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# Kurdish and Palestinian Quests for Self-Determination

*The “politics of the possible” on the path to independence*

Over the past few years, both the Kurds of the Northern Syrian enclaves of Rojava, represented by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the Palestinians, represented by the Palestinian Authority (PA), have made great gains in the field of public diplomacy. This policy brief assesses the viability of these two national movements’ quests for self-determination in the current regional situation. Through a comparison of the Kurdish and Palestinian cases, we argue that nationalism and self-determination are not static ideologies. Rather, what national independence means transforms in response to the opportunities and constraints presented by the regional context. Notions of nationhood and demands for independence are thus negotiated through what we term the “politics of the possible”.

## Brief Points

- Nationalism is not a static ideology and can be interpreted beyond the narrow understanding of statehood.
- International support and legitimacy matter less than facts on the ground.
- Non-state actors are at a structural disadvantage compared to states, but they can leverage local, regional and international dynamics to their advantage.
- Both the Syrian Kurds and the Palestinians have gained international support for their claims but have failed to accomplish their goals.

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## Introduction

For decades, the Syrian Kurds and the Palestinians – represented by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Palestinian Authority (PA), respectively – have struggled to gain some form of national independence. Each has made great gains in public diplomacy in recent years. The PYD has been recognized through their fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Kobane in 2014 and their subsequent alliance with the United States. The Palestinian Authority has received recognition more gradually as the prolonged Israeli occupation has tightened its grip, with the PA engaging in non-violent policies, such as insisting on a diplomatic track and applying for UN membership.

While international moral support for both the Kurdish and the Palestinian national causes has increased over the past few years, this has not translated into secure and stable gains on the ground. The endeavor to gain international support has been one of many strategies in their respective bids for self-determination.

This policy brief assesses the viability of these national movements' ambitions for self-determination in the current regional situation. First, we argue that the ideological understandings of what such national independence means among these two groups is not static. Rather, nationalist ideologies have varied within each of the movements over time. We show how such ideological shifts develop as a result of changing discourse and emerging regional realities. The PYD and the PA maneuver their positions on the quest for self-determination on the basis of the leverages and constraints presented by the regional context. We term this the “politics of the possible”. Finally, we assess the structural disadvantage the Kurds and Palestinians are faced with as non-state actors operating in a state-based system. Analyzing challenges at the systemic, state, and domestic levels, this brief lays out obstacles and opportunities for Kurds and Palestinians in further advancing their claims to self-determination.

## The Quest for Self-Determination

The Kurds and the Palestinians represent two of the largest stateless national groups in the world who are actively seeking self-determination. Globally, the Kurds number approximately 30

million, of which around 2 million live in Syria. The Palestinians number around 13 million, of which close to 5 million live in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, slated to be the State of Palestine. Both these national groups received promises of independence during the formation of the post-WWI order. In both cases, however, the creation of the modern Turkish, Arab, Iranian and Israeli nation states superseded any such promises of independence.

In the Kurdish case, the modern maps divided the Kurdish national homeland between four nation-states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. While the Kurds maintained transnational links, these divisions meant that the Kurdish national movement developed in four distinct directions, shaped within the particular context of the national framework in which the Kurdish population was rooted. In the case of Syria, the Kurds became disenfranchised citizens (until the outbreak of the 2011 war). Where they were accorded citizen rights elsewhere, these fluctuated and were limited by national assimilation policies (Turkey, Iran, Iraq). This historical experience formed Kurdish perceptions on statehood, with the Iraqi Kurds (KDP) advocating for statehood within Iraq, as illustrated by the unsuccessful national referendum held in 2017, while the Syrian, Turkish and Iranian Kurds moved from claims of statehood to forms of decentralized governance within the established states.

In the Palestinian case, the possibility for an independent Palestinian state was left open during the British mandate period (1922–1948). The establishment of Israel (1948), the defeat of the Arabs in the first Arab-Israeli war and the mass flight of the Palestinians destroyed that possibility. The number of Palestinian refugees was 750,000 at the outset, in 1949, but this has grown steadily since then, reaching 5.5 million in 2019. While both the Palestinians and the Kurds are nations without a state, the majority of the Palestinian population does not belong to any existing state either. Unlike the Kurds, the Palestinians did not receive statehood in their host-states (Jordan and Israel are exceptions), rendering the Palestinians doubly stateless. As a result of this predicament, the Palestinians developed a distinct form of “refugee nationalism”, where their demand for a state is also tied to their demand for return to the homeland.

## Nationhood as the “Politics of the Possible”

The respective nationalist ideologies espoused by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have developed from the histories of the Kurdish and Palestinian movements. As such, these nationalist ideologies are not static but fluid. They continually emerge and develop according to changes within the movements, shifting circumstances in the regional context, and the prevailing hegemonic discourses with which they engage.

What national independence means for these groups transforms and adapts in response to these changes and on the basis of the leverages and constraints presented by the regional context. Notions of nationhood and demands for independence are thus negotiated through the “politics of the possible”.

One example of such a shift in ideology can be found in the PYD's transformation from statehood to “democratic confederalism” as a national independence model. For instance, up until the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the Kurds in Syria had mainly worked within the confines of the authoritarian Baathist state, which limited the expression of their political demands. The weakening of the central government in Damascus after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 created an opportunity for the Syrian Kurds. In April 2011, the Assad regime tried to coopt them by granting citizenship to those Kurds who had not held such status prior to the revolution. A second opportunity arose from the Kurds' willingness to engage in the frontlines in the international war against the Islamic State (IS), gaining control over areas in Northern Syria that facilitated their demands for autonomy.

Underlying the PYD's ideas of autonomy is the ideology developed by the Turkish Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan's ideology grew out of the PKK's Marxist-Leninist thinking of the 1960s and 70s and was later inspired by the American libertarian thinker Murray Bookchin. Working within the limits of a strongly centralized Turkish state, Öcalan's ideology advocates decentralization and local autonomy with grassroots participation. The nationalist independence model was termed “democratic confederalism”. The PYD

used this model as a blueprint in the areas under its control in Northern Syria – popularly referred to as Rojava – in the period 2012–2019, while advocating for the territorial integrity of Syria under a federal system.

Given the context of Turkey and Syria as two strong states, the history of Kurdish oppression in both contexts, and the transnational connections between the Kurdish political groups in these two states, the ideological shift from statehood to “democratic confederalism” was a reflection of the “politics of the possible”.

Similar ideological shifts, developed under particular situations of crisis or otherwise shifting circumstances, can be found in the history of the Palestinian national movement. For the Palestinians, for instance, the shift from subsuming Palestinian liberation under the broader pan-Arab ideology into an independent Palestinian-driven national liberation movement occurred as a result of the massive Arab defeat in the 1967 war. Similarly, the shift from demanding total liberation of the entire historical Palestine into a pragmatic acceptance for the division of the territory started in the mid-1970s, when the radical revolutionary violence espoused by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had reached a dead-end and the movement concluded that diplomacy afforded them the best chances for success.

In the current situation, as a result of these historic developments, the Kurds (with the exception of the KDP in northern Iraq) demand regional autonomy in decentralized versions of the existing states, whilst the Palestinians demand independent statehood in parts of historic Palestine. While both these political demands are serious challenges to the existing states (Iran, Syria and Turkey for the Kurds; Israel for the Palestinians), they are far less challenging than the political demands originally made by the same movements.

### Negotiating Independence as Non-State Actors

Regardless of the shifts in their ideology on the path to independence, as non-state actors in the Middle East, there are both limitations and opportunities for Kurds and Palestinians in advancing their claims. This is complicated by regional shifts and the fluid nature of conflicts

with actors involved at the global, regional and national levels. Borrowing from the Waltzian levels of analysis structure, we briefly identify some of the challenges at the systemic, the state, and the domestic level.

### Systemic challenges

At the systemic level, the greatest impact on both cases have come about through changing global power structures and, in particular, shifts in American policy towards the Middle East. For the Syrian Kurds, the gamechanger was US engagement in Syria: first, covertly, and then from 2014, in the international military intervention against IS. The US decision to supply, train and support the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) and other Syrian opposition groups was a turning point that guaranteed the survival of the PYD project of an autonomous entity in the north (Rojava).

Russian intervention into the Syrian conflict in 2015, buttressing the Syrian regime at a critical juncture, was an equally crucial factor that changed the conflict, emphasizing the global power competition being played out in Syria. Although the US decision to withdraw from Syria in late 2019 was framed as a betrayal of the Kurds, the PYD already had a realistic understanding of their role in the game played by the US and Russia with its allies. President Putin had only a year earlier agreed to Turkish demands to enter Kurdish-controlled Afrin, then protected by Russia. This exemplifies the unreliable nature of regional alliances embedded in a great power competition.

The unpredictable nature of US policy that resulted in a sudden announcement of the country’s withdrawal on 6 October 2019 allowed Turkey to intervene in Northern Syria and cast doubts as to the future survival of the Rojava experiment. The clash between the two power blocs – Russia (and Iran) against the US – has, however, also recently opened up opportunities for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces to leverage their experience as fighters on the ground to assist Russian efforts at the stabilization of northeast Syria, a role that will be tested as the final status for the Idlib province is determined. Will the Syrian Kurdish groups find a new benefactor in Russia?

The Palestinians, for their part, have since the

signing of the Oslo treaty in 1993 accepted the United States as the mediator in a peace process with Israel, aimed at securing an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. While the US has never been an unbiased mediator, the Palestinians accepted the US as mediator precisely because of its power vis-à-vis Israel. As a strong benefactor of Israel, the US also holds leverages that no other power does. President Donald Trump upended the Palestinian political calculation when he recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital (2017), defunded UNRWA (2018), closed the PLO office in Washington (2018), and declared that Israeli settlements were not illegal (2019). In light of this full US embrace of Israeli demands, the Palestinians broke contact with the US.

The current Palestinian challenge on the international level is that there is no viable replacement for the US. Their attempt at applying for UN membership was partially successful when Palestine was upgraded to a “non-member state” in 2012, but their pathway to full UN membership is blocked by the US veto in the Security Council. While the EU has an ambition to be more relevant in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has as yet not been up to the task.

Both Kurds and Palestinians have been able to gain support and recognition on the international level. However, they have discovered the hard way that there is simply no means to achieve their goals without territorial control and the acquiescence of regional states. For the Palestinians, being recognized as a state in the UN General Assembly does not end the Israeli occupation; for the Kurds, recognition of their role in the fight against IS does not equal secure autonomy in Northern Syria.

### State challenges

The mid-level of the state is perhaps the most influential and consequential for any claims to independence. At this level, we focus in particular on the role of regional powers to shape the outcome of conflicts on the ground. The state level is often intertwined with the systemic level, but the policies of key regional states in both cases need closer examination.

In the Kurdish case, the common ideology and organic links between the Turkish PKK and the

Syrian PYD – even after the latter became part of the wider Syrian Democratic Forces – sealed the fate of the Rojava experiment from the outset. The failure of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process in 2014–15 coincided with US support for the YPG/YPJ forces in late 2014 during the siege of Kobane. From the Turkish perspective, this was a double threat: Not only did the Justice and Development party (AKP) government feel betrayed by their NATO ally, they were also facing a strengthening of an organization (the PKK) that they defined as a critical domestic threat. The AKP consistently challenged the PYD presence in northern Syria in the following years, intervening through military operations west of the Euphrates river, in Idlib, Afrin, and finally capturing key areas across the border from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn in October 2019.

In the Palestinian case, their regional position has been fluid. While the PLO has formal independence from the various Arab regimes, as well as wide recognition as the “sole representative of the Palestinian people”, their combined non-state status and refugee predicament has led to the Palestinians being constrained by the policies of their various host states. Throughout different points in history, the Palestinians have tried to leverage their position in the broader Arab world. After the 1993 Oslo treaty, the PLO leadership moved to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and established the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994. Since then, the PA has negotiated with Israel but has been unable to reach a negotiated settlement and establish an independent Palestinian state.

### Domestic challenges

The smallest level of analysis is the domestic, here used to describe the intragroup relations within Kurdish and Palestinian movements.

While the PLO has a complex organizational

structure including a variety of political parties, the Palestinian national movement underwent a long process of centralizing power in the hands of the PLO leadership. When the PA was established in 1994, the president of the PA was also the Chairman of the PLO and Chairman of Fatah (the dominant party in the PLO). Demand for external recognition of this unified national leadership was part and parcel of the Oslo treaty, as Israel recognized the PLO as the “sole representative of the Palestinian people”. Since then, however, the Palestinians have been unable to maintain their united front as the non-PLO organization Hamas rose in prominence. During the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections, Hamas won a majority of seats in the Council. In 2007, a civil war broke out between Hamas and Fatah resulting in Hamas controlling Gaza and Fatah controlling the West Bank. This domestic division has massively weakened the Palestinian position in their other levels. This illustrates the interconnectedness of these levels of analysis. Weakness – or divisions – on one level reduces the levers on the other levels.

The Kurds, too, have been fraught with internal divisions. On the regional level, the greatest cleavage has been between the Iraqi Kurdish KRG and the Turkish Kurdish PKK, reflected in differences over nationalist ideology and support. In the present Syrian context, the Syrian Kurds on the whole have been able to unite behind the PYD. However, there are rivalries between the PYD and other Syrian Kurdish parties such as the Kurdish National Council, founded with the support of the KRG in 2011, who accuse the ideologically driven PYD of silencing dissent and persecuting internal Kurdish political opposition. Despite this, the governance model and relative stability of the areas under PYD control for the past seven years has given the Syrian Kurds an opportunity to gain legitimacy for their ideology of democratic confederalism.

## Conclusion

In this policy brief, we illustrate how two non-state actors embedded in a state-based system have struggled for decades to gain national independence. Their respective ideological understandings of what such independence means has varied over time and reflects the constraints imposed upon them and the levers they have had to realize their ambitions. In the current situation, the Kurds of Syria and Turkey demand autonomy in a decentralized version of the existing state, whilst the Palestinians demand independent statehood in parts of historic Palestine.

The comparison of these two cases demonstrates that nationalism and demands for independence are not static ideologies but rather negotiated through the “politics of the possible”. This implies that the current ideological positions of the Palestinians and Syrian Kurds on statehood and autonomy respectively should not be taken for granted. As non-state nationalist actors operating in a state-based system, both the Palestinians and the Kurds adapt their ideologies and strategies for national independence to shifting regional dynamics. ■

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## PRIO

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