



REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The Kurds at a Crossroads

A Survey of Politics and Society

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Contents

Kurdish Perspectives and Attitudes 3

Joshua Yaphe, Ph.D.

The Kurdish Cause, Beyond Survival 14

Soran Tarkhani, Ph.D.

U.S. Policy toward the Kurds 17

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Executive Summary

Kurdistan is a political reality. Not in the sense of a sovereign state with a monopoly on the use of force and diplomatic recognition from its neighbors, but rather as an idea shared by millions of people living across the modern borders of Iraq, Iran, Türkiye, and Syria, and within a larger diaspora. The Kurdish cause is widely felt, with belief and conviction, regardless of local political circumstances, and it is therefore a strong motivating factor in Kurdish politics everywhere. It would be easy to reduce that concept to a caricature, treating Kurdish national movements as little more than insurgents airing their parochial grievances through separatism and violence. But this would be wrong. Because hidden within the well-worn rhetoric of statehood that so dominates political discourse in Kurdish society, there are individuals – human beings who carry within them their own understandings of the past, their own political views and opinions about the present, and their own hopes and fears about the future.

The Center for the National Interest conducted a survey in the spring of 2026 to try to gauge some of these individual perspectives on where Kurdish politics have been and where they are going. The period leading up to the survey had witnessed some dramatic changes. The Syrian Transitional Government (STG) was consolidating authority over the formerly semi-autonomous Kurdish regions in the northeast, the Iranian regime was firing drones and missiles at Iranian Kurdish camps on the Iraqi side of the border, the Turkish National Assembly was debating a new framework agreement to disarm and demobilize the Peoples' Workers Party (PKK), and the Kurdish parties in northern Iraq were still unable to form a cabinet for the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) after 18 months. Many Kurds were deeply pessimistic about the future.

We conducted this survey with the help of two widely-recognized experts: Dr. Soran Tarkhani, a Kurdish academic from Iraq who has just published a ground-breaking study of Kurdish politics; and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a remarkably prolific reporter and author who has been embedded with multiple Kurdish communities for over 15 years. Their concluding thoughts appear in the essays at the end of this report. Together, we asked 28 participants from a wide range of geographical locations and professional backgrounds to provide their impressions of both their own local Kurdish communities and that of others.

Respondents overwhelmingly pointed to corruption, nepotism, and the patronage networks that fuel them as the major factors holding back Kurdish progress and creating obstacles for a properly functioning economy and society. Many viewed the KRG as an achievement, but not a model to be emulated, while the experiment in self-governance in Syria was admired for its principles, but not for its practicality. Above all, the respondents had lost confidence in the ability of current political elites and institutions to meet the needs of the next generation, and they called for Kurds from all walks of life to create a more vibrant civil society that will allow them to get more involved in politics.

Kurdish Perspectives and Attitudes

Joshua Yaphe, Ph.D.

About the Survey

All around the world, governments, political parties, international organizations, and civil society representatives routinely conduct surveys to gauge public opinion, civic sentiment, and the popular will. They also carry out more targeted interviews with key experts to gather lessons learned about policy implementation and assess the impact of political decision-making. Such exercises often feed into larger strategic planning processes that help formulate a long-term vision for senior leaders. In many different societies, it is incredibly important to know how various segments of the population view their social status and economic circumstances, how they measure progress and failure over time, and what they expect from their political leaders. It is critical that such studies be carried out in as non-partisan and objective manner as possible, in order to arrive at something that might plausibly be referred to as a baseline assessment.

For the Kurds, broadly inclusive surveys designed to establish a baseline assessment of political attitudes and policy perceptions across national borders are both incredibly valuable and remarkably rare. Surveys of Kurdish public opinion do exist, and some are very professional and insightful, but to make one that is truly inclusive and allows for comparisons across the various national borders is uncommon.

This survey was carried out in the spring of 2026. It was a time when the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) was busy consolidating authority over the formerly semi-autonomous Kurdish regions in the northeast, the Iranian regime was sending drones and

missiles to insurgent Iranian Kurdish camps on the Iraqi side of the border, the Turkish National Assembly was debating a new framework agreement (that has since been approved) to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate Peoples' Workers Party (PKK) fighters, and the leading Kurdish parties in northern Iraq were still unable, after 18 months, to form a cabinet for the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). A lot had taken place since the start of the year and it was a good opportunity for participants to stop and reflect on what it all meant.

However, there were many challenges in conducting this kind of field work. Decades of political rhetoric within Kurdish circles has left an ingrained attitude that any publicly-aired criticism of Kurdish politics could expose internal divisions, weaken Kurdish unity, and serve as a mark of disloyalty to the Kurdish cause. Many respondents in this survey were reluctant to speak in detail on the sensitive topics of the day, despite assurances of anonymity. Nevertheless, their short comments helped to reveal participants' personal feelings about Kurdish politics and society today, and that is precisely what the survey was meant to achieve.

There were 28 responses overall, with a good balance of younger and older generations from across all Kurdish regions. Seven participants from northern Syria (Rojava), eight participants from western Iran (Rojhelat), five participants from southeast Türkiye (Bakur), and eight participants from northern Iraq (Bashur). The lines of division were not always clear, so that readers should treat these labels with caution. Some individuals insisted that given their experience in multiple locales, their perspectives represented

“pan-Kurdish” viewpoints. Others wanted to provide details about their ancestry in order to explain their family connections to different communities. But that is precisely what made the survey so interesting. These Kurdish intellectuals, from government officials and journalists to academics and civil society activists, are highly educated, politically aware, and well-placed to offer probing insights on affairs that impact their compatriots at home and abroad.

Image: Mentxu Ramilo Araujo / Wikimedia Commons



Mural in Errekalear, in the Basque region of Spain, with the Kurdish slogan *Berxwedan Jiyane* (“Resistance is Life”), November 2024

All Politics is Local

The first question we asked was: “What do you see as the most important political challenge facing your Kurdish community today?” The idea was to begin the discussion at the local level and invite participants to contribute their thoughts on issues close to home. Not everyone was prepared to comment on the affairs of their neighbors, but all were willing to offer their thoughts on their own community, and further questions could then tease out some logical comparisons with other

communities’ experiences. Respondents mentioned repression from regional governments, betrayal by international partners, and the lack of region-wide Kurdish unity. But far more often, they were concerned with political fragmentation, corruption, and stagnation at the local level.

Syria

Several Syrian respondents voiced their suspicions of the central government in Damascus, as might be expected. President Ahmed al-Shara’a is not only the head of the Syrian Transitional Government. He is also the former leader of Hay’at Tahrir al-Shams, a Sunni militia formerly aligned with Al Qa’ida and other extremist groups, with a rank-and-file that included foreign fighters who are now serving as military officers. The central government’s efforts to reassert authority over the countryside have dismantled the Kurdish-led Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) and pushed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) back into small enclaves under new joint security arrangements intended to integrate some Kurdish commanders into the national army. According to one respondent: “Damascus clearly uses PYD/KNC [Democratic Union Party/Kurdish National Council] divisions for their own interests, especially by weakening both sides, and encouraging the rise of Islamist Kurdish figures and groups aligned with Damascus’s al-Shara’a regime.” Another participant emphasized a linkage between the concessions in Rojava and a much larger betrayal of the Kurdish cause: “My primary concern is the potential dilution of the Kurdish cause through the government’s inclusion of selected Kurdish figures and

their presentation as representatives of the Kurdish community.” With that, local Syrian politics is projected onto the regional Kurdish stage.

And yet, Syrian participants overwhelmingly pointed to Kurdish political fragmentation as the central problem in Rojava, both in terms of factionalism and competing agendas within their own community. One journalist summarized it as such: “In Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), multiple political projects have been put on the table by Kurdish parties from the 1957 until today. Some parties demand democracy, others call for expanded local administration, while a third group advocates for an autonomous Kurdish region similar to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.” Another participant noted that it was only after the withdrawal of the SDF in January that local Kurds started to really voice criticisms of their own community leaders, of “the corruption and the nepotism and lack of institutions... and they see that they have lost, or they have lost a lot of lives in this conflict [and] they left without any infrastructure... which has been collapsing.” Summing up the argument: “...those political parties, for [a] decade and [a] half and more, they are telling people that they are trying to reach a unified political vision, but what they are doing is the opposite.”

Iran

The responses from Rojhelat were no different. Some participants did mention as core problems the oppression of Iranian regime, disorganization among other Iranian opposition movements, and “a degree of dependence on developments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which can occasionally constrain political

and organizational initiatives.” The Kurdish groups have attempted to combine efforts under the allied banner of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), yet they are largely living in camps in northern Iraq where they have limited freedom of operation. That situation has put the Kurdish parties in a very challenging situation during the current Iran War. At least one Iranian activist pointed out how public opinion is now divided: “Some believe that the parties made the right decision by refraining from taking [armed] action [against the Iranian regime last March], thereby avoiding further loss of life. A significant section of the population, however, considers this a missed opportunity and believes that Kurdistan could have taken a more decisive role in determining its own future.”

However, most Iranian respondents pointed to internal political divisions as a major problem over the long-term. As one academic put it: “In my view, the greatest political challenge in Rojhelat is the internal fragmentation among the Kurdish political parties, combined with leadership that has largely remained in the hands of the same individuals for decades. [...] In the past, participation as a Peshmerga was closely linked to political education, ideological development, and organizational training. Today, this dimension appears to have weakened, making the parties less attractive to younger generations, who no longer perceive them as revolutionary movements.” As that quote suggests, Iranian participants were not only concerned with the impact of political fragmentation and stagnation on social progress, they were even more concerned with how this was hampering opportunities for the next generation. They spoke of a “growing generational divide,” and “a growing need

for a renewed strategic vision for Rojhelat – one that responds to changing regional dynamics, engages a new generation of activists, and strengthens the Kurdish movement’s role [among the Iranian opposition groups].”

Türkiye

Party division and leadership crisis were at the top of the list of problems for one civil society activist, but other Turkish participants acknowledged that Türkiye occupies a unique position within the broader world of Kurdish politics. Successive Kurdish parties have come into confrontation with a strong Turkish state and learned a series of lessons about how to manage government expectations, voter sentiment, and messaging at both the local and national levels. The current arrangement, since its formation in 2023, is the People’s Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party. It has Kurdish leaders in key executive roles, such as Tuncer Bakırhan, but it also has Hatay-born, Arabic-speaking MP Tülay Hatimoğulları as co-chair and a platform that emphasizes direct participatory democracy, environmental protection, gender equality, and minority rights.

The problem of dealing with a strong state over many decades led one Turkish participant to comment: “[A] major challenge is assimilation. Many Kurds still feel afraid to openly identify themselves as Kurdish because of decades of discrimination and pressure. Regardless of which political party has governed Turkey, many Kurds feel they have been treated as second-class citizens. This has affected

opportunities for education, cultural expression, and social mobility. As a result, some people continue to hide their Kurdish identity.”

Another Turkish participant noted: “The Kurdish movement in Turkey is arguably among the most disciplined, cohesive, and organizationally sophisticated Kurdish movements...” However, the large demographic size and geographical spread of the Kurds in Türkiye are both opportunities and constraints. “This large population provides the movement with a substantial reservoir of human resources that can be mobilized politically, socially, and, when necessary, militarily. At the same time, however, this demographic advantage comes with significant organizational challenges, particularly the difficulty of representing and mobilizing such a large and diverse population.” For the Turkish respondents, complaints about nepotism and corruption, weak institutions and party fragmentation, were minimal or non-existent, but the challenges of maintaining a connection between political leaders and local everyday Kurds remained. And, even more to the point, the Kurds in Türkiye have an incredible challenge in terms of international engagement and gaining global recognition for their issues, when the Turkish state is so closely integrated with the West.

Iraq

If participants from the other Kurdish communities talked about the degree to which factionalism and corruption exist, the Iraqi Kurds were more interested in exploring the underlying causes. The problems

within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are widely known and well established, leaving Iraqi Kurdish participants to spend their time speculating on the long-term impact to society: “The ongoing division of power between the KDP and PUK has produced a system of parallel governance structures, separate military forces, competing revenue channels, and duplicated administrative institutions that has severely undermined the capacity of the Kurdistan Regional Government to function as a coherent and accountable state. This fragmentation has generated widespread insecurity among citizens, eroded public trust in political institutions, and produced a pervasive sense of pessimism about the region’s political future, particularly among younger generations who have grown up entirely within the post-1991 autonomous governance experiment.”

One academic noted that the problem was not even corruption and nepotism per se, but rather the larger system of patronage that had built up over time: “[It] has kept employment behind a barrier through the choices made by one’s family or background. This has barred myself, and many others, from actual employment. [It] is not so much nepotism, rather a core system of patronage that identifies other drivers of the economy, including entrepreneurship, as threats to the status quo, greatly impacting the lifeblood of the economy.” Another Iraqi Kurd pointed to the corrosive effect of these patronage networks, resulting in family disintegration, moral decay, and “astonishing levels of incompetence throughout every tier of governance.” For many of these Iraqi Kurdish participants, there is a sharp disconnect between the revolutionary ideals of

the greater Kurdish cause and the reality that the KRG has achieved on the ground in Iraq.

Cross-Regional Perspectives

Those conflicting feelings among participants of both pride and disappointment in the KRG came into sharper relief as the survey moved into regional comparisons that cut across national borders. We asked participants about whether they looked at the KRG experience in Iraq as a model, a warning, or both. And similarly for the semi-autonomy experiment in Syria. As one Iraqi Kurd responded: “[The KRG] may be considered both [as] a warning and a model for governance, as it may be considered functional to some degree, but fails to translate [into] any means



Mural on the Schwendergasse in Vienna, Austria, with the Kurdish slogan *Jin Jîyan Azadî* (“Woman, Life, Freedom”), January 2021

Image: Maryam Ashrafi / Wikimedia Commons

of independent or autonomous institutions.” Several Iraqi Kurds seemed to believe that the KRG carries a special responsibility to uphold Kurdish societal values, and therein lays its greatest failure. According to one Iraqi Kurd: “For the beneficiaries of the system, it represents an ideal model of governance. For ordinary citizens, however, it stands as a disgraceful example of how not to govern.”

Other respondents were careful to put a distance between the KRG experience and their own. Many participants consciously chose to use the word achievement rather than success in referring to the KRG, as one Turkish activist put it: “Not a model but an achievement.” A second Turkish activist went even further, saying: “Those who are pro-PKK hate [the KRG], but others believe that – despite issues like nepotism in Bashur – the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan must be supported.” Almost as though it were a necessary evil.

These cross-regional perspectives came not only with observations about political differences in terms of the goals and objectives that should function as desired end-states for the Kurdish cause. They also came with social and moral judgments for what Kurdish society can and should be. The most remarkable comment that starkly clarified these distinctions came from an Iraqi Kurdish woman: “Rojava, unlike the KRG, is a revolution. Revolutions are always risky because they are audacious and dare to imagine a different model of coexistence. [...] The KRG has been content to retain patriarchal, tribal, and conservative values to the detriment of women’s

rights. Rojava has refused to compromise women’s rights and safety at the altar of national liberation. As a Kurdish woman I have deeper respect for the Rojava model, and I know many Kurdish women who hold the same view.” Here we have the Iraqi and Syrian experiences in self-governance standing in as a marker for Kurdish society and a lesson in how Kurdish political leaders have a responsibility to uphold a social contract that transcends national boundaries.

It is important to note how Iranian participants view these political developments in the region, since they are starting from a demonstrably low point in terms of administration and institutions. One Iranian weighed the costs and benefits of ideological stances toward governance and morality: “I regard Rojava as an important model, particularly because it has demonstrated that women can play central roles as political leaders, military commanders, and active participants in civil society. At the same time... I believe Rojava would have been better served by placing greater emphasis on Kurdish national interests and strategic priorities than on ideological commitments.”

When asked about which experience she would identify as having had the greatest success in achieving respect and dignity for the Kurds, an Iranian activist replied that neither one served that role, at least in terms of local governance and self-rule. Rather, she pointed toward a very different role that both played with regards to their support to the international community: “I believe one of the greatest Kurdish achievements was the role

Kurdish forces played in defeating ISIS. At a time when the world faced one of the most brutal terrorist organizations, the Kurds stood on the front line and defended not only their own people, but humanity as a whole. That gave the Kurdish cause respect, dignity, and international recognition.” Here we have Kurdish moral values and social responsibility projected onto the international stage, in a positive light.

Many of these cross-regional perspectives centered on Iraq and Syria, where Kurdish leaders spent so much time and effort messaging audiences in the West. The Iranian perspective is interesting, but not entirely relevant at the moment, when Rojhelat is still so far away from having a functioning administrative unit. However, the Turkish perspective is both critically important and little understood among international observers.

One Turkish participant carefully noted: “For most Kurds in Turkey... the KRG is generally viewed as a major step forward in the broader Kurdish struggle for political recognition and self-government. From the perspective of the organized Kurdish movement in Turkey, however... its political model is at times viewed as less than ideal and, in some respects, as a missed opportunity... [and] a potential rival for leadership and representation within Kurdish politics more broadly... [However, even with that,] the Kurds in Turkey and those in Rojava share considerably more in common than either does with the Kurdish communities in Iraq or Iran. Geographically, socially, culturally, and linguistically, Rojava is best understood as an extension of the Kurdish regions of contemporary Turkey rather than as a distinct

Kurdish space. These historical and societal ties are reinforced by the close political and ideological relationship between the Kurdish movement in Turkey and the political actors that have shaped the Rojava experience. Developments in Rojava are therefore rarely perceived as external events; rather, they are understood as having direct implications for Kurdish politics in Turkey. The success or failure of the Rojava project is widely believed to shape the strategic opportunities, political legitimacy, and future trajectory of the Kurdish movement in Turkey itself.”

The landscape looks very different from the perspective of Kurds in Bakur. And yet, other Kurds from very different geographic and professional backgrounds made the same observations. An Iraqi Kurd wanted to stress the importance of the peace process between the Turkish Government and the PKK, insisting that the PKK must end its cross-border interventions and transform into an advocacy organization for the sake of this opportunity in Türkiye. In doing so, he drew a salient point about cross-border Kurdish relations: “The main lesson is not to allow intervention from a Kurdish organization from another country (part of Kurdistan) to take matters in another part of Kurdistan into their hands. This is what the PKK did in Syria through the PYD-SDF. It ultimately tied the fate of Syrian Kurds to the ‘negotiation process’ between the PKK and Ankara in a way that foreclosed the possibility of independent Syrian Kurdish political agency.” The idea being that the collapse of the semi-autonomy experiment in Syria was, in part, a sacrifice aimed at achieving progress in reconciliation with the Turkish Government. There is an awareness among many



Mural at the University of Bologna, Italy, expressing support for the Kurds in Kobani, June 2016

Kurds that events in one part of Kurdistan do not stand along in isolation, even if the high-flown rhetoric of politicians sometimes make it seem as though local achievements are sui generis.

Various participants had a range of other observations, which are worth mentioning even if they represent strictly individual viewpoints:

- A lesson from Syria in the 2010s, as well as Iraq in the 2000s, is that Kurdish autonomy is possible, but only where the nation-state is weak and instable.
- The Iraqi Government is still unable to distribute oil revenues equitably, provide basic services, or build inclusive national institutions, which paradoxically only contributes to the conditions for another Kurdish attempt at independence, even if it is not feasible in the short-term.

- Any Kurdish peace process must have credible international guarantees and independent monitoring if it is to succeed, yet U.S. policies can change markedly from one administration to another.
- There is still an opportunity for the Kurds of Iran to achieve some form of autonomy, if they can establish themselves as political stakeholders in Iran's future, rather than being viewed by the United States and others as merely a military partner.

Above all, there is one recurring theme in all of these cross-border comparisons, and that is the lack of trust. There is no trust among Kurds in President Trump and Special Envoy Tom Barrack. There is no trust in the promises of President Erdoğan and the Turkish Government. There is no trust in Britain or the Europeans, and no trust in the governments of other regional capitals. Even the PKK and local Kurdish political leaders are experiencing a trust deficit.

Advice for the Future

We asked participants to provide recommendations. In this case, it was not so much recommendations for Western governments or the international community, since the purpose of the exercise was to give participants a chance to reflect upon their own collective situation. Rather, the respondents provided advice for their own political leaders, both in terms of positive steps to take and negative consequences to avoid. They also offered advice for the next generation of Kurds. Almost every

participant struck a note of caution to avoid “international projects” or an “overreliance on foreign powers,” i.e. placing trust in erstwhile allies that are only really interested in pursuing their own agenda and will eventually leave. Below are some of the responses that tackled other issues.

A key message that several participants wanted to impart to political leaders was that they need a message of hope. As one Iranian activist put it: “[They need to] encourage us to dream again for a better life. I feel more despair than anything when thinking of them right now.” Another recurring theme was the need for unity, even at the most local level, as another Iranian Kurd noted: “Fight your brothers in debates and arguments, but never ever in armed conflict. [...] Don’t attack your rival Kurdish parties, that will not give you respect.” Yet others were more skeptical that the current officeholders were even up to these tasks: “Kurdish political leaders should begin transferring power and responsibility to the younger generation. Many current leaders no longer have the vision, rhetoric, knowledge, or charisma needed to inspire public opinion at home or abroad. Kurdish politics needs renewal, fresh ideas, stronger institutions, and leaders who can connect with a new generation of Kurds and with the international community.”

Nowhere was this desire for change more evident than with the Iranian Kurdish participants. One of them put it bluntly: “It is time for a generational transition.” Another added more detailed advice: “The current Kurdish leadership, particularly the political parties, urgently needs to integrate younger generations into senior positions within their

leadership structures and make a far greater effort to adapt to contemporary realities. This includes developing a deeper understanding of current global politics. Moreover, given that part of their struggle remains linked to armed resistance, they need to develop greater knowledge of the changing nature of armed conflict, the forms warfare may take in the coming years, and the strategies required to respond to these developments. A significant proportion of the leadership across Kurdish political parties consists of individuals whose political and armed struggle was shaped during an era dominated by Kalashnikov-based guerrilla warfare. Today, however, the nature and methods of struggle have changed considerably.”

Responses from all corners of Kurdistan featured calls to reduce corruption and nepotism, but at least one Syrian participant was able to put the matter in terms that were more broadly applicable: “Kurdish movements should move beyond personality-centred politics. Political leaders should be accountable to strong democratic institutions rather than being treated as unquestionable figures. Appointments should be based on competence, qualifications, and public service rather than party loyalty or personal relationships.”

In terms of advice to the youth, one recurring theme was the strong belief that the next generation will be judged by their peers not for their party affiliation but rather by their actual skills and their ability to shape a strategic vision. The following are some individual viewpoints that respondents shared with their advice to the younger generation:

- “Young Kurdish intellectuals would benefit from taking the initiative to establish independent research centers, policy institutes, civic organizations, educational platforms, technology start-ups, and cross-regional professional networks linking Kurds across all parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora.”
- “Involve [yourself] with central government wherever you live, became a political member of a party, try to be a member of parliament, etc.”
- “Stop expecting quick fixes or miracles. Instead, prepare for a sustained, generational effort to persuade your states and societies to recognize and accommodate Kurdish distinctiveness.”
- “People inside Kurdistan should not assume that political parties must take the lead in every form of struggle.”
- “Whether through political activism, academic work, civil society initiatives, media, entrepreneurship, technology, or public service, there are many ways to contribute to the advancement of Kurdish society and the broader struggle for democracy and justice.”
- “Understanding where you come from and being able to articulate it in multiple languages to multiple audiences is one of the most powerful forms of political agency available to a stateless nation.”

- “My advice is to be innovative, to be courageous and to have the strength of character, and love of Kurdistan to envision different ways of achieving collective liberation.”

That last remark deserves special notice. There should be no mistaking the fact that the majority of participants did not envision a retreat from the Kurdish cause. Many saw these calls for local reform as part and parcel of the effort to advance the long-term goal of Kurdish self-rule or Kurdish autonomy. One Turkish participant made the linkage between local reform and Kurdish nationalism with his advice to politicians: “Stop bickering over narrow, short-term



Drawing of renowned Kurdish actor Juma Khalil (“Bavê Teyar”), who died from injuries sustained in a January 18, 2025, Turkish drone attack targeting the Tishreen Dam on the Euphrates River in Syria during a sit-in of Kurdish peace activists

Image: Norhin al-Hussein / Wikimedia Commons

self-interests. Those interests will mean very little if the broader Kurdish cause is weakened or damaged. Whatever leadership, influence, or legitimacy you enjoy today exists because the Kurdish movement as a whole has grown stronger over time. If the Kurdish cause is weakened, your own position will inevitably weaken with it—perhaps even disappear altogether. In the end, the strength of Kurdish leadership depends on the strength of the Kurdish cause itself.” Despite all of the criticism about local and regional politics from respondents, there was still a firm belief in the need for Kurdish unity in the pursuit of a shared vision for Kurdish nationalism.

The Kurdish Cause, Beyond Survival

Soran Tarkhani, Ph.D.

Reading these responses as a Kurdish scholar from Bashur, I am struck less by pessimism itself than by its source. The respondents do not speak as people who have ceased to believe in a Kurdish future. They continue to attach importance to Kurdish rights, dignity, recognition, self government, and political agency. What troubles them is the growing uncertainty over who can carry those aspirations forward, through what institutions, and with what political vision. That distinction matters. The Kurdish cause remains powerful, but confidence in much of the politics conducted in its name appears far less secure.

This is not an easy conclusion to reach because Kurdish politics has also produced achievements that should not be diminished. A generation ago, many of the political realities that now exist would have seemed extraordinarily difficult to imagine. Kurdish political visibility has increased. Kurdish media, universities, civil society organizations, diplomatic networks, and political institutions have expanded. In Bashur, the Kurdistan Region has survived wars, internal conflict, pressure from Baghdad, regional intervention, economic crises, and the war against ISIS. Whatever its failures, its existence remains one of the most consequential Kurdish political achievements of the modern period.

Yet being from Bashur also makes it difficult for me to look at that achievement without asking what has been made of it. More than three decades of self-government should have produced institutions capable of standing increasingly on their own. Instead, political parties remain more powerful than many of the institutions they created. The KDP-PUK

divide is not simply a disagreement between two parties competing for votes. It reaches into security forces, administration, employment, economic networks, revenues, and the exercise of political authority itself. Government exists, but party often remains the more decisive political institution.

For me, this is among the most serious problems facing Kurdish politics. It also raises a question of loyalty that is rarely comfortable to discuss. Kurds can be deeply attached to Kurdistan while also being deeply attached to a party, movement, or leader. There is nothing inherently contradictory about that. The problem begins when the interests of the party and the interests of Kurdistan are assumed to be the same. Once access to employment, resources, institutions, or influence depends heavily on partisan affiliation, political loyalty begins to shape the meaning of national loyalty. A shared Kurdish identity remains, but the national interest itself can become divided into competing partisan interpretations.

Bashur represents the most institutionalized form of this problem because it has had the longest experience of Kurdish government. The other regions cannot simply be placed in the same category. Rojava faces uncertainty over the survival and future shape of Kurdish self administration. Rojhelat's parties confront the power of the Iranian state as well as their own fragmentation and questions of generational renewal. In Bakur, Kurdish politics operates within a much stronger state and has developed forms of organization and electoral participation different from those in the other regions. Their circumstances are not interchangeable, and Kurdish politics has



Pro-Kurdistan independence rally at Franso Hariri Stadium in Erbil, Iraq, September 2017

sometimes suffered from pretending that they are.

The need for Kurdish cooperation nevertheless remains. To me, unity has never required one Kurdish party, one ideology, or one political center. Nor should it. Political disagreement is unavoidable in a society as geographically, socially, and ideologically diverse as Kurdish society. What should be avoidable is allowing those disagreements to become destructive: one Kurdish movement weakening another's political gains, armed confrontation among Kurdish actors, or organizations in one part of Kurdistan claiming the right to determine political choices in another. Bashur carries a particular responsibility here. The Kurdistan Region is not simply another Kurdish party project. It is a political entity whose survival and development have consequences for Kurds well beyond Iraq. A Kurdistan Region in which government becomes stronger than party, public institutions become more professional, and citizens can participate without

dependence on partisan networks would make a stronger case for Kurdish self-government than any speech about national rights could accomplish.

The respondents' distrust of outside powers also deserves serious attention. Kurdish political memory contains repeated experiences of alliances that ended when regional or international priorities changed. Yet I am reluctant to understand this history only through the language of betrayal. States rarely conduct foreign policy out of permanent friendship. Kurdish leaders know this, or should know it. The problem is not that Kurds work with outside powers; a stateless people surrounded by powerful states could hardly afford not to. The problem arises when a temporary convergence of interests is mistaken for a durable strategic commitment. Kurdish diplomacy needs partnerships, but it also needs a clearer understanding of their limits.

I am perhaps most concerned by what these responses suggest about generations. The leaders and movements formed in the twentieth century emerged from extraordinary circumstances. They organized underground, fought wars, survived repression, and in some cases created political spaces where none had existed. That history deserves recognition. But younger Kurds are not living in the same political world. In Bashur especially, an entire generation has grown up under Kurdish rule. They cannot be expected to judge government only by comparing it with the repression, displacement, and violence experienced by their parents and grandparents. They also judge it by whether they can find work, receive fair treatment, participate politically,

build careers, and imagine a future without depending on a party.

If those expectations are repeatedly disappointed, the danger is not necessarily that young Kurds will cease to identify as Kurds. The more subtle danger is that Kurdish political achievements will lose some of their meaning for them. An institution remembered by one generation as the product of sacrifice can be experienced by another as a source of exclusion or frustration. Past suffering cannot indefinitely substitute for present performance. This is why the respondents' calls for intellectual and generational renewal matter so much. They did not restrict political contribution to joining parties. They spoke about research centers, civic organizations, education, technology, entrepreneurship, media, professional networks, and public service. That is an important shift. Kurdish society needs political parties, but it also needs spaces that parties do not control. It needs scholars who can challenge established assumptions, journalists who are not extensions of political organizations, professionals selected for competence, independent policy institutions, and younger people able to imagine service to Kurdistan without first choosing a partisan camp.

My own position, after reading these responses, is therefore mixed but not ambiguous. I remain confident in the persistence of Kurdish identity and in the legitimacy of Kurdish political aspirations. I am much less confident that the present structures of Kurdish politics are adequate to advance them. The Kurdish cause has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to survive. Survival, however, cannot remain its principal measure of success.

Renewal will not come from politicians alone. Those who control parties, governments, armed forces, and public resources carry the greatest responsibility, but they are not the only ones who shape Kurdish political life. Academics, intellectuals, journalists, professionals, civil society actors, entrepreneurs, the diaspora, and younger generations also determine what ideas enter public debate and what alternatives become possible. After all the struggles required to preserve the Kurdish cause, the challenge now is not simply to keep it alive. It is to build a political life capable of doing justice to what has already been achieved and to what Kurds still hope to achieve. Whether Kurdish politics can make that transition may be the more consequential question these responses leave behind.

U.S. Policy toward the Kurds

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

After living and working among the Kurds for many years, even co-authoring two books on the Kurds of Syria, the one issue that strikes me the most is that of U.S. policy. I cannot get beyond the cognitive dissonance that has cast a shadow over American officials everywhere they have appeared in Kurdistan over the years. They seek to promote strategic relationships with Kurdish partners on issues of key importance to U.S. national interests, and yet their government has no intention of abandoning its commitments to other regional allies, even when the two are in direct conflict with each other.

Some of the frustration that results is echoed in the responses of the participants in the survey that we conducted this spring, though the comments did not go into any great depth on the matter. That is because it is simply taken for granted among most Kurds that the United States has no strategic interest in building long-term relationships that might potentially bolster Kurdish chances for self-administration or even self-rule.

When the Syrian Kurds fought alongside U.S. forces against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at the famous battle for Kobani in 2014, some Kurdish officials [hoped](#) the U.S. would redraw borders and create a Kurdish corridor from the border town of Derik to the Mediterranean Sea, but in the end, the U.S. was only interested in the fight against ISIS and pushed the SDF towards Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour. Later, the U.S. Government distanced itself from the Iraqi Kurdish referendum on independence in September 2017. And over the following month, Iraqi Kurdish forces lost many of the territories they had gained during the war against ISIS, as Iran-backed militias advanced northward alongside the Iraqi army with its [U.S.-supplied tanks](#).

Let's make no mistake, it was the same Iraqi militias that were attacking the Kurds from the disputed territories back in 2017 without much protest from the U.S. Government that later attacked the U.S. Consulate and Coalition Air Base in Erbil during the war in 2026.

But the U.S. only partnered with the Kurds because they were among the few forces on the ground with the will to fight ISIS, and Washington [did not want](#) to commit large numbers of its own troops. I was on the ground covering many of those battles from non-Kurdish cities like Manbij, Raqqa and eventually Baghouz in Deir ez-Zour, which led to the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria, and you could see the writing on the wall that the Americans would eventually leave. The U.S. allowed Turkey to take the towns of Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn) and Tal Abyad on October 9, 2019, cutting up the continuous areas that the Kurds had controlled, leaving nothing but feelings of abandonment and betrayal.

More recently, since the fall of the Asad regime in December 2024, there has been nothing but shock among the Syrian Kurds that the United States would be willing to work with an avowedly jihadist movement instead of them. And on August 25, Kurdish Commander Mazloum Abdi announced the end of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), confirming he would instead become an advisor to Syrian President Ahmad al-Shara'a.

Other enemies of the United States have witnessed these patterns in U.S. policy and they have played it to their advantage. On September 8, 2018, Iran first tested its ballistic missiles on the Iranian Kurds living in exile in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, [killing](#) at least



Kurdish New Year's celebration in Dahuk, Iraq, with members of the 1st Armored Division and Multinational Division-North present, March 2008

14, using the Iranian Kurdish deaths as a message to the governments of the United States and Israel. The Islamic Republic has been lobbing missiles over the border at Iranian Kurdish encampments throughout the current war on Iran, while America and Israel dither over whether to encourage a Kurdish uprising. There were high hopes in March 2026 that the Iranian Kurds would regain some form of autonomy by [crossing](#) the border into Iran under cover of U.S. and Israeli airstrikes, with rumors that President Trump had even [spoken](#) with Iranian Kurdish leaders. But the U.S. [abandoned](#) the Kurdish offensive, reportedly under pressure from the Turkish Government, and dozens of Iranian Kurds have [lost](#) their lives in the meantime. It's reminiscent of President George H.W. Bush, who called for an Iraqi popular uprising in 1991 under cover of the American-led international coalition's No-Fly Zone, only to see that nascent revolt crushed by Saddam Hussein.

Today, the current agreement between Baghdad and Washington will see the [withdrawal](#) of Coalition troops from all of Iraq – including Kurdistan – by the

end of September 2026. Many Kurds are [afraid](#) of being left defenseless amidst reports that the United States has removed Patriot batteries from Erbil. Just recently, on August 17, Iranian-backed groups successfully [struck](#) Kurdistan Regional Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's office and the residence of the Kurdish intelligence director. And this is not the first time senior Kurdish figures have been targeted. One of the most terrible was that of Kurdish businessman Peshraw Dizayee and his family, who were [killed](#) in an Iranian missile strike on Erbil on January 15, 2024. I was able to [debunk](#) false Iranian media claims that Peshraw had links to Mossad, but only after Iranian outlets circulated fake photos purporting to show him alongside a Mossad agent.

The survey that we carried out this past spring was surely an effort to give voice to Kurdish concerns about the precariousness of the present and the uncertainty of the future. But it should also be seen as an attempt to speak to policymakers in Washington and remind them that the Kurds matter. Several respondents in our survey wanted to stress that while Kurds are often viewed as symbols of insurrection, revolt, separatism, and politics, they are ultimately human beings. All too human, in fact. And after all of these years, having seen so much of Kurdistan and its people, that is perhaps what has struck me most of all – the way in which outsiders can apply so many labels to a people they know so little about, while most Kurds are simply trying to survive and pass along a better life to their children. There has to be a space for that policy debate in Washington, separate and distinct from the other forms of diplomatic, military and economic activity with governments in the region that so often intercede in America's relations with the Kurds.

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