that a significant number of Syrian Kurds are legally stateless. In 1961, the first Baath government after the dissolution of the United Arab Republic sought to reinforce its claim to Arab nationalism, and in 1962 the government decreed a special census in Hasakah governorate, seeking to identify “alien infiltrators” from Turkey. Some 120,000 Kurds living in Syria were stripped of their nationality, though they held no other. Most accounts claim that the identification was either arbitrary, or specifically aimed at persons suspected of political activity: in some cases brothers in the same family were treated differently. Descendants whose fathers were among those 120,000 are also stateless, and some estimates are that as many as 200,000 Kurds in Syria have no legally recognized nationality.

Syria has always emphasized its role as a center of Arab nationalism -- “the beating heart of Arabism” -- and that has left little room for Kurdish identity. Kurds are not mentioned in the Syrian constitution nor is their language given any official recognition. Even though since the early 1970s Syrian governments have been dominated by the `Alawites, who are themselves a minority, the `Alawites are an Arabic-speaking minority.

In the 1960s and 1970s Syria was actively engaged in creating a so-called “Arab belt” running about 10 kilometers along the Turkish border. While Kurds were not evacuated, Arabic-speakers, including those relocated to build the Asad Dam on the Euphrates, were settled alongside the Kurds. This was clearly aimed at creating an Arabic cordon along the Turkish border. The “Arab belt” policy reportedly was ended in 1978, however.

But, as already noted, while showing little recognition of its own Kurdish population, the Syrian government has often been willing to use Kurdish nationalism against its regional rivals, Iraq and Turkey. In addition to its indigenous Kurds, Syria has also received refugees from Kurdish conflicts in neighboring countries. Apparently there was a significant flight across the Syrian border during Turkish repression of the Sheikh Sa`id revolt in the 1920s, and in more recent conflicts in eastern Turkey as well. (The arrival of a population of Kurds from Turkey provided the pretext for stripping those 120,000 Syrian Kurds of their nationality in 1962, though it was not applied consistently to those of foreign origin.) Syria also has reportedly had some refugee camps of Iraqi Kurds. Both Iraq and Turkey are geopolitical rivals of Syria, and unsurprisingly -- if seemingly hypocritically -- it has been willing to use the Kurds to harry those rivals.

In the case of Iraqi Kurds, at various times through the years Syria has played host to various KDP and PUK exiles (the creation of the PUK was proclaimed in Damascus), has hosted efforts to reconcile the two factions, and has otherwise sought to encourage Iraq's Kurds in their efforts at winning autonomy or more. But there are limits to Syrian enthusiasm. In 1991 and 1992, with the creation of an Iraqi Kurdistan which appeared to be genuinely autonomous if not quasi-independent of Baghdad, under Western protection, Syria became far less supportive of Iraq's Kurds. Syrian officials met with Turkish and Iranian officials in what appears to have been an effort to contain the danger of an independent Kurdistan. Syrian concerns were reduced once the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties began fighting among themselves.

While seemingly inconsistent, there is a strong geopolitical logic to this sort of policy. Syria and Iraq are historical rivals, and not merely in this century. Damascus and Baghdad have been countervailing poles of power in the fertile crescent for a very long time. The fact that in recent decades Syria and Iraq were ruled by rival (and hostile) wings of the Baath Party exacerbated the rivalry rather than cooling it. Since Iraqi Kurdistan is a greater problem for Iraq than Syria's Kurds are for Damascus (given the larger

population of Kurds in Iraq, and their geographic cohesiveness), the temptation to destabilize Iraq by supporting Iraqi Kurds has been irresistible. The problem arose when, in the early 1990s, the prospect of a genuinely autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan loomed. That was unacceptable for an Arab nationalist state like Syria, whose own borders include a number of minorities, some linguistic (Kurds, Armenians) and some religious (Alawites, Druze, various Christians and Jews).

In the case of Syrian support for Turkish Kurds, geopolitical considerations, old rivalries and the presence of a significant population of Kurds in Syria who originated in what is now Turkey all combined to bring about Syrian support for the PKK. Syria has several historical and contemporary quarrels with Turkey unrelated to the Kurdish question. Though the claim is essentially latent, Syria still does not recognize the annexation of the Hatay region (the former Alexandretta, now Iskenderun), and Syria and Turkey have deep differences over the Euphrates waters, especially in light of Turkey's dam-building upstream. A more recent concern is the growing Turkish-Israeli strategic alignment, which is seen by Syria (not without reason) as aimed at encircling it.

Syria has often been willing to provoke Turkey by quiet support of groups hostile to the Turkish state. In the 1980s, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) had camps in Lebanon's Baqaa Valley; ASALA at the time was frequently attacking Turkish targets abroad. Syrian support for the PKK stemmed from a similar effort to use a surrogate against Turkish interests. Though Abdullah Ocalan lived in Damascus, and there were reports that Syrian Kurds were encouraged to serve in the PKK and even were excused from Syrian military service if they did so, the PKK *never* struck at Turkey from inside Syria. Rather, Syria quietly supported the PKK in its camps in northern Iraq, so that when Turkey struck across its border at the PKK, it struck not at Syria but inside Iraq.

For many years, this careful Syrian policy of supporting the PKK at one remove worked. But in 1998, Turkish pressure and threats finally made the policy no longer politic. Syria agreed to end its support of the PKK and Ocalan left Damascus on his "Flying Dutchman" tour of Europe and Africa,

ending ultimately in Turkish custody.

Syria supported the PKK not from any core Syrian interest in Turkish Kurds, but because its overall interests clashed with Turkey's in other areas. In the long run, Syria would no more want to see an autonomous or independent Turkish Kurdistan than it did an Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991-92. Its support of the Kurds was purely a tactic to outmaneuver Turkey, not an altruistic commitment; when the policy no longer served its interests, and Turkey was threatening intervention against Syria (and not just in northern Iraq), Syria abandoned the policy.

The Rest of the Arab World

Because the rest of the Arab world is less directly involved in the Kurdish question than Iraq or Syria, our overview can be less detailed. Other than Iraq and Syria, no other Arab country has a significant Kurdish minority, though a few may be found scattered in Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere. As noted earlier, a country's interest in or concern for Kurdish issues tends to diminish with distance from the region. Those Arab countries which border Iraq naturally are more concerned with the issue than those farther away. But, except for Syria in the limited ways discussed above, no Arab country has been a major supporter of Kurdish aspirations. A possible exception may be some limited support by some Islamists in some Arab countries for Kurdish Islamist groups in Iraq and Turkey, but with this limited exception, most Arab countries other than Syria, no matter how opposed they may be to Saddam Hussein, appear to have refrained from major support of the Kurdish movements. (Verbal support for greater autonomy without independence has sometimes been offered, but usually without much enthusiasm.

One reason, of course, is that no Arab country is eager to encourage separatism in another Arab country, not merely because of boilerplate rhetoric about Arab brotherhood, but primarily because many of these states have ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities of their own, as well as boundaries as arbitrary as those in Kurdistan, and a resultant fear that separatism encouraged in one place might spread.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf

The classic instance of this is the case of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and to a lesser extent the other Gulf Arab states. At the end of *Desert Storm*, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait clearly had little love for Saddam Hussein, but they were even more alarmed by the uprisings in Iraq, largely centered in the Kurdish north and the Shi`ite south. Both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have substantial Shi`ite minorities. If Iraq were to fragment along ethnic and religious lines, and a Shi`ite dominated state emerge, perhaps backed by Iran, that would be a potential threat to both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as to majority-Shi`ite (but Sunni-ruled) Bahrain.

And, while I will leave internal Iraqi issues to the Iraq panel, it needs to be remembered that Shi`ites already constitute a majority of Iraq's population. Discussions of the dangers the Saudis perceived in 1991 often assumes that if Iraq came apart into three parts or more, the Shi`ites might have tried to create an enclave starting somewhere south of Baghdad. In fact, though, that was not the only possible option. Even if Iraq split into only two parts, one would likely be Shi`ite. In the past, Sunni Arab dominance has sometimes been achieved by cutting a deal with Sunni Kurdish leaders. An Iraq in which the Sunni Arab dominance was removed *and* Kurdistan broke away, the rest of Iraq -- say from Kirkuk all the way to Basra -- would have a Shi`ite majority. If the Tikriti elite were swept away at the same time, the rump would probably be Shi`ite led. And that frightened the Saudis and Kuwaitis, and explains the insistence of most Arab governments, particularly in the Gulf, on an undivided Iraq in the post-Saddam period.

While the players and prospects are somewhat different now than they were in 1991, when Iran was still seen as a major threat from the other side of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states still fear the devil they do not know (fragmentation of Iraq) more than the devil they do (Saddam, whom they know too well).

In passing, it may be worth noting that the fact that the Kurdish and Shi`ite uprisings occurred simultaneously did much to hinder the action of the West in the aftermath of the war, because too of the

absolutely crucial allies, without whose territory *Desert Storm* could not have been launched, were both alarmed by the prospect of Iraqi disintegration: Turkey fearing an independent Kurdistan as much as Saudi Arabia feared a Shi`ite-dominated rump Iraq.

Beyond Syria and the Gulf, the policies of most Arab states, even major ones like Egypt, towards Kurdish issues seems to be, first, to insist on the integrity of Arab boundaries everywhere, and second, to consider that the relationship between the Kurdish minorities and the states in which they find themselves are internal issues for Iraq, Syria, etc. and that other Arab states should not interfere, just as they do not welcome interference in their own internal affairs.

Thus, in short, the broader Arab world as a whole pays little attention to Kurdish issues, with the exception of those countries which are themselves involved, Iraq and Syria, or which consider the stability of Syria and Iraq to be in their own interests, such as the Gulf states. Beyond this, the Kurdish issue does not appear to resonate deeply in the Arab world, though it raises issues of the rights of cohesive minority groups which could have implications for other Arab countries as well.