Twilight of the Kurds.

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**Kurdish officials once dreamed of forging their own state out of the ashes of the war against the Islamic State. Now they are fighting for their very survival.**

[**I.**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=7dd7e010-a3b3-4ca3-92af-310169dae9bb%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=Jmxhbmc9Y3Mmc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

**just a few months ago**, it appeared that the Kurds of Iraq and Syria were the biggest winners in the war against the Islamic State. Bolstered by alliances with the very Western powers that had once betrayed and divided them, they dared to dream that they were on the verge of undoing what they perceived as a historic wrong, when geopolitical maneuvering denied them a state following the end of World War I.

Yet, instead of witnessing the creation of an independent homeland, the Kurds have suffered a major setback. As the military campaign against the Islamic State winds down, the United States and its allies’ enthusiasm for using the Kurds as their proxies against the jihadi organization has not translated into long-term military or diplomatic backing and certainly not into support for statehood.

Kurdish leaders were always aware of such dangers but nevertheless agreed to go along, seeking a fair reward for sacrifices made: the thousands of lives lost and massive investments diverted from the development of Kurdish areas to recapturing areas of great concern to the United States and its allies but not necessarily to Kurdish forces themselves. Such missions caused deep frustration among the Kurdish public. A Kurdish lawyer in the Syrian city of Qamishli noted that Kurdish forces had fought to liberate numerous Arab towns while majority Kurdish areas still suffered from a lack of basic infrastructure, such as schools and electricity.

To make matters worse, the combination of Western abandonment and internal political dysfunction has left the Kurds in a more precarious position than ever. Over the past year, Kurdish authorities in Iraq abandoned their cautious strategy to achieve independence in the hope that American support would allow them to leapfrog over the remaining hurdles in a dash toward the finish line—and were proved wrong. And their decision to go ahead with a controversial referendum on independence, defying the will of more powerful states, led to a setback of historic proportions.

[**II.**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=7dd7e010-a3b3-4ca3-92af-310169dae9bb%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=Jmxhbmc9Y3Mmc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

**the september 2017 referendum** was supposed to begin the process that would see the Iraqi Kurds reap the rewards from their role in the war against the Islamic Statee. Masoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, extended the vote to areas known as the disputed territories—borderlands between Kurdish and Arab Iraq that are claimed by both sides and prized for their oil. The Baghdad government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi objected in particular to this decision, seeing it as the first step toward the Kurdistan region's annexation of these areas.

The Iraqi government's response was swift and severe: In the aftermath of the referendum, Abadi sent federal troops into the disputed territories to restore Baghdad's authority. It had lost these areas to Kurdish Peshmerga fighters more than three years earlier, when the Iraqi Army crumbled under the Islamic State's initial onslaught. In October, after retaking the Kirkuk oil fields, Iraqi security forces then kept rolling, retaking vast swaths of the disputed territories in northern and eastern Iraq—more than what the Kurds had seized in 2014.

Barzani quickly found that his allies had abandoned him and his enemies were united against him. Iran, which long opposed any move toward Iraq's breakup, deployed some of the Shiite groups it had trained and equipped against the Kurdish forces, which withdrew in the face of Abadi's advancing army. Turkey, a Barzani ally, was concerned that secessionist sentiment could spread to its own Kurdish population. It threatened to close its critical border along the Kurdish region and stood aside as Iran brokered a deal that allowed the Baghdad government to push back against the Kurds.

For their part, U.S. officials had long opposed any changes to the Middle East's borders for fear of setting off an unstoppable domino effect, as well as any move that threatened to undermine the Iraqi central government, and publicly told Barzani not to proceed with the referendum in preceding weeks. Washington then took no action when it learned that Abadi had struck a deal with one of the Kurdish groups, the Talabani faction of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), to retake the Kirkuk oil fields without bloodshed. That deal appears to have been brokered by Iran.

The Iraqi government's seizure of the oil fields around Kirkuk may represent a larger blow to the Kurds’ aspirations than the losl of the city itself. The oil is critical to their independence bid: It provides a revenue stream that gives them economic leverage with their neighbors. Losing control over those fields means having to revert to an earlier era when they were dependent on Baghdad for income from Iraq's much larger southern fields. Baghdad's approach since it retook Kirkuk in mid-October suggests that this is precisely the situation it intends to restore: the Kurdish region's almost complete reliance on Baghdad.

[**III.**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=7dd7e010-a3b3-4ca3-92af-310169dae9bb%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=Jmxhbmc9Y3Mmc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

**the kurdish leadership** made two miscalculations that led to their current perilous position. The first was Barzani's expectation that the United States would support him as he moved toward statehood, based on what he viewed as the Kurds’ utility to the West and the West's assumed sympathy for them. Kurdish leaders believe they have proved their worth as U.S. allies time and again and have been marketing Kurdistan as a dependable partner in checking Iranian ambitions in the region.

Kurdish leaders also have long invoked their support of democratic principles, claiming to be a model for the Middle East after 2003. They never fail to mention their protection of ethnic minority groups and of more than a million internally displaced Iraqis in the Kurdish region. And they argue with justification that their pursuit of statehood is no less legitimate than was America's in its war for independence and that the principle of self-determination is enshrined in international law.

That the charm offensive hasn't paid off is partly due to the second source of Barzani's miscalculation, which lies much closer to home. The inconvenient fact is that Kurdish leaders like to boast that they built a thriving democratic bastion in the largely autocratic Middle East—but they never actually did. After Saddam Hussein's fall, the two main Kurdish parties—Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's PUK—did not pour their energies into creating functional rule-of-law institutions or diversifying the economy. Instead, they used oil money to enrich themselves, their families, and their party cadres.

The Islamic State's slash-and-burn offensive through northern Iraq in June 2014 made matters worse. Fighting off a common threat gave Barzani political breathing room, a justification for closing parliament, and a chance to extend his term as the region's president. Party rule was replaced by personality-based rule. The front line with the Islamic State in both KDP- and PUK-controlled areas was commanded by a network of political, military, and business figures who were mainly related to party leaders by personal or familial links.

The coseizure of the spoils of war by a handful of increasingly powerful leaders undermined the political system. Government ministers belonging to opposition parties had less power than KDP or PUK subordinates in the same ministries, who became the Kurdish region's primary sources of patronage. Masrour Barzani, Masoud's son, strengthened his control over the KDP's security apparatus in a power struggle with his cousin Nechirvan Barzani, who is the region's prime minister and a pragmatist focused on growing the economy.

Unconditional Western military support reinforced these trends. The United States and European countries supplied large amounts of weaponry to Kurdish forces—nominally to the regional government but in reality mainly to the KDP. The KDP's and the PUK's security forces pushed farther into the disputed territories, destroying some non-Kurdish areas in the process of fighting the Islamic State and preventing civilians from returning home unless they pledged their loyalty to the Kurdish parties.

In the run-up to the battle to wrest control of Mosul from the Islamic State in late 2016, the mixture of bad governance, political polarization, and popular discontent started to boil. Some saw the fight against the Islamic State in areas outside the Kurdish region as a tool for Kurdish leaders to enrich themselves, with no tangible benefit to ordinary Kurds. “Why should we fight for this political class?” one Peshmerga fighter asked at the start of the Mosul campaign. “Why should we go to fight in Mosul if Mosul is not part of Kurdistan?”

The KDP-PUK split deepened and has led to a territorial division within Kurdistan; entering KDP-controlled Erbil from PUK-controlled Sulaimaniya now feels like crossing a border. In a way, the referendum and subsequent backlash were both spurred by the two parties’ efforts to secure their survival against each other: In order to mobilize popular support for the referendum, the Masoud-Masrour Barzani faction of the KDP struck an uneasy détente with PUK leaders who felt threatened with marginalization by the party's Talabani faction. This gambit encouraged the Talabani group, through Iranian mediation, to seek an understanding with Baghdad and pull its forces out of Kirkuk.

The Talabanis’ role was critical. They had given only tepid and belated support to Barzani's referendum plans. When they noticed how much regional and international opprobrium the president incurred for his decision to push ahead with the referendum, they saw their chance to turn the tables on him. As a result of their withdrawal from Kirkuk, the Iraqi Army, backed by pro-Iran military factions, met virtually no resistance as it advanced.

Barzani appeared blindsided by these develop-ments—a testament to his likely belief that Western support and oil revenues had inoculated him against the need for compromise. His party had increasingly taken a go-it-alone approach: “If Sulaimaniya won't come along with us, we'll build Kurdistan in Dohuk, Erbil, and the Nineveh Plain,” a businessman-turned-Peshmerga fighter said before the recent events, referring to areas in which the KDP exercises virtually exclusive control.

As a result of this hubris, it is now increasingly doubtful whether they will be able to build Kurdistan anywhere at all.

[**IV.**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=7dd7e010-a3b3-4ca3-92af-310169dae9bb%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=Jmxhbmc9Y3Mmc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

**the group ruling kurdish districts** in Syria's north may soon face similar challenges. It too has been willing to fight America's battles in exchange for military hardware, and it too may prove dispodable as the Islamic State's remaining strongholds crumble and Washington's attention is drawn elsewhere. What will then happen to the de facto autonomous region Syrian Kurds have managed to carve out over the past five years?

Like their brethren across the border in Iraq, the Kurds in Syria have taken advantage of a weakened central state. In 2012, President Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime pulled out of the north, leaving a vacuum that was filled by a local affiliate of the Kurdistan Workews’ Party (PKK) in Turkey. This group—known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG—has received U.S. military largesse despite the fact that its leaders are trained by the PKK, which the United States considers a terrorist organization.

As in Iraq, armaments and training have enabled the YPG to deal the Islamic State defeat after defeat. These victories have had two contradictory consequences: They have fed Syrian Kurds’ appetite for building an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria like the one in Iraq, and they also have empowered PKK-trained commanders operating in Syria, the primary U.S. interlocutors. These commanders are torn between wanting to invest their gains in Syria in support of the PKK's struggle in Turkey and securing first and foremost autonomy in Syria.

The political monopoly exercised by PKK-trained cadres has alienated the YPG from northern Syria's Kurdish merchant and professional middle classes, who may be thankful for the group's protection but chafe under its tight control and feel increasingly pushed aside by the war profiteers gravitating around it. As one middle-class resident of Qamishli put it: Taxi drivers have become powerful police officers, and “simple shopkeepers can now be seen driving a 2017 Mercedes because they're smuggling oil and exporting cement.” He went on to lament that such changes are especially galling at a time when teachers, lawyers, and doctors are doing small jobs on the side simply to survive.

The YPG faces a serious dilemma: In order to be militarily strong, it needs to remain tied to the PKK, from whose training grounds it draws its senior commanders. Yet doing so will prevent it from gaining support from a local population that finds no benefit in PKK-trained commanders carrying the flag of the Kurdish cause in Syria. Whatever the local people think of the group's ideology, they object to its exercise of power, which tolerates zero opposition. At the same time, the YPG's PKK affiliation makes it a direct enemy of Turkey, which has tried to strangle northern Syria economically. If the Syrian Kurds are not careful, they will find themselves isolated by their neighbors; Ankara and Damascus may in the future collude to oust the YPG and restore central control, just as Ankara gave a green light to Tehran to set back Kurdish aspirations in northern Iraq.

The YPG has two potential routes to avoid this fate. It could relinquish control over non-Kurdish areas to local non-Kurdish allies following the Islamic State's military defeat and then focus on building a more viable autonomy for majority Kurdish districts. To do so, it would need to rely on the educated middle class affiliated with parties other than the PKK and its trained military cadres and hope that the United States will provide protection. This might also be acceptable to Turkey, which can tolerate a Kurdish entity on its border, as it has in Iraq, but not one dominated by its mortal enemy, the PKK.

That strategy, however, is complicated by the fact that the U.S. alliance with the Syrian Kurds is even less stable than Washington's partnership with the Kurds in northern Iraq. In late November, President Donald Trump suggestsd that the United States might end military supplies to the YPG. If this was a signal that the United States intends to abandon its proxy in the foreseeable future—a possibility that is the subject of vigorous debate within the YPG and PKK—the Kurdish group will have no choice but to diversify its alliances if it wants to survive.

Given this reality, the Syrian Kurdish leaders’ other path would be to integrate their local governance and security institutions under the framework of the Syrian state, whose capability has been severely eroded. The YPG has been present in northern Syria at the tolerance of the regime and its powerful backers, and its fighters have mostly coexisted with Syrian security forces in the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah. The PKK also has a history of making deals with the regime since at least 1978, when it had offices in Damascus and trained its fighters in Lebanon's Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley.

The YPG would do well to focus on creating effective governing institutions in cooperation with local Kurdish parties and consider inviting the return of the Syrian state's service delivery ministries. Such an approach might unlock the doors to trade with Iraq through the shared border, now controlled by Baghdad and Iran-affiliated armed factions on the Iraqi side, because the Iraqi goverment might look favorably upon an understanding between the YPG and Damascus.

It is unclear whether Assad will agree to anything less than full restoration of Syrian sovereignty over the Kurdish areas, but it's equally unclear whether he will have the capacity to pull it off. Moscow has suggested that it might not oppose Kurdish autonomy. Much will therefore depend on whether the United States, with Russia, will agree to broker a post-conflict arrangement that would allow the Kurdish districts to emerge from the Syrian war with a measure of self-rule.

[**V.**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=7dd7e010-a3b3-4ca3-92af-310169dae9bb%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=Jmxhbmc9Y3Mmc2l0ZT1lZHMtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

**by demolishing the border between iraq and syria**, the Islamic State challenged the political order that governed the post-World War I Middle East. Its brash actions helped nourish Kurdish dreams of independence; it invited Western intervention on behalf of the Kurds and offered the chance to change the region's borders to the Kurds’ benefit. On both sides of the Syria-Iraq border, Kurdish leaders waited for central states to collapse under the strain of civil war while strengthening their forces with the help of Western weaponry. In Iraq, in particular, they appeared to bet on something more important: Western backing for statehood once that battle was done. Increasingly, however, this is looking like it was a losing bet.

There's a better way for the Kurds to pursue independence than relying on outside powers and escalating repression at home. Until a year ago, Iraqi Kurdish leaders had a brilliant strategy to achieve statehood: an incremental leverage-building process based on the presence of oil and gas inside the Kurdish region. For almost a decade, they were able to lure increasingly powerful oil and gas companies to invest in these largely unexplored blocks, accumulating political support in the process from the companies’ home governments, including the United States, Turkey, and Russia. This approach would not have delivered independence soon, but it laid the foundations for it.

Kurdish leaders will now need to start over. Doing so will require reinvesting in the kinds of institutions that can both lead to and sustain an independent state, if and when the regional balance of forces turns in the Kurds’ favor. A vibrant parliament and an independent judiciary are two essential such institutions, as is an independent anti-corruption agency working in tandem with the judiciary.

The Western-backed fight against the Islamic State encouraged Kurdish leaders to erode the very bases of sustainable statehood. The combination of political overconfidence and territorial greed triggered the disastrous setback for the Kurds in Iraq—and it could soon do the same in Syria as well. If the Kurds want to have any future prospect of independence if and when the regional equation changes, their leaders would do better to prioritize political reform at home. If they fail to do so, they may, seven years after the Arab uprisings, face a Kurdish spring of their own, driven by a youthful populace—furious, frustrated, and keen to punish them for their historic blunder, political mismanagement, and irredeemable corruption.

PHOTO (COLOR): Masoud Barzani, left, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, at a Sept. 22, 2017, rally in Erbil, Iraq.

PHOTO (COLOR): Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, right, at a press conference in Ankara, Turkey, on Oct. 25, 2017.

PHOTO (COLOR): Supporters wave flags as they wait for Barzani's arrival during the rally in Erbil on Sept. 22 for the independence referendum later that month.

PHOTO (COLOR): About 100 Peshmerga fighters gather near the town of Altun Kupri, Iraq, on Oct. 19, 2017.

PHOTO (COLOR): Pro-Iraqi government militias patrol the Turkmen area of Kirkuk the day after they took the city from Kurdish forces.

PHOTO (COLOR): A Syrian girl waves a Kurdish flag in support of the independence referendum in Iraq in Qamishli, Syria, on Sept. 25, 2017.

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