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Turkey, the Islamic State, and the Kurdistan Liberation Movement

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JOOST JONGERDEN AND BAHAR ŞİMŞEK, NOV 24 2014

On June 10, 2014, an estimated 1,500-2,000 jihadists from what was then called the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL, or DAISH, from the Arabic,) captured Mosul, Iraq's second city, and much of Ninevah province to the west of the city. The group, which would rename itself in July 'Islamic State' (IS), not only captured a major city, including the wealth in its bank vaults, but also large stocks of heavy weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army, which were used on several fronts: an assault on Mount Sinjar, north-west of Mosul, on the morning of August 3; a full-fledged attack on the Kurdish town of Kobanê, starting on September 15; and a march – or rather, drive – towards Baghdad, from the beginning of October. The sudden rise of the Islamic State, its dismissal of the post-WWI Iraqi-Syrian division, and ruthless violence against anyone who was not Sunni-Muslim and loyal to the caliphate had forced itself into people's daily lives, the regional consciousness, and the international relations agenda.

'The picture is horrifying,' says Rıza Altun, member of the Executive Council of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*/Kurdistan Workers Party). 'Islamic State,' he says, 'is an enormous threat for everyone and if we had not stopped them, their span of control would have been much bigger.' Initially, the PKK battle against the Islamic State was characterized as a 'lonely fight' (Spiegel, October 29, 2014), but it was vital. 'Our resistance was not taken very seriously in the beginning, but nobody has risen against the Islamic State as we did,' explains Rıza Altun in an interview on October 30, 2014 with one of the authors. 'The PKK has become a protection force in the region of ethnic and religious groups,' he continues, and, referring to PKK and PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*/Democratic Union Party): 'We stopped the Islamic State and that is no small thing. We have stopped them in Sinjar, we have stopped them in Erbil and we have stopped them in Kobanê.'

IS – the 'self-proclaimed' Islamic State, as it has since been dubbed – was not just air-dropped into the Middle East, emphasizes Altun, alluding to its rather sudden appearance in the wider public sphere. Indeed, it must be considered the product of both the internal contradictions of the old regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, and of the international and regional powers, which have contributed to the transformation of religious and ethnic differences in hard-line sectarian politics. And, moreover, despite its reference as 'caliphate' to pre-modern times, IS has engaged in a territorial development that has much in common with modern nation-building. In this context, any attempt to understand the IS phenomenon must inevitably deal with the identity-politics of regional powers and nation-state modernity.

The Rise of IS

Rather than Sykes-Picot per se, IS is fundamentally the product of the social contradictions of the regimes in Iraq under Saddam and then Maliki, and Syria under the Assads, which constructed their polity along sectarian lines. Further to this, the post-Saddam policies toward, and indirect/irregular interventions in Iraq and Syria of, the regional powers, particularly Turkey, Egypt (under Morsi), Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, have been crucial. Then, of course, there are the various, wider geopolitical and economic interests, particularly of the West and Russia. And it is, of course, the seismic event of the ousting of the Saddam regime in 2003 by the US-led coalition that presents itself as the obvious starting point for a contemporary narrative of the development of IS.

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Importantly, the US provisional government in Iraq effectively followed a pattern of 'reverse state building' and adhered to a strict neo-liberal programme, which led to social and political insecurity and a related growth of regional and religious sectarianism (Medani, 2004: 255). This project was quickly reduced to the building of earth walls and the digging of ditches in a desperate attempt to manage sectarian violence (Parker, 2006: 256-95). Not so much the collapse of the Saddam regime, but the way in which a post-Saddam Iraq was constructed, gave rise to a Sunni insurgency. Along with the liquidation of the army and well-attested security vacuum, state institutions generally were dismantled overnight and tens of thousands of civil servants replaced by an army of consultants, while the neo-liberal reform furthered the dislocation and fragmentation in shifting resources from state to private control. This perfect-storm combination of measures resulted in the rapid development of a militia-economy. 'Like Goethe's wizard's apprentice,' Parker argued in 2006, 'US policymakers now find themselves unable to contain ghosts they themselves called into existence' (Parker, 2006: 99).

Indeed, the first ghost to appear was that of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, conjured from almost nothing in an ironically prophetic fulfilment of one of the principle rationales for the invasion originally presented to the UN by US Secretary of State Colin Powell. While the worst of the violence passed, as the US 'surge' and Sunni tribal 'awakening' reasserted a modicum of stability, the routine violence never abated and the fractured state went unattended, with the pluralism necessary for a project like a democratic Iraq and the avowed aim of a political model for the whole region stillborn in the atmosphere of fear and opportunism that only called up another ghost – or released another genie, perhaps – that of Iranian influence. When the Arab Spring arrived in Syria, meanwhile, the downward spiral into civil war saw the hardening of communal dividing lines across the whole of the northern Middle East and the awful manifestation of the spectre of sectarianism.

Thus did 'contradictions embedded within the old regimes,' as Rıza Altun argues, 'come into the open.' And thus also did the regional actors – primarily other powerful regimes with well-versed vested interests – come increasingly into play. Against Iran's gain in Iraq through collaboration with the Maliki government and continuing support of the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt (until the coup by Sisi), Qatar, and Saudi Arabia not so much supported the opposition in Syria as facilitated its transformation into a violent Sunni insurgency. In the case of Turkey, its support for the Syrian National Council, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, was criticized as sectarian (Nuh Yılmaz, European Council of Foreign Relations, 2013), while, in its attempt to overthrow the regime, it started to lend support to jihadi and Al-Qaeda-related groups (Al-Monitor, June 10, 2014).

For its part, the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*/Democratic Union Party) did not support the idea of a violent overthrow of the regime in Syria. The PYD feared that this 'could lead to the kind of turmoil witnessed in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein' (KNK, September 2, 2013). Interestingly, the international powers feared the same, and (with the exception of Russia) preferred to attempt a peaceful transition in Syria, while the regional powers (other than Iran) thought that a swift military regime change replacing a 'Shi'a regime' with a Sunni one was possible. Already, in the early days of protests in Syria, Turkey had developed a policy of regime change. In its move from a policy of 'zero enemies' to what became widely regarded as a neo-Ottoman strategy, however, Turkey was never able to convince international powers, most importantly the US, to intervene in Syria.

The role of Turkey in the development of a Sunni insurgency in Syria and its sectarian policy in Iraq stands square to the historically Western leaning of its NATO membership and previous pro-European policy. 'We see a paradoxical situation in Turkey,' says Rıza Altun. 'Turkey has tried to become a member of European institutions ever since the 1950s and though it seems as if this policy has not been changed under the rule of the AKP, yet it developed a foreign policy on basis of a religious, a Sunni identity, which came out into the open in Syria.' He adds his voice to the growing testimony in stating that 'Jihadi groups were received as guests and nurtured and supported by Turkey.' This policy of state support – extending, apparently, even to arms supplies by the national secret service (MIT) operating from Ankara – contributed to the rise of radical jihadi groups, among them the official Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, Al-Nusra, and the Islamic State (Philips, 2014). 'Turkey thought that it could use the Islamic State, and it still has not given up on this, but since IS has shown what its own agenda looks like, it is difficult for Turkey to maintain this policy,' Rıza Altun continues. 'Turkey tries to buy time, yet this is contradicted by the lack of success of the Islamic State.'

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Kobanê

Turkey had counted upon an IS *blitzkrieg* on Kobanê to deal a decisive blow to the PYD on its border, and thereby also weaken the PKK, as the AKP governing party sought to control resolution of Turkey's 'Kurdish problem' after its own agenda. In the first days of the IS assault, several Turkish politicians, including the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, proclaimed that Kobanê had fallen or was about to (The Independent, October 7). The idea that the fall of Kobanê was inevitable might have informed the international coalition against IS not to intervene in the attack during its initial stages, while the PKK connection might also have caused hesitation, since the US could be seen to be supporting an organisation on its own terror list; it is even possible that Washington wanted to flush Turkey out, as it were, to reveal its true allegiance. Either way, the US was concerned more with shoring up Baghdad, as confirmed by the statement of US Secretary of State John Kerry, who claimed that preventing the fall of Kobanê to Islamic State fighters was not a strategic US objective (Reuters, October 8).

However, the fierce resistance by Kurdish YPG fighters, and the worldwide rallying of Kurds and their supporters for Kobanê, created a sudden change in the perceived strategic importance of the city. The city, counting no more than 40,000 inhabitants, did not fall and showed the world that in spite of the fact that the defenders of Kobanê were out-gunned by IS, the apparent unstoppable push forward of IS could be stopped on the basis of conviction and persistence, and with a little help. Kobanê became the symbol of anti-IS resistance worldwide and with that gained strategic importance. But the apparent cynicism of Turkey's position in sealing the border and thus, with IS on the other three side of the city, effectively supporting the siege of the city – to the extent, even, that dozens of stranded refugees denied entry into Turkey died on its border, literally alongside the boundary fence – forced the US to show itself.

Only three days after John Kerry's statement about Kobanê's subordinate position in the US strategy against IS, American diplomats and the PYD met in Paris. On October 11 and 12, they discussed Kobanê and the fight against IS. This meeting may be regarded as crystallizing the abrupt turn in US policy: since then, the fight against IS and Kobanê have been treated as intimately bound up together. On the day after the US-PYD meeting in Paris, however, the Turkish Armed Forces shelled and conducted airstrikes against alleged PKK bases at the border with Iraq. One of most popular mainstream news agencies, Hürriyet, reported both that the airstrikes were a response to a PKK attack on a military outpost (unclaimed by the PKK) and also that they were directly related to the nationwide Kobanê protests and unrest that had broken out, inflamed by Turkey's support for the Islamic State. The fate of Turkey's relationship with its Kurdish population hung in the balance. With Kurds on the street met by members of the Kurdish Islamist movement, Huda-Par, resulting in 55 deaths in three days (October 7-10, 2014); the imposition of a military curfew in some city centres; and a deadline set by PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan for tangible movement in the Turkish-Kurdish peace process passing, Turkey was threatened with a massive blowback from its second gamble on a fast fall – after Assad, now of Kobanê – with the potential, even, to ignite a civil war. Nevertheless, Turkey maintained its position of not joining the anti-IS coalition and blocking all support for Kobanê. 'There has been talk about forming a front against ISIL by giving the PYD arms,' said Erdoğan, 'but the PYD, for us, is equal to the PKK; it is a terrorist organization' (Zaman, October 19). Thus overtly equating the PYD with the PKK and implicitly equating them both with IS as 'terrorist' organizations further alienated the Kurds. It suggested an entirely incoherent or duplicitous government policy towards the 'peace process' with the PKK. The situation remained delicate, dependent on the fate of Kobanê.

Straying so far from the official US and NATO line vis-à-vis Syria and IS as to be almost in open opposition, however, Turkey had found itself badly exposed on the international stage. Now, its reluctance to take action against the assault on Kobanê caused it to become politically isolated, as the US responded not only by increasing its airstrikes, but also using PYD intelligence on the ground, contributing to their effectiveness. Escalating its assistance, an American military aircraft dropped ammunition, small arms, and medical supplies in order to resupply the PYD (New York Times, October 20). Clearly, the US had determined that the fall of Kobanê was no longer a strategic option.

As a result of these developments, Turkey's position started to change. Turkey had not become part of the coalition against IS, prioritizing the overthrow of Assad and the Kurdish entity on its border with Syria. However, the fight had turned against the Islamic State, Turkey's strategic partner in the region, and the PYD had, in effect, started to

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receive US recognition and support in their fight against this Islamic State. For Turkey, this was suddenly a lose-lose situation, so it attempted to create room for manoeuvre by opening cracks and highlighting contradictions in the anti-IS fight. Internationally, stating that it would not intervene in Kobanê – meaning, in fact, re-open the border it had closed to allow for resupplies – until there was a wider plan to oust Assad – an option which, for various reasons, had already long since been shelved by Obama – at home, Turkey suggested opening a corridor along the Turkish border for Peshmerga fighters to enter into Kobanê from the KRG, with which Erdogan's AKP had developed good relations over the past 10 years, expecting the PYD to turn this offer down. 'The PYD does not want the Peshmerga to come,' Erdoğan added, dismissing his own proposal (AFP, October 26).

However, another bluff was called, as the PYD issued a statement in which it welcomed the opening of a corridor and Peshmerga support, leaving Turkey no other option than implement its own proposal, albeit with delay, and by doing that becoming an unwilling partner in the coalition of the willing. 'With the fact that Kobanê did not fall and the opening of a corridor for the Peshmerga to Kobanê,' says Riza Altun, 'Turkey has no other option than to admit that their policy failed.' Looking back on the last two to three years, Turkey has tried to operate as a play-maker in the Middle East, preparing a Sunni-Muslim takeover in Syria. This policy has collapsed. Turkey's policy has now become reactive, with the objective of buying time. Ankara has realised that it cannot continue with its support to IS as before, but hopes that IS will eventually be able to create a new situation on the ground by occupying Kobanê.

Living With(out)

'We have paid a heavy toll,' Riza Altun acknowledges, 'but we have stopped the Islamic State.' The military significance of preventing IS from taking Kobanê may be immense, but the political significance is at least as important. 'We have reached a situation in which politics will be reshaped,' he adds. Indeed, if we take Kobanê or Sinjar as a lens through which to look at the Middle East, we see the confrontation between two models. The first expresses the IS ideal, the culmination of sectarian Sunni politics supported by the modern means of nation states including patriarchal codes, while the second, that espoused by the PYD for Rojava, is profoundly democratic, thus neither statist, in the conventional modern sense, nor patriarchal.

Though the IS announcement of a caliphate and their idea of an Islamic State might make the suggestion that we are dealing with an organization that prepares for a long walk back into history, the killing of non-Muslims and those who do not comply with their conception of Islam – the destruction of ancient mosques, shrines, and tombs; their strict dress codes and prescriptions of behaviour – might have more in common with modern political thought than with the caliphates of the past. The congruence IS seeks to create between culture and geography, the way in which it violently tries to produce a people that is compatible with the self-image of the grand design of the territory it aims to establish, resembles the development of a modern nation-state more than many might be willing to admit. Indeed, its politics of assimilation and homogenization may appear closer to those of current nation-states than to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious geographies of the past. At the same time, the brutal violence against women is embedded in the nationalist idea that men are political agents and women the carriers of national culture (Yuval-Davis, 2000). In her work, Yuval-Davis shows that violence against women is related to their symbolic position as reproducers of national identity, and how rape has become a tool in conflict and women the battlefield (Boesten 2014: 21). In this context, women's participation in the resistance has a special importance, actively engaged in preventing women from continuing as the object of male-dominant politics and society, and helping them to become the subject of their own socio-political narratives.

The defilement and dismembering of others and the decimation of material expressions of what symbolizes them, from the destruction of Shi'a mosques to the selling into slavery of Yezidi women, is not arbitral or mindless, but planned and quite rational. Simply, it is instrumental and foundational to the design of the devout state IS aims to create: those who are exterminated are the ones who do not fit in the scheme of the society IS wants to create. In this sense, IS does not think so differently from the founders of many modern nation-states, who sought a congruence between state and culture as an assumed condition for a viable polity. IS kills in the name of a well-organized society, one which is marked by their understanding of a Sunni-Muslim identity.

In his work on the holocaust, Zygmunt Bauman explains this killing in the name of an orderly and well-functioning

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society with the gardener metaphor. Every gardener worth his name, Bauman argues, has a design of the perfect garden and works towards this state of perfection. Those plants or weeds which are not part of the design have to be removed. Modern culture, Bauman argues, is a garden culture, an artificial order. 'The order, first conceived of as a design... classifies all elements of the universe by their relation to itself' (Bauman, 1989: 92). It determines what is useful and not, what should be preserved and what killed. At the moment people are classified as not compatible with or outside the self-image of society, they become perceived as endangering its realisation by virtue of their very existence. They become the weeds that have to be removed (Jacobsen, 2008: 253). They have to be killed because they do not fit in (Bauman 1989: 92), and this is the terrifying logic of nationalism in its ultimate form, and of the Islamic State.

The persistent attacks on the Kurds in Rojava have to do with the fact that they symbolize a different model. The Kurds are not killed because they are Kurds – after all, undetermined by ethnicity, IS ranks also count fighters with a Kurdish background – but because of the model PYD stands for. Following the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the PYD considers the idea of creating homogenous states, regardless of whether they are based on an ethnic or religious identity, as erroneous – not to say, from both their own experience as well as that of the region recently, catastrophic. The alternative proposed, implemented, and defended by the PYD in Rojava has been a model based on the recognition of the multi-cultural character of the reality on the ground, on the right to people to express differences and to self-government. This idea is practiced in the form of a council or assembly democracy, interconnected in the three-canton system.

In the cantons, local communities of Kurds and Arabs, Shia and Sunni Muslim, and Armenian and Syrian Christians are enabled to give expression to their beliefs, while co-chairmanship is formed by a 50% quota of female representation at each level as the basic principle of administration. So while IS is designing its new state on the basis of a patriarchal society purified of all others and implementing it by means of killing, denigration, and destruction, the model of the PYD is based on the idea of living together. The assault on Kobanê is an assault on this alternative model; the defence of Kobanê its defence.

Possible Future(s)

'The current situation in the region,' Rıza Altun underlines, 'is the result of a failure of international and regional powers to impose their political models and the development of sectarian politics.' We have been witnessing the US failure to develop a viable post-Saddam polity; we have been witnessing the failure of the regional state actors (Turkey and southern Arab nations) to develop a polity based on a Sunni-Islam identity under their divided as well as divisive patronage, along with the parallel failure of Iran to develop a viable polity based on a Shi'a identity. Together, these failures have resulted in the development of the Islamic State, pushing sectarian logic and related identity politics to its extreme. The destructive 'success' of IS is to have broken the mould. A return to what was once Iraq and once Syria will not be possible, let alone desirable. Although there is no immediately foreseeable way in which IS will lose its grip over the lands it has gained, however, nor does it seem to offer any real future, so its proximate demise is, one imagines, inevitable, by one means or another.

The model developed in Rojava, on the other hand, offers not only a viable alternative to authoritarianism and sectarianism but, for many in the region, also the last chance. And it is exactly in this manner that this push for a democratic autonomy must be recognized, for the sake of a possibility, no more, of an emancipated Middle East in peace, no less. Although it is presented by mainstream agencies and politics as the resistance of Kurds against massacre, this represents a greatly reduced understanding of the wider implications and opportunities. Indeed, Rojava is fighting and standing for a pluralistic society and active citizenship, and this is a key to a Middle East where people are the subjects of their own future. As the Efrîn economics minister, Dr Ahmet Yusuf, exhorted, 'When you think on Rojava, do not get stuck in war but also think on construction' (November 9, 2014).

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