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End Times for the Caliphate?

By Patrick Cockburn
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The war in Syria and Iraq has produced two new de facto states in the last five years and enabled a third quasi-state greatly to expand its territory and power. The two new states, though unrecognised internationally, are stronger militarily and politically than most members of the UN. One is the Islamic State, which established its caliphate in eastern Syria and western Iraq in the summer of 2014 after capturing Mosul and defeating the Iraqi army. The second is Rojava, as the Syrian Kurds call the area they gained control of when the Syrian army largely withdrew in 2012, and which now, thanks to a series of victories over IS, stretches across northern Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), already highly autonomous, took advantage of IS's destruction of Baghdad's authority in northern Iraq to expand its territory by 40 per cent, taking over areas long disputed between itself and Baghdad, including the Kirkuk oilfields and some mixed Kurdish-Arab districts.

The question is whether these radical changes in the political geography of the Middle East will persist – or to what extent they will persist – when the present conflict is over. The Islamic State is likely to be destroyed eventually, such is the pressure from its disunited but numerous enemies, though its adherents will remain a force in Iraq, Syria and the rest of the Islamic world. The Kurds are in a stronger position, benefiting as they do from US support, but that support exists only because they provide some 120,000 ground troops which, in co-operation with the US-led coalition air forces, have proved an effective and politically acceptable counter to IS. The Kurds fear that this support will evaporate if and when IS is defeated and they will be left to the mercy of resurgent central governments in Iraq and Syria as well as Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

‘We don’t want to be used as cannon fodder to take Raqqa,’ a Syrian Kurdish leader in Rojava told me last year. I heard the same thing this month five hundred miles to the east, in KRG territory near Halabja on the Iranian border, from Muhammad Haji Mahmud, a veteran Peshmerga commander and general secretary of the Socialist Party, who led one thousand fighters to defend Kirkuk from IS in 2014. His son Atta was killed in the battle. He said he worried that ‘once Mosul is liberated and IS defeated, the Kurds won’t have the same value internationally.’ Without this support, the KRG would be unable to hold onto its disputed territories.

The rise of the Kurdish states isn’t welcomed by any country in the region, though some – including the governments in Baghdad and Damascus – have found the development to be temporarily in their interest and are in any case too weak to resist it. But Turkey has been appalled to find that the Syrian uprising of 2011, which it hoped would usher in an era of Turkish influence spreading across the Middle East, has instead produced a Kurdish state that controls half of the Syrian side of Turkey’s 550-mile southern border. Worse, the ruling party in Rojava is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which in all but name is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), against which Ankara has been fighting a guerrilla war since 1984. The PYD denies the link, but in every PYD office there is a picture on the wall of the PKK’s leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who has been in a Turkish prison since 1999. In the year since IS was finally defeated in the siege of the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani, Rojava has expanded territorially in every direction as its leaders repeatedly ignore Turkish threats of military action against them. Last June, the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) captured Tal Abyad, an important crossing point on the Turkish border north of Raqqa, allowing the PYD to link up two of its three main enclaves, around the cities of Kobani and Qamishli; it is now trying to reach the third enclave, further west, at Afrin. These swift advances are possible only because the Kurdish forces are operating under a US-led air umbrella that vastly multiplies their firepower. I was just east of Tal Abyad shortly before the final YPG attack and coalition aircraft roared continuously overhead. In both Syria and Iraq, the Kurds identify targets, call in air strikes and then act as a mopping-up force. Where IS stands and fights it suffers heavy casualties. In the siege of Kobani, which lasted for four and half months, 2200 IS fighters were killed, most of them by US air strikes.

Ankara has warned several times that if the Kurds move west towards Afrin the Turkish army will intervene. In particular, it stipulated that the YPG must not cross the Euphrates: this was a ‘red line’ for Turkey. But when in December the YPG sent its Arab proxy militia, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), across the Euphrates at the Tishrin Dam, the Turks did nothing – partly because the advance was supported at different points by both American and Russian air strikes on IS targets. Turkish objections have become increasingly frantic since the start of the year because the YPG and the Syrian army, though their active collaboration is unproven, have launched what amounts to a pincer movement on the most important supply lines of the IS and non-IS opposition, which run down a narrow corridor between the Turkish border and Aleppo, once Syria’s largest city. On 2 February the Syrian army, backed by Russian air strikes, cut the main road link towards Aleppo and a week later the SDF captured Menagh airbase from the al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front, which Turkey has been accused of covertly supporting in the past. On 14 February, Turkish artillery started firing shells at the forces that had captured the base and demanded that they evacuate it. The complex combination of militias, armies and ethnic

groups struggling to control this small but vital area north of Aleppo makes the fighting there confusing even by Syrian standards. But if the opposition is cut off from Turkey for long it will be seriously and perhaps fatally weakened. The Sunni states – notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – will have failed in their long campaign to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Turkey will be faced with the prospect of a hostile PKK-run statelet along its southern flank, making it much harder for it to quell the low-level but long-running PKK-led insurgency among its own 17 million Kurdish minority.

Erdoğan is said to have wanted Turkey to intervene militarily in Syria since May last year, but until now he has been restrained by his army commanders. They argued that Turkey would be entering a highly complicated war in which it would be opposed by the US, Russia, Iran, the Syrian army, the PYD and IS while its only allies would be Saudi Arabia and some of the Gulf monarchies. Entry into the Syrian war would certainly be a tremendous risk for Turkey, which, despite all its thunderous denunciations of the PYD and YPG as 'terrorists', has largely confined itself to small acts of sometimes vindictive retaliation. Ersin Umut Güler, a Turkish Kurd actor and director in Istanbul, was refused permission to bring home for burial the body of his brother Aziz, who had been killed fighting IS in Syria. Before he stepped on a landmine, Aziz had been with the YPG, but he was a Turkish citizen and belonged to a radical socialist Turkish party – not the PKK. 'It's like something out of *Antigone*,' Ersin said. His father had travelled to Syria and was refusing to return without the body, but the authorities weren't relenting.

The Turkish response to the rise of Rojava is belligerent in tone but ambivalent in practice. On one day a minister threatens a full-scale ground invasion and on the next another official rules it out or makes it conditional on US participation, which is unlikely. Turkey blamed a car bomb in Ankara that killed 28 people on 17 February on the YPG, which must increase the chances of intervention, but in the recent past Turkish actions have been disjointed and counterproductive. When on 24 November a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian bomber in what appears to have been a carefully planned attack, the predictable result was that Russia sent sophisticated fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft missile systems to establish air supremacy over northern Syria. This means that if Turkey were to launch a ground invasion, it would have to do so without air cover and its troops would be exposed to bombing by Russian and Syrian planes. Many Kurdish political leaders argue that a Turkish military invasion is unlikely: Fuad Hussein, the KRG's president's chief of staff, told me in Erbil last month that 'if Turkey was going to intervene then it would have done so before shooting down the Russian jet' – though this assumes, of course, that Turkey knows how to act in its own best interests. He argued that the conflict would be decided by two factors: who is winning on the battlefield and the co-operation between the US and Russia. 'If the crisis is to be solved,' he said, 'it will be solved by agreement between the superpowers' – and in the Middle East at least Russia has regained superpower status. A new loose alliance between the US and Russia, though interrupted by bouts of Cold War-style rivalry, produced an agreement in Munich on 12 February for aid to be delivered to besieged Syrian towns and cities and a 'cessation of hostilities' to be followed by a more formal ceasefire. A de-escalation of the crisis will be difficult to orchestrate, but the fact that the US and Russia are co-chairing a taskforce overseeing it shows the extent to which they are displacing local and regional powers as the decision-makers in Syria.

For the Kurds in Rojava and KRG territory this is a testing moment: if the war ends their newly won power could quickly slip away. They are, after all, only small states – the KRG has a population of about six million and Rojava 2.2 million – surrounded by much larger ones. And their economies are barely floating wrecks. Rojava is well organised but blockaded on all sides and unable to sell much of its oil. Seventy per cent of the buildings in Kobani were pulverised by US bombing. People have fled from cities like Hasaka that are close to the frontline. The KRG's economic problems are grave and probably insoluble unless there is an unexpected rise in the price of oil. Three years ago, it advertised itself as 'the new Dubai', a trading hub and oil state with revenues sufficient to make it independent of Baghdad. When the oil boom peaked in 2013, the newly built luxury hotels in Erbil were packed with foreign trade delegations and businessmen. Today the hotels and malls are empty and Iraqi Kurdistan is full of half-built hotels and apartment buildings. The end of the KRG boom has been a devastating shock for the population, many of whom are trying to migrate to Western Europe. There are frequent memorial prayers in mosques for those who have drowned in the Aegean crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands. The state's oil revenues now stand at about $400 million a month; expenditure is $1.1 billion, so few of the 740,000 government employees are being paid. In desperation, the government has seized money from the banks. 'My mother went to her bank where she thought she had $20,000,' Nazdar Ibrahim, an economist at Salahaddin University in Erbil, told me. 'They said: "We don't have your money because the government has taken it." Nobody is putting money in the banks and it is destroying the banking system.'

The KRG promoted itself as a 'different Iraq', and so, in some respects, it is: it's much safer to live in than Baghdad or Basra. Though Mosul isn't far away, there have been few bomb attacks or kidnappings in Iraqi Kurdistan compared to elsewhere in the country. But the KRG is an oil state that depends wholly on oil revenues. The region produces almost nothing else: even the vegetables in the markets are imported from Turkey and Iran and prices are high. Nazdar Ibrahim said that clothes she could buy in Turkey for $10 cost three times as much at home; Iraqi Kurdistan, she suggested, was as expensive to live in as Norway or Switzerland. The KRG's president, Massoud Barzani, has declared he will hold a referendum on Kurdish independence, but this is not an attractive option at a time of general economic ruin. Asos Hardi, the editor of a newspaper in Sulaymaniyah, says protests are spreading and in any case 'even at the height of the boom there was popular anger at the clientism and corruption.' The Iraqi Kurdish state – far from becoming more independent – is being forced to look to outside powers, including Baghdad, to save it from further economic collapse.

Similar things are happening elsewhere in the region: people who have been smuggled out of Mosul say that the caliphate is buckling under military and economic pressure. Its enemies have captured Sinjar, Ramadi and Tikrit in Iraq and the YPG and the Syrian army are driving it back in Syria and are closing in on Raqqa. The ground forces attacking IS – the YPG, the Syrian army, Iraqi armed forces and Peshmerga – are all short of manpower (in the struggle for Ramadi the Iraqi military assault force numbered only 500 men), but they can call in devastating air strikes on any IS position. Since it was defeated at Kobani, IS has avoided set-piece battles and has not fought to the last man to defend any of its cities, though it has considered doing so in Raqqa and Mosul. The Pentagon, the Iraqi government and the Kurds exaggerate the extent of their victories over IS, but it is taking heavy losses and is isolated from the outside world with the loss of its last link to Turkey. The administrative and economic infrastructure of the caliphate

is beginning to break under the strain of bombing and blockade. This is the impression given by people who left Mosul in early February and took refuge in Rojava.

Their journey wasn't easy, since IS prohibits people from leaving the caliphate – it doesn't want a mass exodus. Those who have got out report that IS is becoming more violent in enforcing fatwas and religious regulations. Ahmad, a 35-year-old trader from the al-Zuhour district of Mosul, where he owns a small shop, reported that 'if somebody is caught who has shaved off his beard, he is given thirty lashes, while last year they would just arrest him for a few hours.' The treatment of women in particular has got worse: 'IS insists on women wearing veils, socks, gloves and loose or baggy clothes and, if she does not, the man with her will be lashed.' Ahmad also said that living conditions have deteriorated sharply and the actions of IS officials become more arbitrary: 'They take food without paying and confiscated much of my stock under the pretence of supporting the Islamic State militiamen. Everything is expensive and the stores are half-empty. The markets were crowded a year ago, but not for the last ten months because so many people have fled and those that have stayed are unemployed.' There has been no mains electricity for seven months and everybody depends on private generators which run on locally refined fuel. This is available everywhere, but is expensive and of such poor quality that it works only for generators and not for cars – and the generators often break down. There is a shortage of drinking water. 'Every ten days, we have water for two hours,' Ahmad said. 'The water we get from the tap is not clean, but we have to drink it.' There is no mobile phone network and the internet is available only in internet cafés that are closely monitored by the authorities for sedition. There are signs of growing criminality and corruption, though this may mainly be evidence that IS is in desperate need of money. When Ahmad decided to flee he contacted one of many smugglers operating in the area between Mosul and the Syrian frontier. He said the cost for each individual smuggled into Rojava is between $400 and $500. 'Many of the smugglers are IS men,' he said, but he didn't know whether the organisation's leaders knew what was happening. They certainly know that there are increasing complaints about living conditions because they have cited a hadith, a saying of the Prophet, against such complaints. Those who violate the hadith are arrested and sent for re-education. Ahmad's conclusion: 'Dictators become very violent when they sense that their end is close.'

How accurate is Ahmad's prediction that the caliphate is entering its final days? It is certainly weakening, but this is largely because the war has been internationalised since 2014 by US and Russian military intervention. Local and regional powers count for less than they did. The Iraqi and Syrian armies, the YPG and the Peshmerga can win victories over IS thanks to close and massive air support. They can defeat it in battle and can probably take the cities it still rules, but none of them will be able fully to achieve their war aims without the continued backing of a great power. Once the caliphate is gone, however, the central governments in Baghdad and Damascus may grow stronger again. The Kurds wonder if they will then be at risk of losing all the gains they have made in the war against Islamic State.