

The Middle East and Syria as a Case of Foreign Intervention

Implications for the United States, the Syrian Kurds, and the Middle East after the Defeat of Daesh

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احسن طريقة للتعامل مع الاكراد هي ان لاتعير لهم اي اهتمام

(Arabic Proverb)**

One of the key elements in the analysis of foreign realities is the acknowledgment of its foreign element. In a very recent publication,¹ Dr. Irena Chiru, of the National Intelligence Academy of Romania, describes the importance of the cultural element in security-related research and the importance of understanding a country's society and values. Western academics and practitioners must carefully study the Middle East, as a strategic area, to truly understand its history, its unique way of development, and forms of governance. This article intends to give a broad perspective of the Middle East—and Syria in particular—from a Western perspective but with an approach qualified by a proper experience on the field and using Realism and Structural Realism.

Introduction

Since World War I, the West has focused on influencing and trying to change the main principles by which leadership is produced and maintained in the Middle East, disregarding the reality of the terrain and the past experiences of Western actors. But, more importantly, the West has forgotten, or has claimed to forget, the matters that peaked its interest in the region in the first place: availability and control of mainly natural resources and the establishment of regional peace and stability.

Much like the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Moscow and Beijing today are using the space left by Western neglect and lack of cultural awareness to enhance Russian and Chinese power in the region. That same power gap is also allowing other regional powers, such as Iran, to fill the void.

* The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Catholic University of Erbil.

** Translation: The best way to deal with the Kurds is to not give them any attention.

In decisions that result in Western intervention in the Middle East, sociocultural structures and complex political allegiances are disregarded, resulting to chaos in the region. Furthermore, once the intervention is over, a vacuum of power results, which is quickly filled up by the contenders in their constant bid to oppose Western supremacy.

If we analyze the case of Iraq after 25 years of Saddam Hussein's rule, the fact that the newly established system after 2003 was going to bring a predominance of the Shia factions with very strong ties to Iran was disregarded and seen as a minor issue. Seventeen years later, Iran's power in Iraq poses a threat to Western interests and has caused grief to a significant percentage of the local population. Iran is a regional power with a history of domination and an overt and publicly expressed long-term plan that excludes the presence of the West.²

Syria, Human Rights, and Several Proxy Groups

Syrian society is extremely complex. There are people of numerous ethnicities and religious beliefs and a long list of politically complex features. As in many other cases in the Middle East, the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad stands accused of violations of human rights. Western nations used these violations as a pretense for the ongoing proxy war. The wide diplomatic measures that were taken against al-Assad failed to dismantle his power, but they did weaken it. An unintended result was the strengthening of preexisting cells that eventually coalesced to create Daesh (more commonly known as the Islamic State, ISIS, or ISIL). In response, al-Assad deliberately released jihadis to delegitimize the protest movement, hoping to foster a setting in which he became the only viable, palatable option for a stable Syria. Additionally, the weakening of the Government of Syria opened the door for increased participation in the country by Russia and Iran, both siding with al-Assad and reducing the room for Western participation in matters of security, economy, and diplomacy. The West's competitors are always ready to act as vultures. Their techniques are well-known and consistent throughout a history that the West does not seem to master as well as it should.

The West must come to understand that the only possibility in which war is a viable option and winning proposition is if—after the real estimation of losses, including human, economic, and political, and understanding strategic scenarios—a country is ready to make all those sacrifices. If not, a war should never be initiated. Entering a war where total victory will not be pursued until the last circumstances is a big mistake—one that is acknowledged in most conflict-resolution manuals.

Setting up red lines is also very delicate. If a super power establishes red lines, its credibility is on the line. "If you make the tragic mistake of using these weap-

ons there will be consequences and you will be held accountable,”³ as Obama said, without fulfilling his own red-line promises. In the Middle Eastern context, if a promise or a threat is not fulfilled, loss of respect is an immediate consequence.

Another element that is widely used against the West is public opinion, which plays a very important role in this regard. Russia and China have an increased interest in keeping Western populations busy with issues that are beyond the West’s immediate capacity to fix, as they require a global approach. Such issues serve as the perfect preoccupations to “entertain” Western constituencies while other countries play a hardcore Realist game. The importance of public opinion in the West is notorious, and competing powers have realized the possibility of using that aspect against Western governments, thus limiting the latter’s actions toward the pursuit of national interests in the international political sphere.

The use of proxies is also widespread and has been the case for decades, as leaders see the practice as a tool to save Western lives. When interests no longer align and Western nations withdraw their support to their proxies, those erstwhile friends become foes who possess Western training and Western equipment. The problem with engaging proxies with “bad faith” is that they are designing their “betrayal” from the beginning, as illustrated by the case of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. The problem with those of “good faith” is that either the proxies deeply believe—or they so claim—to be key allies of the West, and when that relationship is broken, the resulting information campaign becomes very damaging to the interests of the West. The latter is a more serious case of credibility loss.

The Kurds

The Kurds are an Indo-European ethnic group of unknown origin who reside among different nations in the Middle East, mainly in mountainous environments that have allowed them to maintain a certain distinctive personality and have also led to their isolation from the other ethnic groups in the region: Arabs, Persians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turks, and others. For centuries, their “otherness” has set them apart from the majority ethnic groups and ruling factions in these Middle Eastern countries, due in part to their very unique line of thought and distinct culture that have made it difficult for states to integrate them.

A very strong publicity campaign from the 1980s onward, designed by Kurdish intellectual elites and funded by their corrupt political leadership, allowed the Kurdish cause to globalize and to enter the consciousness of all leftist liberal circles throughout the West. The picture of an oppressed Middle Eastern people in need of state building was much more appealing to these leftist liberals than the memories of the Kurds slaughtering Armenians (Christian Orthodox) in the early twentieth century in the context of the Armenian Genocide. The same narrative, as well

as the claim of escaping totalitarian regimes, was a key element in allowing certain members of the Kurdish population to be successfully granted asylum in the West.

The Kurds as a Proxy Force in Syria

The use of foreign forces to achieve a political interest is an ancient practice. Julius Caesar famously described the pitting of the different Gallic tribes against each other in the eight books that compose the *Commentaries on the Gallic War*. A few millennia later, Carl von Clausewitz developed the practical and theoretical approach to the use of proxies,⁴ while Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov established his in 1984, providing two useful definitions:

1. “a war between regional states behind each of which—or behind only one—stands a superpower who supplies the state by indirect military intervention, i.e. without the need to intervene by its own forces”; and
2. “a war between regional states in which external powers may intervene directly when a local state is defeated, despite the arms supplied to it”⁵

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the definition of a proxy war was broadened to include a wider range of actors, as described by Andrew Mumford: “Proxy wars are the product of a relationship between a benefactor, who is a state or nonstate actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor’s weapons, training and funding.”⁶

In the case of the war against Daesh, some Syrian Kurdish groups forged a collaborative relationship with the United States in which the latter serves as a benefactor and provider of training, weapons, and aerial and intelligence support. In this specific situation, the tricky element in the use of Syrian Kurds such as the Popular Protection Unit (YPG) as proxies is that they were engaged because they had a common enemy with the United States: Daesh. On the other hand, American engagement with the YPG put Turkey—a US NATO ally—in a difficult position, since Turkey considers the YPG as a terrorist group affiliated with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

President Donald Trump gave several public speeches in which he made the most important points about the US position toward Syrian Kurds, which are analyzed in this article and are consistent with the use of Syrian Kurds as a proxy force:

1. “Kurds are fighting for their land.”⁷ The United States did not initiate the cause for the Kurds’ fight but saw an opportunity for a strategic partnership that resulted in a collaboration.
2. “We secured the oil.” The United States was not hiding the importance of oil in the Middle East as a strategic interest. Even after Washington’s

partnership with the Kurds ended, the US military presence to protect the oil was maintained. That would explain why the military presence survived the end of the US partnership with the Kurds.

3. “We never agreed to protect the Kurds.” There was a common interest to fight common enemies, in this case, Daesh. Once the enemy was gone, that meant the end of the partnership and a return to the previous status quo in which Turkey, as a NATO member and strategic ally of the United States, was more relevant than several militias that are, by definition, non-state actors and, therefore, much more volatile.
4. “We fought with them for three and a half to four years.” The partnership had a beginning and an end. The end has arrived.
5. “We never agreed to protect the Kurds for the rest of their lives.”⁸ As already developed in the third point.
6. “Without spending a drop of American blood.” This point represents one of the key elements of this paper’s claims in terms of the Syrian Kurds being a proxy force and fighting the war—against a common enemy—with boots on the ground.
7. “Sometimes you have to let them fight a little while, then people find out how tough the fight is.” A claim that illustrates the price that US leadership is willing to pay to prove the difficulty of its position and that sometimes it is necessary to make allies understand the weight of the hegemon’s position.

US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper also explained the US position in October 2019, elaborating that the Kurds had not been abandoned, as *Al-Monitor* journalist Adam Lucente was successfully able to explain.⁹

After the partnership was over, the Syrian Kurds launched a public relations campaign. The Kurds denounced the United States for “using” them and claimed that the US withdrawal left the Kurds at the mercy of Turkish forces and the Syrian government.

A good knowledge of the terrain would have informed decision makers that it was impossible to predict concrete Kurdish behavior but the general pattern is typically obvious: Kurdish nationalism only exists as a flag for victim status, which the foreign gaze pushes onto them, and the Kurds utilize whenever it benefits them. The actual daily relations are far more tribal and business-centered, and it is these more primitive relationships that hold sway in day-to-day decision-making processes. To the Western eye, the first perception would be that Kurds first betray each other, then continue being traitors to their allied forces, and in between they generate chaos. However, that lack of unity, the absence of a “they” as a category

cannot be forgotten. The end result of the Kurds' political behavioral patterns is very well-known in the region and throughout history.



(US Army photo by SSgt Ray Boyington)

Figure 1. A symbol of Kurdish nationalism. The Kurdistan flag waves atop a government building of the Iraqi autonomous region of Kurdistan during an engagement between Coalition Forces and members of the Peshmerga media cell in Erbil, Iraq, 2 May 2019. The engagement was to discuss media capabilities and offer assistance to strengthen them.

The Kurds follow the concept of *brakuji*, which is well-known among Middle Eastern peoples and Middle East experts. Composed of the Kurdish word *brak* (brother) and *kuji* (to kill), it literally means to kill one's brother and is used as an expression of a Kurd killing or betraying another Kurd.

It is not uncommon for Kurds to involve other forces in their fights, either as a result of them being used as proxies or them dragging other forces into a personal or tribal fight as in the case of the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War. One of the more important examples in recent history happened during the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War between 1994 and 1997 in which the two main tribes, the Barzanis and the Talabanis were in competition for power and money. To cement his power, Massoud Barzani, as the head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), decided to seek help from Saddam Hussein, Turkey, and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) (an anti-Iranian regime Kurdish party). Jalal Talabani, as a founder of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), managed to secure military help from Iran and the PKK, now designated a foreign terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.¹⁰

Around 5,000 people lost their lives because Jalal Talabani could not accept Massoud Barzani's leadership. Such examples are rampant in Kurdish history—subordinates in political organizations sooner or later betray their leaders, establish a new political party or a guerrilla group, and even start a war to become the

leader. Today this remains the case, witnessed by the fact that in April 2020, the PDK, PUK, and PKK are engaged in skirmishes against one another to seize control of Zini Warte, a city to the west of Mount Qandil in Iraq.¹¹ These realities on the ground contradict the preferred narrative of the Kurdish diaspora and the liberal West of a united Kurdish nation seeking freedom from Middle Eastern regimes through state building.

Thus, a good Western public relations campaign to counteract such Kurdish narratives should have been put in place, especially taking into consideration wide-eyed leftist liberals who, as constituents of Western leaders, negatively influence national political decision making, and who, without proper knowledge of the region, buy into the fictitious narrative of an egalitarian Kurdish society where women are equal to men and renounce freedoms all for the elusive dream of building a country.

However, in this specific case, Washington's use of Syrian Kurdish militias as proxies in the Syrian Civil War was in itself a mistake. Wars are terrible, men and women in uniform die, as do civilians, but the West has to engage in brutal honesty with its publics and build a system that, instead of relying on naïvety at home and employing the "real game" abroad, explains to its citizens what the real game is about and the true price that has to be paid for Western cultural pervasiveness and military primacy in the world.

Jean Baudrillard famously declared that "the Gulf war did not take place," implying the history of the war is nothing more than the sum of the media images it generated, with no way to separate that largely fictitious version of events from the reality of what happened on the ground.¹² This perspective allows us to understand a change of attitude of the public to wars. The public does not want to see dead people, it wants to keep war out of its comfortable lives and receive as little information as possible to keep its conscience clean. Remaining true to the meaning of democratic societies means having Western citizens understand that freedom comes with a high price. Social naïvety and governmental hypocrisy will not allow the West to remain in a position of power. The West seems to want a low cost of comfortable living, to engage in discussions over global issues (peace, global warming, etc.) and is increasingly less willing to accept the costs of its privileged position.

Implications for the United States and the West

The United States and the West have failed by engaging in a conflict that they were neither able to win nor to end and have been affected more greatly than "the enemy." The earliest and most crucial mistake was to label Bashar al-Assad as an enemy, following the trend of seeking to oust other unsavory leaders such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Mu'ammār Gadhafi in Libya. In a polarized world, the

West is struggling to dominate and, unfortunately, is leaving the door open for its competitors (Russia, China, Iran, and others) to offer their support. Doing so has enabled these adversaries to keep the conflict going for almost a decade. The West must come to understand that the Middle East has its own ways, respect it, and try to play the game without burning the cards.

The second big mistake was to continue engaging in a proxy war even after witnessing the obvious strength of Daesh in relation to those chosen to be Western proxies. In the end, failing to properly gauge this power disparity resulted in the West needing a strong boots-on-the-ground presence in the Middle East, costing a high price in lives and resources. It also brought the migration crisis to Europe, generated regional chaos, led to loss of lives, and created a difficult, complex, and unresolved situation, with negative effects that will last decades.

The third mistake was to engage with the Kurds without understanding their manifest political nature—an unreliability displayed throughout history that has become almost a pattern—and forgetting the financial and public relations support to Kurds in the Middle East given by the Kurdish diaspora. One of the major points of agreement among Kurds is the phrase that they repeat like a mantra, “No friends but the mountains,” which describes everyone aside from themselves individually as a foe. Human relations cannot flourish without trust.

A successful marketing campaign, however, has masked such ethnocentrism. Crafted by the Kurdish diaspora, one of the demonstrable successes of this marketing campaign is the Western nations’ granting of full citizenship to millions of Kurds, which started in the 1970s and has continued through today.

The asylum programs in these Western nations, praised by the Western liberal left in a rather triumphant way, allowed enemies of the West to exploit their hosts’ hospitality—providing citizenship to individuals who did not share the West’s values. Those passports—and the rights that came with them—were later used to move freely and conduct political campaigns centered on the the cause of the Kurdish “nation”—a cause that does not exactly align with the West’s regional or global interests.

Furthermore, information drawn from hundreds of formal and informal interviews performed in the field point to a significant number of Kurds faking their need for asylum or refuge. Among these Kurds are officers who served in the Syrian and Iraqi armies during the rules of Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein, as well as political elites who lied in their interview processes by exaggerating threats to their own survival.

During the years in which Daesh still held territory (2014–2017), many of the current Kurdish political leaders took the opportunity to seek asylum or refuge, acquire a residency in the West and quickly returning to the region to continue

conducting their political activities, then returning to the West for the purpose of continuing the process of acquiring citizenship.

The fourth mistake—which is ongoing—is the retreat of Western military forces from the Middle East, largely due to the fear of losing Western lives in renewed and intensified fighting in the region in recent years. Such a withdrawal leaves open the door for other states, mainly Iran, to insert themselves and influence the new postwar situation. The most dangerous mistake that the West can make in the Middle East is to show weakness and fear. Once an open wound is bleeding, the piranhas will attack. Only firmness will keep the West safe and strong.

Implications for the Syrian Kurds

At this point, the only viable option for the Syrian Kurds is to return to the fold and follow their nation's leaders. They will not be benefiting from any other partnership that offers them an alternative to negotiating with Damascus for a way forward. In the most likely scenario, the Kurds will be required to again acknowledge Syrian sovereignty in the northeast of the republic.

In accepting such a suboptimal outcome (from a Kurdish perspective) the Syrian Kurds do have an advantage over other Kurds in the region, as they possess one of the highest levels of education—together with their ethnic cohorts in Iran—and a mastery of the Arabic language that allows them to integrate easier into the national culture. In contrast, Iraqi Kurds, especially those among younger generations, are unable to understand Arabic, their national language, as a result of a disastrous policy to neglect it and to teach only their local dialect of Kurdish in primary, secondary schools, and universities.

A postwar agreement with Damascus might be the only way to protect Kurds against invading Turkish troops—sent by Ankara out of fear of the creation of a stronghold of Kurdish administration close to Turkish borders that could enhance the creation of similar structures in the southeast of Turkey in PKK-dominated rural areas.

History teaches us that Middle Eastern leaders, due to their feudal nature, do more to protect those who acknowledge themselves to be part of the nation. The Syrian Kurds do not have any other viable option now that their partnership with the West is over.

Implications for the Wider Middle East

The Middle East is on the verge of falling under Iranian domination. Tehran has been a consistent actor in the region and knows where it wants to go and who

it wants to be, and the regime has the cultural awareness to bring its Middle Eastern plans to fruition.

In waging war against President Assad, the West lost a decade it did not have to spare in its efforts to reshape the region in a fashion more aligned with Western strategic interests. In the aftermath of this failed endeavor, the West must rethink those strategic interests in the region and devise a sounder plan, couched in a better understanding of the region, to achieve its goals.

Conclusions

Labeling al-Assad as an enemy of the West was a big mistake. Liberal democracy should not be the only system that we feel comfortable in openly engaging. The Middle East has some particularities that we might learn from, if we want to continue interacting with such a rich and storied culture.

The West is no longer able to afford certain mistakes such as the hidden proxy wars against established leaders like al-Assad, Hussein, and Gadhafi and open proxy wars against terrorist organizations like Daesh. Partner states have to be strong, and partnerships have to be strengthened, ensuring the West offers a better deal than other contenders.

The Syrian Kurds were aware all along that they were a proxy force. The War against Daesh is over, and Turkey is a NATO member and a key ally for the United States. Throughout the history of the region, partnerships with Kurdish militias have always ended badly—and this one is likely no different.

If the West resorts to proxies in this day and age, leaders must expect a public relations campaign against itself from its proxy force that will continue to demand for more and continued support. We see this in April 2020 with Iraqi Kurds who are overplaying the importance of the Daesh in Iraq and selling themselves to Iran and the Shia after several decades of US influence and “partnership” that cost billions in American aid and military assistance.

There is a need to know and understand the terrain—geographic and human—and for more honesty toward a more educated and realistic Western citizen.

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Notes

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