

The Kurdish Issue in the Middle East Context

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The Kurdish issue has long haunted the Middle East, reflecting the complex regional ethnic conflicts that has given rise to the Kurdish resistance and independence movement. Relevant academic studies in the past has mostly focused on historical, ethnic and international relations aspects of the issue. With the idea and movement of Kurdish independence on rapid rise in recent years, it has been a major variable that would affect the evolution of regional power structure. A scholarly reflection of the current trend would help us understand more deeply the great power competition and transfer as well as hotspot issues in the broader Middle East region.

Development of the Kurdish Independence Movement

The Kurds are an ancient ethnic group living in the Middle East, with a recorded history dating back to the 3rd century BC, and the region inhabited by them, called Kurdistan, covers a total area of 392,000 square kilometers, including parts of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. According to the demographic statistics of the four countries in recent years, the number of Kurds in the four countries totals about 28 million. The eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey are called “North Kurdistan,” an area of about 190,000 square kilometers with a Kurdish population of about 15 million; northern Iraq is

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known as “South Kurdistan,” an area of about 125,000 square kilometers with about 7 million Kurds; the northeastern region of Syria is known as “West Kurdistan” or “Rojava Kurdistan,” an area of about 12,000 square kilometers with a Kurdish population of about 2 million; the northwestern region of Iran is called “East Kurdistan,” an area of about 65,000 square kilometers with about 4 million Kurds. Besides, about 2 million Kurds have settled in or been stranded in 18 countries in Europe, Transcaucasia and North America.

The Kurds have been seeking to establish an independent Kurdistan state since the Ottoman Empire era. Over time, their independence movements have developed to a greater scale and from ideological mobilization to military struggle. In 1880, Sheikh Ubeydullah, hailed as a hero by the Kurdish people, led the Kurds to uprising simultaneously in eastern and southeastern Turkey and in northwestern Iran, swearing to fight to the end for an independent Kurdistan.¹ Although this uprising was put down by the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar dynasty of Persia collectively, the Kurds were allowed by the Treaty of Sevres in 1919 to establish autonomous regions or independent countries to the east of the Euphrates, the south of Armenia and the north of Syria and Iraq where the majority of Kurdish people live. The treaty was signed by the Ottoman Empire and the Entente powers following the Ottoman defeat in WWI, and is now the only document of international law concerning Kurdish autonomy or independence. The Kurdish political forces in the four countries have used it as a legal justification for an independent Kurdish state.

At the end of WWII, the Kurdistan independence movement became a bargaining chip for the United States and the Soviet Union to compete for sphere of influence in the Middle East. In December 1945, under Soviet auspices, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was established in

¹ Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 74-75; Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006, pp. 75-79.

Mahabad, including an Iranian committee and an Iraqi committee.² Qazi Muhammad was the head of the Iranian committee and Mustafa Barzani was in charge of the Iraqi one. The KDP announced the establishment of the “Mahabad Republic,” and elected Muhammad chair of the party and “president” of the republic. Barzani was appointed commander of the Kurdish forces. Their goal was to overthrow the Iranian and Iraqi feudal dynasties, and ultimately establish a unified Kurdistan Republic, of which the “Mahabad Republic” was the initial stage according to the party’s manifesto. On August 16, 1946, Barzani was elected chair of the KDP in absentia and since then he has taken effective control of the party. In December 1946, the Pahlavi Dynasty sent a large number of forces to wipe out the “Mahabad Republic,” killing and capturing a legion of KDP key members. Muhammad was captured and hanged while Barzani was exiled to the Soviet Union. The KDP’s operation has gone underground since then.

In July 1958, the Iraqi Faisal Dynasty was overthrown in a coup d’état staged by the Free Officers led by Iraqi Army brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Republic of Iraq was established. Qasim implemented a series of policies in domestic and diplomatic areas, including improving the relationship between the Arabs and the Kurds. Barzani was also invited to return to Iraq by Qasim to help the government manage the Kurdish area and quell the 1959 Mosul uprising. However, his cooperation with the Iraqi Communist Party in the land reform led to disputes within the party. Barzani promoted Jalal Talabani and a number of young people to the party central to bring the situation under his control, but Talabani took the opportunity to foster his own faction, whose influence thus surged in the party. In 1959, the party was split into the traditionalist faction led by Barzani and the leftist faction under Talabani. The former faction pursued Kurdish nationalism, tribalism, populism and conservatism while the latter faction advocated a reform of the KDP towards secularism and democratic socialism. In

2 M. A. Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq: Ethnonationalism and National Identity in Iraqi Kurdistan*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2011, pp. 219-246; N. Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East*, Lexington Books, 2010, pp. 24-52.

addition, there were serious disagreements between the two factions on how to deal with the successive Iraqi central governments. Talabani's emergence caused alarm to Barzani. During the KDP's sixth Congress in July 1964, Barzani captured Talabani and his more than 4,000 followers and expelled them to Iran. For Barzani, this purge established his absolute leadership in the KDP. Nevertheless, in 1975, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party ordered a mop-up of the KDP armed forces, during which Barzani suffered a major defeat and fled to Iran with the remnants of his army. He was unable to return to the Iraqi Kurdistan before his death in the United States in 1979, and the KDP was handed to his second son Masood Barzani. For Talabani, after being expelled, he still managed to lead his followers into Syria with the help of the contradictions between the Iraqi Ba'ath Party and the Syrian Ba'ath Party. In June 1975, Talabani formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Damascus.³ The establishment of the PUK indicates the formation of two major political forces of Kurd's independence movement in Iraq, namely the KDP and the PUK. Both parties constantly sent their cadres to the Iraqi Kurdistan to re-establish grassroots organizations and to re-create armed forces.

At the beginning of 1991, the two Kurdish forces in northern Iraq launched an uprising during the Gulf War, but it was suppressed by the Saddam Hussein regime. A "No-Fly zone" was subsequently set up by the United States, Britain and France in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds and the two factions started to establish "a state within a state" in their respective controlled areas. From 1994 to 1997, the KDP and the PUK fought a three-year civil war in the northern Iraq, which was eventually ended in reconciliation due to the United States' mediation. In September 1998, the two factions signed the Washington Agreement, promising to build an autonomous region together, which still holds today.

Inspired and influenced by the Kurdish independence movement in northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was established by the

3 David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 242-297.

Kurds in Turkey in November 1978.⁴ Abdullah Öcalan was elected head of the party, whose ideology was Kurdish nationalism and socialism. Its ultimate goal was to establish an independent and unified Kurdistan state, but different development stages such as greater autonomy and confederation were allowed. Under the leadership of Öcalan, the PKK established the People's Defense Forces (HPG) and the Women's Liberation Army (YJA) which have fought for Kurdish independence since 1984. In order to effectively deal with the raids and encirclement of Turkish government forces, the PKK established divisions or bases in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, and used the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq as a strategic rear. In case all the party leaders were to be killed in a mop-up by Iraqi or Turkish armies, Öcalan sneaked into Syria in July 1979 to remote-control PKK activities in the four countries. In October 1998 he was advised by Hafez al-Assad to leave the country but was caught in Kenya by Turkish special agents in February the following year. After the capture of Öcalan, the new PKK central, composed of Cemil Bayik, Murat Karayılan and Fehman Hüseyin, was chosen by its members. Bayik has been the PKK's leader till today.

The Turkish government has been spreading the message that Öcalan had betrayed the PKK, repented his crime and provided secret information to the government in order to foment internal dissension within the PKK. The strategy once proved effective as a group of high-level PKK leaders felt pessimistic about the future and some grassroots cadres even abandoned the party. For the sake of resuming cohesion and combat effectiveness of the whole party, the PKK Central Committee had tried to pry into Öcalan's condition in prison through various channels. In May 2007, Bayik announced that Öcalan did not surrender and his thought would still be the guiding principle of the party's future struggles. Bayik also proposed that the PKK would build the broadest united front with the Kurdish political forces in Iraq, Syria and Iran to gradually realize the dream of a Kurdish state. Since then, the social foundation of the PKK in Kurdish areas of the countries has

4 Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*, Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2007, pp. 57-71.

been expanded and the armed forces have been restored to about 30,000 people. The PKK's greatest achievement so far has been the establishment of the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria." In 2014 the legislative and judiciary branches were constructed, a constitution promulgated and other laws passed. Besides, the HPG and the YJA were enlarged and later became the pillar of the Syrian Democratic Forces supported by the United States. The PKK has sent political and military cadres and effectively controlled the "Federation," even though it is operating in the name of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to conceal that it was under PKK control.⁵ The community construction and public management of the "Federation" is guided by the theory of Kurdish nationalism and socialism of Öcalan, whose works have been must-read and had a wide impact on the Kurdish people in northern Syria. Nowadays, the PKK central departments under Bayik's leadership have taken root in the "Federation," keeping close ties with their base in the Qandil Mountains while commanding PKK operations in southeastern Turkey.

Key Factor of the Syrian Situation

Since early 2011 when the "Arab Spring" took place in Syria and sparked off a civil war, the Syrian crisis has been centered around Bashar's political fate. Under Bashar's leadership, Syria is situated at the center of the "Shiite crescent," so Bashar's fate is related not only to the geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East, but also to the conflict and bargaining of interests between the United States and Russia on the Eurasian continent. On one hand, Russia is deeply engaged in this area; Bashar's Syrian government allies with Iran and Russia, and Russia and Iran share friendly cooperative relations. On the other hand, the United States and Saudi Arabia aim to cut the Shiite Crescent in half by overthrowing the Bashar regime. Currently, the US and Russia are trapped in the Ukraine

5 "Crisis in Syria Emboldens Country's Kurds," *BBC News*, July 28, 2012; "Syrian Kurdish Leader: We Will Respect Outcome of Independence Referendum," *ARA News*, August 3, 2016.

crisis, both facing difficulties with follow-up measures and coordination with allies. Therefore, mutual compromise and exchange of interests are likely for both countries to ease the tension in between, and the fate of the Bashar regime may become a bargaining chip for the US and Russia. Therefore, whether Russia would support the Bashar government or not hinges upon the United States' stance on making geopolitical concessions to Russia on the Eurasian continent. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, there has been no sign from the US to concede. However, both sides have decided to limit their military intervention to avoid a direct war in Syria, despite the fact that Syria is strategically important to the two countries' national interests.

The Syrian crisis that has lasted for more than six years can be divided into two stages. The first one is from early 2011 to September 2014, when the United States, Saudi Arabia and other regional allies were determined to overthrow the Bashar regime even at the expense of supporting all opposition factions including extremist and terrorist groups. However, the Bashar regime, with the help of Russia and Iran, resisted the military offence, while the opposition forces were seriously fragmented. As the terrorist groups, typically the "Islamic State" and the "Al-Nusra Front" (name changed to "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham" in July 2016), rose rapidly and threatened the security of Western countries and their Middle East allies, the United States, Europe and their Middle East allies were forced to put "anti-terrorism" before overthrowing the Bashar government. The second stage is from September 2014 until now, which has witnessed adjustment of the US Middle East policy by the Obama and Trump administrations from prioritizing anti-terrorism to achieving anti-terrorism and regime change at the same time. The change was indicated by the United States' cruise missile attack on the Syrian Air Force base on April 7, 2017 and Trump's follow-up statements of his position on Syria-related issues.

It should be noted that the regime change pursued by Trump is based on the premise that there would not be substantial US ground forces going into battle. Therefore, the main approach to toppling the Bashar regime is determined to be a time-consuming proxy war. In order to overturn

the regime, the United States needs to do at least four things. First, the approximately 1,000 US soldiers stationed in Syria should act as political deterrence to protect the anti-government forces from the government's attack. This would buy time for the rebels to rally their forces, and for the US to train the rebels and increase their combat capabilities, which would tilt the balance of power between the government and the opposition in favor of the latter. Also at this stage, the US stationed forces should investigate Syria's strategically important areas and the government forces' firepower configuration, gathering reliable intelligence for future military operations. Second, the US should start the political transformation of the Syrian Democratic Forces from a force fighting against the Islamic State to one that would topple the Bashar regime. Third, the US should take the initiative to improve the relationship with Turkey that was disrupted by the 2016 Turkish coup, try to change Turkey's position towards the Syrian Democratic Forces and persuade it to participate in the US-led efforts against Bashar. Fourth, the US should rally more support from the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and other regional allies like Jordan for the Syrian opposition groups.

The abovementioned strategic concerns indicate the complexity of the Syrian crisis. Today, the interests of the opposition forces in Syria are different from those in the first phase of the Syrian chaos. Previously, overthrowing the Bashar regime was a common goal of various armed opposition forces, with varying degrees of coordination. However, as the situation on the battlefield turned against them and the United States was unable to integrate the opposition, they began to seek for their own respective backing, fighting against the Bashar regime and at the same time scrambling with each other for territory. The more than one hundred opposition forces in Syria can be roughly divided into three categories: the first is backed by the United States, like the Syrian Democratic Forces; the second is financially supported by extremist religious forces in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, represented by the Islamic State and the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham; the third mainly seeks the patronage of Turkey, but also gains support from

the US, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, like the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Turkmen Brigades.

Militarily speaking, the strongest opposition faction is the Syrian Democratic Forces with about 80,000 soldiers. Most of them come from the HPG and the YJA while the other 10,000 or so soldiers include Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians and Caucasians. The Syrian Democratic Forces are based in the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,” which covers the entire Rojava and extends to some areas of Aleppo, Al-Hasakha, Ar-Raqqah and Dayr az Zawr. At present, the Syrian Democratic Forces has already started the battle to seize Ar-Raqqah, the temporary “capital” of the Islamic State, and clearly intended to integrate it into the “Federation.” In this way, the Democratic Union Party and the Syrian Democratic Forces under its control have become a key factor for the future of Syria.

Politically speaking, the Democratic Union Party is committed to turning the “Federation” into “a state within a state.” For them, fighting against the Islamic State and overthrowing the Bashar regime only serve as a way to get the United States’ prop-up. Whether Bashar was overthrown or not, the “Federation” is hard to be destroyed by external forces. Syria has become a fragmented state, whose reunification in the future remains uncertain.

Concerning Iraq’s Unification or Division

Northern Iraq is where the Kurdish independence movement first sprang up and where it is the most influential. The 1991 Gulf War constitutes a turning point in the movement because the “No-Fly Zone” in northern Iraq made sure that the Kurdish armed forces could get rid of the suppression by the Iraqi central government. After the Iraq War broke out in 2003, the Iraqi central government was no longer able to intervene in the Kurdish area.

The Iraqi Kurdistan is controlled and governed by the KDP and the PUK. The capital is Erbil, where the legislature, the judiciary and other departments of the Kurdish autonomous government are situated. The

Dohuk and Erbil governorates are controlled by the KDP while the PUK controls Sulaymaniyah and most of Diyala. In addition, the two parties have been fighting for control of Temim, the Kirkuk oil field, Nineveh and Mosul. Since the two parties signed the Washington Agreement in September 1998, the bilateral deadlock has further consolidated. After overthrowing the Saddam regime in 2003, the two parties reached an agreement on power sharing of the Iraqi central and Kurdish governments. The President of Iraq would be exclusive for the PUK, while the President and the Prime Minister of the Kurdish autonomous region are members of the KDP. Therefore, former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and current President Fuad Masum are both PUK leaders, while President of the Kurdistan Regional Government Massoud Barzani and Prime Minister Nechervan Idris Barzani (nephew of Massoud Barzani) are both from the KDP.

The KDP and the PUK mainly relies on their own respective *Peshmerga*⁶ to carve up northern Iraq. Both forces are similar in size and combat capabilities and neither is inferior to the Iraqi government forces. At present, the regional government ruled 36 brigades with a total number of 350,000 people. Half of them belong to the KDP and the rest are in the charge of the PUK. The Kurdistan Regional Government can request the Iraqi central government to provide military expenditure, weapons and ammunition, which are limited in quantity and should be shared out equally between the two parties. To support their respective armed forces, both parties have access to external military aid. The KDP is close to Turkey, selling oil to Turkey and helping the Turkish Army in their cross-border fight against the PKK in northern Iraq, while Turkey is the main supplier of weapons and ammunition to the KDP. In addition, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf states have provided financial support to the KDP for regional development as well as weapon and ammunition purchase in the black market, in the hope of developing the KDP to restrain the Iraqi central government. As for the PUK, its military equipment is mainly from Iran and Syria. This is

6 *Peshmerga* are what both the KDP and the PUK call their respective armed forces, meaning “one who confronts death” or “one who faces death.”

because the PUK has close cooperation with the PKK, giving them shelter in northern Iraq, and supports the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” and the Syrian Democratic Forces, while Iran and Syria intend to keep Turkey in check. It is true that after the United States publicly granted support to the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” and the Syrian Democratic Forces, Iran did downgrade its backing to PUK. The Bashar regime of Syria even ceased its support. Nevertheless, Iran has not completely cut off its support, which indicates the possibility that Iran would use this to increase its leverage in negotiations with the United States for a *détente*. Although the KDP and the PUK have profound historical resentments and have remained wary toward each other for a long time, establishing an independent Kurdish state has been the greatest common goal of the two parties, which would not be abandoned due to the divergence of respective supporters behind them.

Although the KDP keeps close relations to Turkey at present, Turkey has remained highly vigilant against the KDP. The two sides mutually implement a dual policy of cooperation and precaution. This leads to the improvement of relations between the KDP, the PUK and the PKK. Besides, the KDP and the PUK share the same worry that the Iraqi central government is increasingly encroaching the Kurdish area in the name of anti-terrorism. Even though the Kurdish and the Iraqi government forces started cooperation in response to the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in June 2014, the Kurdish troops have been deployed from northwestern Mosul to the Sinjar Mountains since the government started the Mosul battle in October 2016. On the pretext of besieging the Islamic State from the west, this is in fact to protect the Kurdish area from the government forces, even to facilitate an internecine situation between the government and the Islamic State.

The allocation of domestic power, interests and resources after the Iraqi War has been generally beneficial to the Kurds in northern Iraq. However, the Kurds have insisted on seeking for independence. The PUK and the KDP, after negotiations in June 2016, have agreed to hold a referendum

on the independence of the Iraqi Kurdistan on September 25, 2017. Once the referendum result favors independence, it would further tear Iraq apart, triggering greater intervention of all interested parties, and even leading to greater structural changes in the Middle East.

Restraining Turkey from Achieving Regional Dominance

Turkey is not only a powerful nation in the Middle East, but is also a geopolitical pivot of Eurasia playing an important strategic role. In addition, Turkey has for a long time exerted significant influence on NATO, the OECD, the Islamic and the Turkic worlds. Historically speaking, successive Turkish politicians, governments and major political parties have been committed to reviving the glorious era of the Ottoman Empire. As a region under Ottoman rule for more than 600 years, the Middle East has Turkey's special attention. For many years, Turkey has made substantial political, economic, cultural and diplomatic investment in the Middle East, in an effort to become a dominant player of regional affairs. However, the Kurdish issue has been an obstacle for Turkey. Most Middle East countries find it hard to erase the humiliation under Ottoman rule and are vigilant against Turkey's major political, diplomatic and military moves. As a result, they are willing to use the Kurdish issue to block Turkey from dominating the Middle East for the sake of their own interests. Other foreign forces like the United States, Europe and Russia also attach importance to the Kurdish issue as a bargaining chip in their engagement with Turkey.

Although the PKK in Turkey suffered a setback because of the capture of Öcalan, it still has a strong social foundation in the 15 million Kurds in eastern and southeastern part of the country. The fundamental reason is that the economic, political and social status of the Kurds is not only lower than the Turks, but also lower than any other ethnic groups. On the one hand, the Turkish government refused to recognize the Kurds' ethnic identity; the 1924 Constitution referred to the Kurds as "Mountain Turks." On the other hand, successive Turkish administrations have tried to assimilate the Kurds, but all

have ended in failure. Although Article 10 of the 1982 Constitution provides that all races are equal, the “absolute supremacy of the will of the nation,” i.e. the supremacy of the majority ethnic group, is emphasized in the preamble. As the Turkish government was unable to eliminate the Kurdish resistance, they revised the strategy from suppression and assimilation to using both carrots and sticks, in order to gradually resolve the Kurdish problem that has restricted its national development and revitalization. In 1991, then President Turgut Özal proposed a constitutional amendment that lifted the ban on Kurdish broadcasting and publications. In 1992, then Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel announced recognition of the Kurdish minority identity, promising that the government would support the economic development of the Kurdish area and improve the livelihood of the Kurdish people. After the Justice and Development Party (AK) came to power, in order to achieve the goals of “Vision 2023,”⁷ a series of conciliatory policies were adopted toward the Kurds, including increasing economic and social investment of the Kurdish area, allowing the use of Kurdish language in election campaigns and promotion, and granting amnesties to the arrested PKK members that have made confession to the government. These policies, however, do not fundamentally solve the problem of ethnic discrimination against the Kurds.

In response to the policy changes of the Turkish government, the PKK has also carried out strategic adjustment. Considering the unbalanced development of the Kurdish independence movement in the four countries, the PKK formulated a new strategy after the chaotic period following Öcalan’s arrest. That is to speed up development in northern Syria, forge a Kurdish united front in northern Iraq, preserve strength in Turkey and keep dormant in Iran. Therefore, the PKK reached several ceasefire agreements with the Turkish government, and gradually set up several peripheral

7 Vision 2023 was proposed by the Justice and Development Party in 2003. It was designed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a famous Turkish geopolitical strategist, former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. The key element of the vision is that in 2023 when Turkey celebrate the centennial anniversary of its founding, it will play a unique role in international rules-making and discourse, and its comprehensive power will be among the world’s top ten. Even though Davutoğlu was forced to resign from his position in May 2016, the vision remains the general goal of the AK Party government.

organizations in Turkey. They have also avoided carrying out political activities or combat operations in the PKK's name, and tried to mitigate its relationship with other Kurdish political forces. Among the peripheral organizations, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) entered the parliament in the June 2015 election with 80 seats; in November the same year they won 59 seats. In July 2015, however, the Turkish government unilaterally tore up the ceasefire agreement and resumed the suppression on the PKK. Now, the PKK uses the mountainous areas in eastern and southeastern Turkey to deal with the government in small-scale guerrilla warfare. The mopping-up operations of the Turkish government did not attract the return of the PKK's major forces. Instead, the PKK has concentrated on expanding the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" and proceeding mobilization of the mass.

Influencing US-Russia Competition in the Middle East

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has played a dominant role in Middle East affairs and Russia is considered its biggest competitor. Therefore, constricting Russia's sphere of influence in the Middle East constitutes one important objective of the US government's Middle East strategy in the post-Cold War era. Historically, there has been clear division between the US and Russian blocs in the Middle East. The US not only cooperates with its European allies, but also relies on the regional partnership system, which is mainly constituted by the Saudi Arabia-led GCC countries, Israel, Egypt, Turkey and Jordan. In comparison, Russia has no external partners to advance its Middle East strategy; instead, it relies on Iran and Syria to contend with the US. The complicated Middle East issue is therefore the result of US-Russia competition and the geopolitical and sectarian disputes between Saudi Arabia and Iran, combined with the Palestinian-Israeli and the Arab-Israeli contradictions. The so-called "external engagement" in the Middle East is essentially the US-Russia competition.

The West Asian and North African turbulence that broke out in 2011

and the Ukraine crisis in 2014 are two major factors that prompted the US and Russia to accelerate their competition in the Middle East. The West Asian and North African turmoil has hit the regional alliance system of both the US and Russia. For the US, the downfall of the Egyptian Mubarak regime is a big loss. Besides the Muslim Brotherhood's temporary rule, the uprising also undermined Egypt's power so severely that it will hardly be able to play a leading role in the Arab world for a long time, which directly weakens the collective support among the Arab countries for the US Middle East strategy. Although General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 was in line with the US interests, Egypt's rise is highly unlikely, if not impossible, in the short term. For Russia, the regime changes of Libya and Yemen indirectly damaged its interests, and the crisis facing the Syrian Bashar regime was manipulated by the US within its sphere of influence. Besides, the Ukraine crisis has put Russia under punitive sanctions by Western countries. The deterioration of Russia's surrounding environment has effectively contained Putin's ambition to build a strong and thriving Russia. To turn the tide, Russia militarily intervened in the Syrian civil war in September 2015 under the banner of anti-terrorism. The fate of the Bashar regime was used as a bargaining chip by Russia in its political deal with the US. If the attempt failed, Russia would most likely to continue backing the Bashar regime so that the US cannot concentrate resources to pursue its Asia-Pacific and Eurasian strategy as planned. As the Middle East concerns critical interests that the US could not bear to hand over to Russia, the region would continue to be a key place of major bilateral competition.

At present, the Trump administration's policies are heading towards five goals in the Middle East. First, encouraging the Middle East to serve the "America First" agenda in economy. Particularly, the US regional allies would contribute to stimulating the US economy and increasing the US employment by buying American products, purchasing American bonds with their sovereign wealth funds, and increasing investment in the US. In exchange, the US would offer security goods and services for regional allies to purchase, providing corresponding guarantee for their safety. Second,

encouraging the Middle East to serve the “America First” agenda in security. Particularly, the US regional allies are expected to actively resonate with the US anti-terrorism operations and restriction of Muslim immigrants into the US territory, in order to make the US more secure. In addition, the regional allies are urged to increase defense spending and buy more American arms. Third, guaranteeing the security of Israel. Fourth, mobilizing regional allies to topple the Bashar regime and severing the Shiite Crescent. Finally, ensuring that regional allies like Egypt and Jordan recover from chaos as soon as possible.

Russia responds to the US Middle East objectives in four ways. First, strengthening cooperation with Iran and Syria, particularly extending the life of the Bashar regime. Second, manipulating the US-Turkey tension and mending relations with Turkey, in order to restrain the implementation of the US ambition in the Middle East and especially Syria. Third, seeking opportunities and improving relations with Egypt and other Arab countries, to expand its maneuvering space in the region. Fourth, making use of the special bonds with Israel to open up new fields of bilateral cooperation. Israel could be encouraged to mediate between Russia and the US to facilitate their exchange of interests in Eurasia and the Middle East.

From the perspective of policy directions, the focus of US-Russia conflict is the Syrian crisis. Historically almost all regional contradictions and hotspot issues have been taken advantage of by the US and Russia, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Sunni-Shiite antagonism, the turmoil of the Arab world, the aftermath of the Iraq War, the Libyan civil war, the Yemeni civil war, and now the Syrian crisis. Currently, the emerging Kurdish factor in the Syrian situation has raised the attention of the US and Russia, both of which attempt to utilize the issue in their political competition.

From the perspective of Kurdish history in Syria, they have no major contradiction against the Assad family, as both the elder Hafez and the younger Bashar have utilized the Kurdish issue as a bargaining chip to rein in Turkey, which is why the PKK and its derivative political parties and armed forces can grow in Syria. It is true that since the civil war broke out

in Syria, Kurdish armed forces like the HPG and the YJA fought against the Syrian government for several times, but their original intention was just to expel the Syrian government forces out of West Kurdistan, and this goal has primarily been achieved. The reason why the Syrian Democratic Forces fought hard against the Islamic State is that the latter attempted to conquer the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.”⁸ In fact, the Kurdish forces have not conducted operations outside the boundary of West Kurdistan. The ultimate goal of Kurdish political parties and armed forces in northern Syria is to build an independent Kurdish state, of which the “Federation” constitutes an important part. Thus as long as the Bashar regime comes to accept the fact that the “Federation” has become “a state within a state,” the Kurdish political parties and their armed forces will not insist on overthrowing the Bashar regime. This position has been clearly articulated by the PKK leader Bayik, the Democratic Union Party Chairman Salih Muslim and the Syrian Democratic Forces spokesperson Talal Silo. In other words, whether Bashar accepts the Kurdish group’s desire to found an independent state will be decisive for the policy development of Kurdish political parties and armed forces in northern Syria. If the Bashar regime has much confidence in Russia’s long-term support, it will deny the Kurdish people independence; otherwise, it will acquiesce in their de facto independence for the sake of extending his own political life.

From the perspective of combat capabilities and influence, the armed forces under the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” have been the strongest of all opposition forces, and are now appealed to by both the US and Russia. But since Donald Trump took office, his policy of overthrowing Bashar and anti-terrorism simultaneously has provided opportunities for Russia to win over Kurdish militant groups in northern

8 According to the Declaration of a Caliphate issued by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on June 29, 2014, the establishment of a “Islamic Caliphate” must go through three stages: first, conquering Iraq and the Levant (including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) and eliminating Israel; second, reforming the Islamic world, toppling all secular “renegade” regimes, occupying Mecca and making it “permanent capital”; third, converting all pagans and atheists into Islam and establishing a global “Caliphate.” While the first stage is considered the priority, preparations could be made for the second and third stages, such as establishing several wilayahs like Khorasan, Maghreb, Sinai, Chechnya, Yemen and Afghanistan.

Syria. Russia has offered military aid and humanitarian assistance to the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” since both the US and Russia started to fight against ISIS, which has won the Kurds’ friendly attitude. Maintaining influence on the Kurdish forces is of great significance for Russia in two aspects. First, Russia can in so doing manage its relations with Turkey. The bilateral relationship once improved after Turkish President Recep Erdoğan suppressed the coup on July 15, 2016, but it has gone sour again since Erdoğan reiterated in late April 2017 that Bashar should step down. To pressure Turkey into giving up the anti-Bashar policy, Russia has upgraded its friendliness to the Kurdish people in northern Syria. Russia is also prepared to make an exchange of interests with the US on the future of the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.” This is why when Russia took the lead in establishing four conflict de-escalation zones together with Turkey and Iran on May 4, 2017, it deliberately avoided the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.” This is intended to reserve maneuvering space for respective bilateral negotiations with the US and Turkey on the Kurdish issue. Second, Russia could mediate between the Syrian central government and the “Democratic Federation of the Northern Syria” so that Kurdish militants will not participate in the US-led regime change against Bashar.

At present, the United States’ choices for allies or proxy are in fact limited. Such steadfast anti-Bashar forces as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Turkmen Brigades are too weak in strength and cannot present fatal threats to the Bashar regime. It is also under the control of Turkey instead of the US. Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham take the Bashar regime as their enemy too, but they have been targeted by both the US and Russia. The Syrian Democratic Forces is thus the only powerful opposition left to have the US backing. However, its attitude toward the Bashar regime has been ambiguous. The abovementioned situation exposes the dilemma the United States faces in its anti-Bashar operations, and also shows the flexibility of Russia in its Syria policy and military presence there. What’s more, it displays the unique role of the Kurdish group in influencing the future of Syria. From a broader perspective,

both the US and Russia should make better use of the Kurdish factor when it comes to Turkey and Iraq-related policies.

Conclusion

The Kurdish issue is derived from discrimination against the Kurdish people by relevant countries and ethnic groups, as well as from the resistance of the Kurdish group for equality. These have ultimately generated ideas and movement for independence. The “Arab Spring” triggered a large-scale turmoil in the Middle East, and unprecedentedly intensified a great number of problems in this region. The chaos has imposed a direct impact not only on the geopolitical interests of major external powers, but also on the stability and development of regional countries. Wars broke out; terrorism and extremism became more rampant; external forces intervened in regional affairs to various degrees. In this context, the Kurdish independence movement has grown into an important factor in the geopolitical evolution of the Middle East, which has been manipulated by both external and regional powers.

The rise of the independence movement of the Kurdish group has led to several consequences. Syria has been fragmented, and whether this country can remain unified in the future is a question full of variables. The Kurds asking for referendum is also a great challenge to Iraq where the government is not yet well functioning - the Iraqi Shiites regime has a close relationship with Iran but has not gotten well with Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia; also domestic economic, political, sectarian, social and security crises are far from being cleaned up. As the Kurdish issue is held as a bargaining chip by other major powers, Turkey has not yet achieved significant geopolitical gains, although it has been deeply involved in the mess of Syria and Iraq as a power with regional ambitions. Looking into the future, the Kurdish independence movement will gain new momentum, but is still likely to face major restraints from Turkey, Iran and the Iraqi central government. 🌐