

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Kurdish Aspirations and the Interests of the UK, HC 518

Tuesday 21 November 2017

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Ms Nusrat Ghani; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell; Royston Smith; Nadhim Zahawi.

Questions 1-46

Witnesses

[I](#): Dr Nazand Begikhani, Senior Research Fellow, Bristol University, and Professor Mohammed Ihsan, Senior Research Fellow, King's College London, and a former Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

[II](#): Dr Zeynep Kaya, Research Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science, and Guney Yildiz, Visiting Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Nazand Begikhani and Professor Mohammed Ihsan.

Chair: Dr Begikhani and Professor Ihsan, thank you for taking the time to speak with us this afternoon. You are both extremely welcome. As you know, we have a short time. We shall try to keep our questions short and I would be grateful if you could likewise keep your answers short. You may find that we are coming on to a subject you are seeking to answer.

Q1 **Ms Ghani:** Professor Ihsan, what makes the Kurds politically or culturally distinctive in the Middle East?

Professor Ihsan: A lot of things make the Kurds distinctive from other nations in the Middle East. Genetically, they are Indo-European or of European background. They speak a different language. They have a multi-religious culture, not related to just one sect or one religion: there are Christian Kurds, Jewish Kurds, Muslim Kurds, Yazidi Kurds, and Kaka'i Kurds, who believe in different things.

Their language is distinctive. As an expert in that part of the world, I think Kurds have forward-looking vision, not like some other nations in the area that are digging up their past and living in their past. I find them to be life lovers and freedom lovers, culturally.

Even politically, they are different from others. They have multi-party systems. From 1991 to now, they have proved that they are not a threat to any regional power. They have managed to hold all of their communities together after the ISIS crisis, and what happened in the civil war in Iraq between Shi'a and Sunnis. That was the basis for terrorism and political terrorism in Kurdistan.

Q2 **Ms Ghani:** When you say that they are genetically different, does that suppose that most Kurds marry other Kurds?

Professor Ihsan: Not marry other Kurds. In the Middle East, nations—for example Arabs think that they are all descended from Yemen, Kurds think different things. As an expert in national identity, for me, it is nationalism of an imagined community¹. The Kurds think they are different from others. They have been struggling for their freedom from the beginning of the 20th century until now. This is why I think they are freedom lovers, compared with others.

They have a forward-looking vision. After 2003, despite everything that was going on in Iraq with the liberation—or as some might call it, occupation—the majority of Iraqis started to re-dig their past: they wanted to rediscover their history, going back 1,400 years. But the Kurds, since 1991, were always looking forward, to be more developed: instead

¹ Note from witness: should read 'nationalism means an imagined community'



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of looking to Tehran, Qom, and Ankara, they were looking at London, Paris, DC—a different, liberal point of view.

- Q3 **Ms Ghani:** When Daesh arrived on the scene, did the Kurds feel a particular threat because of their distinctive heritage and cultural background—a threat that had not been felt with other regimes that have been violent towards the Kurds?

Professor Ihsan: They have been targeted by different regimes, mainly in Iraq, since—

- Q4 **Ms Ghani:** But is there something about Daesh's attitude that was different from previous threats?

Professor Ihsan: Their main crime was that they were Kurds and they were willing to preserve their identity, their culture. That is the main reason, more than other things in their history. This is why they have been persecuted by different Iraqi regimes and experienced genocide.

Even they acknowledged the crimes they have committed against Kurds². Look at what happened to Feyli Kurds in 1979, to Barzani Kurds in 1983, the Anfal campaign in 1986 to 1987, the crimes during the uprising—even what is going on today, after 16 October. Consider what is going on in Tuz Khamatu today, after the crisis of 16 October. If you look at it as an expert in genocide, you know you are not going to stop it: it is going to lead to another genocide in Iraq against Kurds.

- Q5 **Ms Ghani:** Dr Begikhani, one of the distinctive features of Kurdish communities is their attitude towards women. It is reported that 10,000 women in the YPJ—the Women's Protection Units—are actively engaged in defeating Daesh. It is very rare for women to be that liberated in that region. Is there anything else that you could advise us on? Could you shed more light on that?

Dr Begikhani: I would like to add to what my colleague said. There are two main characteristics of the Kurds that make them really distinctive in the region. They are one of the oldest ethnic groups in Mesopotamia. They have lived in that territory for thousands and thousands of years. The identity of the Kurds is not based on religion. This is a very distinctive feature of the Kurds. Their identity is based on culture and cultural elements, and that has made them open, tolerant and moderate, ready to embrace secularism and to integrate international human rights conventions, as well as gender equality. That is a very strong characteristic of the Kurds.

The other one is their strong sense of being stateless. Their stateless status makes them really distinctive. They are bitterly aware that they have been denied the right to statehood and to self-rule. They have their own culture, their own language, their collective memory, strong bonds of

² Note from Witness: should read 'The Iraqi Government has acknowledged the crimes committed against Kurds by different regimes'



violent religious and ethnic ideologies that practise politics of elimination and mass murder, including genocide under Saddam Hussein. That has made the Kurds distinctive in terms of resistance. They have resisted.

They have resisted different politics in the region practised against them. They have resisted politics of denial, politics of physical elimination, identity discrimination and extreme violence in terms of the genocide practised under Saddam Hussein. This resistance is not confined only to men; women inside Kurdish society have very strong characters, despite the fact that the society is very traditional and patriarchal. Women have always been considered important actors in terms of fighting against hostility and enemies, and what we have seen in recent years, especially in the fight against ISIS, is what you have just mentioned. Yes, women in Syria, but also in Iraq, have been at the front of the battle against jihadists in the Middle East—the strongest force really, fighting against jihadists.

- Q6 **Mike Gapes:** Dr Begikhani, you said that there was cultural commonality. Does that include language? I remember that when I went to a refugee camp near Dohuk in Iraq in 2013, the Syrian Kurdish refugees there had to find Arabic-speaking teachers for the children, because under the Assad regime they had been taught in the Arabic language. Is there a commonality of linguistics connections or has that changed? When you talk about culture, do you mean language as well?

Dr Begikhani: Yes, definitely. Language is a very strong aspect of culture, and Kurds have their own language. Unfortunately, the geographical division has created other boundaries among the Kurds. It has created linguistic boundaries, cultural boundaries and organisational and political boundaries. That has led to cleavages among the Kurds. You have the Kurds of Turkey, who are not allowed to speak their language in public spaces, so they speak their own dialect. The Kurds of Iraq—I am British, but I am of Kurdish origin, and I have been denied the right to study in Kurdish. When you have all these boundaries, you cannot have a standardised language. That is what has happened, and experience is telling us exactly that. When you have all these divisions and boundaries, you cannot practise your own language, and that is one of the aspects of genocide. The Kurds of Turkey have been subjected to another form of genocide, of identity and culture. Their identity has been denied.

- Q7 **Ann Clwyd:** Can you give us some comparisons with how Kurds are treated in some of the countries that have large populations of Kurds, such as Turkey and Iran? How are they treated in those countries?

Dr Begikhani: In all parts of Kurdistan, Kurds have experienced persecution and violent, chauvinistic ideologies. Their human rights and their civil and political rights have been denied, but each part of Kurdistan carries its own specificities. During the Ba'ath regime, Kurds in Iraq lived for more than 40 years under a dictatorship. They experienced different forms of ideological and political violence, including, as I mentioned earlier, the Anfal genocide. They resisted in their own ways. They organised themselves in their own ways in response to the politics of that



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state. In Turkey, the Kurds have tried to organise themselves differently. In all parts of Kurdistan—Syria is probably an exception in that sense—Kurds have tried to struggle. They adopted armed struggle to resist the different forms of violence, discrimination and persecution.

Q8 Ann Clwyd: When you are talking about Kurdistan, are you talking about Iraqi Kurdistan? What are you talking about?

Dr Begikhani: The Kurds who adopted armed struggle for almost a century in different parts of Kurdistan have changed their strategies. In different parts of Kurdistan, they seek to establish their rights—their civil, political, cultural rights—through diplomatic channels. I am talking about Kurds in general. When I talk about Iraqi Kurdistan, I mention Iraqi Kurds. I talk about Turkish Kurds and so on.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the referendum on 25 September was part of this shift in strategy that the Kurds have tried to adopt in recent years. Through that channel, they wanted to sort out their outstanding disagreements with Baghdad peacefully and establish a confederal model of governance in Iraq with greater autonomy.

In Turkey, we have seen that the Kurds are still fighting and it is very unfortunate that the peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK has collapsed since 2015. That led to another era of violence, but even the PKK is seeking diplomatic channels to resolve the problem of the Kurds in Turkey.

In Iran it is the same. In Iran, Kurds are not only subjected to political persecution but also to religious persecution, because the majority of the Kurds are Sunni, and it is a Shi'a regime in Iran. They have also adopted armed struggle but they change their policies.

So in all parts of Kurdistan nowadays, the Kurds are convinced that they should resolve their problems and establish their human, civil and political rights through diplomatic channels.

Q9 Ms Ghani: The aspirations of the YPG women are helping us defeat Daesh. What recognition are they hoping for?

Dr Begikhani: I have talked to some of these women during my field work in the Middle East. They have a strong conviction and great determination. When they joined the armed struggle, it was for them a kind of liberation from patriarchal norms and practices. This form of struggle and resistance was part of their liberation as women. I interviewed many of them: while they are fighting against the jihadis, almost all of them reiterated to me that there is no way to go back and be constrained within the family and patriarchal norms. Their aims are also to stay active actors and no longer be subjected as women.

Q10 Ms Ghani: I should have made the question clearer. What recognition are they expecting from the international community for their role in defeating Daesh?



Dr Begikhani: Women, as well as their male colleagues, would like to receive international support. But—especially after what happened in the Iraqi Kurdistan region after the attack of the Iraqi army on Kirkuk and its surrounding areas, and after Iraqi Kurdistan was taken as hostage by Haider al-Abadi and his patron Iran—Syrian Kurds are drawing lessons, and they are afraid to receive the same kind of treatment once Daesh is defeated. But all Kurds seek support, because we should not forget that Kurds in general, in all parts of Kurdistan, are suffering from a very difficult geopolitical constraint. This geopolitical constraint is making them vulnerable to regional powers, and they have been instrumentalised. They seek international support that is based on human rights and democratic values and principles that you and the UK Government believe in, not a support that is pragmatic, short-term and based on the profit and interests of the different western powers.

- Q11 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Professor Ihsan, Dr Begikhani, welcome. Before I move on I would like to go back to the question of language and a challenge facing Kurds in Iraq. Am I right in saying that Kurds in the KRG region who are under 40 years old today do not speak Arabic, or very little Arabic, so there is a demographic challenge here, as well as a generational issue?

Professor Ihsan: Yes, true, because Kurds who were born in 1991 are 26 years old now. The majority of them cannot speak Arabic, because they have no interaction. Baghdad was so isolated during Saddam Hussein's time, even after 2003 until now they were fighting each other. Kurdistan was a refuge for all educated, wealthy professional Iraqis. They started to know what Iraq means for them. This is why I agree with you that it is a linguistic challenge for Kurds, despite all the social connections between us. Now with the embargo and restriction of flights to Kurdistan, a lot of people are reluctant to go through Baghdad because they cannot speak the language or Baghdad does not mean a lot of things to them³, because they have been liberated, living their own lives since 1991. Immediately, some people wake up and impose their wills or target them. It is not acceptable for the majority⁴.

- Q12 **Nadhim Zahawi:** We talked a lot about the regional neighbours, the powers. Of course, many of them if they were here would say the challenge to them was Kurdish aspirations which challenge their sovereignty. I would like to take you slightly further away to the rest of the world, to the international community. Which countries would you say have been the main supporters of Kurdish aspirations, if you can elaborate? Going back to what Dr Begikhani described very aptly as pragmatic short-term relationships, can you enlighten us as to which countries you feel have taken a positive role in the international community and which countries you feel have taken a negative role?

³ Note from witness: should read 'does not mean anything to them'

⁴ Note from witness: should read 'It is not acceptable for the majority of the Kurds'



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Professor Ihsan: I will answer you directly. I remember in 1991, I was working for 40 Brigade Royal Marines, when they first created a safe haven. I was a liaison officer with them. I think the idea of what is going on in Kurdistan today started from the UK. A safe haven, before 688, if you remember, if you go back—

Q13 **Nadhim Zahawi:** That is article 688, for the Committee, the Security Council resolution.

Professor Ihsan: The idea for the Security Council resolution started in the UK. The safe haven was a British initiative in John Major's time to bring Kurds from the mountains to a safe area around Dohuk and Zakho. Then international communities started to push more and came out with Security Council resolution 688, then it moved to the no-fly zone, then the Kurds started to go their own way for elections. I think that means it started here, but what is going on today and the silence since 16 October, mainly from the UK Government and Foreign Office, is shocking for the majority of us and we still do not understand what is going on. You were the first group who created and protected Kurdistan. Today, we know each cannot have their own interests. Kurds are asking to have a political role⁵ so that we can sort out our issues politically, peacefully and not with threat or aggression or the language that is coming from Baghdad. That is something strange for us.

Regarding the regional power, Kurds have proved since 1991 until now that we are not a threat⁶. I agree that Kurdish nationalism is fragmented. We are brothers, but we are not partners in politics. We are brothers. We sympathise with Kurds in Turkey and Iran⁷. The base of today's co-operation among regional powers against Kurdistan is not at its place. It is going to return Kurds back to before the 1970s. In my generation, if somebody was talking about southern Kurdistan, it was an insult for me. We were thinking about big Kurdistan. The new generation thinks about a piece of Kurdistan⁸. It is more encouraging for the regional or international community to support the Kurds of Iraq, to preserve their identity and to keep them from attacks. Okay? That would be more helpful, even for regional powers.

We are proof that since 1991, we were a key of settlement, not a key of disturbance for Turkey or Iran—not like they acted against Kurds since 16 October.

Dr Begikhani: The UK has a long history of engagement with Iraq; people ~~sometimes just make~~ jokes, saying that the UK is the midwife of the state

⁵ Note from witness: should read 'Kurds are asking for a political role for the UK'

⁶ Note from witness: should read 'not a threat to anybody'

⁷ Note from witness: should read 'We sympathise with Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Syria'

⁸ Note from witness: should read 'The new generation thinks about their own piece of Kurdistan'



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of Iraq. The UK has had many deals and agreements with the Kurdistan region since 1991, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein. There is also a formal military agreement in the fight against Daesh. There have been cultural, educational and trade deals between the UK and the Kurdistan region, and Kurdistan has been a very strong ally of the UK.

However, it is being felt really as a disappointment—I have done some fieldwork on this—by people in Kurdistan when they saw that the UK just played the role of a bystander and did not engage with preventing the Iraqi army attack on the Kurdistan region. Also, the UK did not involve itself in stopping Iran in strengthening its bases, because the Iraqi army would never have been able to do what it has done without the support of the Hashd al-Shaabi and the Iranian-backed militia groups.

The UK should realise that this is going to lead to disaster, because the Kurds in Iraq now feel that they are taken as hostages by al-Abadi and by Iran. If we leave Iran to move further and to strengthen further its bases in Kurdistan and it weakens further the KRG, that will lead to further violence and religious and ethnic confrontation, not only in Iraq but in the whole Middle East, because we are talking here about Iran and also about his men in the Middle East, including al-Abadi, Nasrallah and Assad.

The role of the UK, and the fact that the UK abandoned the Kurds recently in their crisis, has been felt with bitterness and there is a strong feeling among the Kurds that the UK has never been an important support. And what BP has done just after the attack on Kirkuk is very strongly felt among the Kurds in Iraq and across the region.

- Q14 **Nadhim Zahawi:** Let me ask the big question: does independence offer the best protection for the Kurds and Kurdish aspirations in Iraq, or are there any other ways of cohabiting or coexisting within the boundaries of Iraq? When you answer that question, can you also address the question of whether Kurdish movements elsewhere in the region seek independence? I understand that in Syria, they are looking only for autonomy within a Syrian state. If you could address those two points, I would be very grateful.

Dr Begikhani: All parts of Kurdistan dream of freedom, peace, respect and the recognition of their civil, political and cultural rights. That is the dream of all the Kurds, but they have learned from history to be pragmatic and to change their strategies, as I mentioned earlier. The idea of having a pan-Kurd independent state is no longer there. Kurds in Turkey have their own political agenda for achieving and establishing their rights. Iraqi Kurds have their own agenda, and Iranians the same. We see that, in Rojava in Syria, they have their own agenda. Having a big, independent Kurdistan is no longer on the Kurdish agenda.

Professor Ihsan: In each part of Kurdistan they have different struggles with different Governments, based on the Kurds' age, education, wealth

and social structure. The idea of pan-Kurdishness, which goes back to the '60s, no longer exists.

If Iraq were democratic and federal and implemented its constitution, the Kurds of Iraq would never, ever think of going for independence or for a referendum. I would like to make the referendum clear⁹ for the Committee, because it is still not clear for a lot of people¹⁰. A lot of people think that the referendum was the source of the current crisis. I spent seven years of my life in Baghdad in charge of the KRG office there. I was among Iraqis who fought against Saddam Hussein, with the majority of the people. Ann Clwyd was supporting INC all the time, when we were knocking on doors and getting support. We were all working hard to build a federal, democratic, pluralistic, stable Iraq. We were working to create for Iraqis in Iraq, not as proxies for Iran¹¹, and implement the constitution.

Between 2005 and 2011, they never, ever implemented the constitution. They looked at the constitution like a candy store: they picked out things that interested them. That is why the Kurds ended up with no option but to go for a referendum and listen to the people¹². The referendum was not a crime. Referendums are what people like, but the reaction of the international community and the Iraqi Government surprised all of us. We have all spent all our lives struggling for freedom, human rights, dignity, respect and equality. We found out that even Kurds in Iraq have no right to say, "I want this."

Q15 Ann Clwyd: It has been a great disappointment for many of us that the Kurdish Parliament, which was democratically elected, has not met for two years.

Professor Ihsan: I totally agree with you. That was not a good move. Like all other Middle Eastern countries and all other democracies, we have made our own mistakes. I agree with you, and I respect your point of view. It was not right. That is why the KRG and the Kurdistan region should reorganise their home and fix their internal problems in order to get more respect from the international community.

Andrew Rosindell: Some of my points have already been made. You feel that the UK has not stood by Kurdistan and has not been the friend to Kurdistan that you hoped it would be. That is a great shame, because I know that Kurdistan has been a huge ally, particularly over the recent issues with ISIS. What would you like the UK to do? How would you like our policies and our approach to Kurdistan to change? If the Foreign Secretary were sitting here today, what would you say to him about what British policy should be towards Kurdistan?

⁹ Note from witness: should read 'make the issue of the referendum clear'

¹⁰ Note from witness: should read 'still not clear to a lot of people here in the UK'

¹¹ Note from witness: should read 'We were working to create Iraqis in Iraq (with respect to the ethnic and religious backgrounds), not as proxies for Iran'

¹² Note from witness: should read 'listen to their own people'



Dr Begikhani: There are many things that the UK can do. To summarise, people are disappointed with the UK because they think that the UK did not respect the desire of the people. They went to express their desire through the ballot, and that was not respected. The UK could do a lot, including mobilising United Nations members, as well as NATO members, to mediate effectively between Erbil and Baghdad to sort out the outstanding problems.

Secondly, the UK can help, with the United Nations, to facilitate the return of more than 2 million displaced people who live in Kurdistan. That humanitarian crisis has loosened the already loose economy and public sectors in the Kurdistan region.

Q16 **Andrew Rosindell:** You mean Yazidis? Are there any other groups you are talking about?

Dr Begikhani: There are more than 2 million displaced people—internally displaced persons, but also refugees.

Q17 **Andrew Rosindell:** Where are they all from?

Dr Begikhani: You have people who fled Syria, Turkey, Iran—

Q18 **Andrew Rosindell:** Kurds from those regions?

Dr Begikhani: Not only Kurds—there are also Arabs, Turks, and Persians who fled the persecution of the Iranian regime. You have Shabaks, Kaka'is, Yazidis, Christians, and Sunnis from southern and central Iraq who fled discrimination and persecution by the Shi'a regime, especially under Maliki. Recently, after the attack on Kirkuk, 60,000 displaced people arrived in the Kurdistan region. There is a huge humanitarian crisis, which has put a lot of constraints on the economy and public services in the Kurdistan region. The UK can engage with the United Nations to facilitate the return of those displaced people.

The other thing that the UK should do is help to engage with Baghdad and intervene effectively so that Baghdad does not take the Kurds hostage and leave in place the air blockade¹³, which has isolated the Kurdistan region and contributed to the dysfunction of the already loose political and economic system on the ground.

Professor Ihsan: The UK should play a better political role between Baghdad and Erbil. We need an international broker, because there is no trust, and those in Baghdad think they are the winner and that there are no such negotiations. Their excuse is that they are implementing the constitution, which is totally untrue. They are implementing corruption and power against Kurds and Kurdistan.

My other recommendation, if I have the right to suggest it, would be that it is the correct time for the UK Foreign Office, or the Committee, to send a truth-finding mission group to see what crimes have been committed in Taza Khurmatu and Kirkuk, which were not less than the crimes

¹³ Note from witness: should read as 'lift the air blockade'



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committed during Saddam Hussein's time. I remember in 1987 when Congress sent a truth-finding committee to Iraq before Anfal. If they had listened to the findings at that time, we had chances to prevent Anfal. Now the UK Government or Parliament can send a truth-finding committee to find the truth.

I think crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed against Kurds. I have all the data. I can give you names and pictures and everything. The best way is to send a committee there to find out the truth of what is going on and then to evaluate the future plan. If something like that does not happen, chances for the committing of new genocides exist. The basic role for the UK is to encourage a political role for both sides. They should sit down together and negotiate.

Dr Begikhani: One last point to add: the UK should not be shy—it should just take a public stance on stopping Baghdad from having a new system of strongman governance, which would lead to disaster, as recent history reminds us.

- Q19 **Andrew Rosindell:** There was a referendum in Catalonia recently. We had a referendum in Scotland two or three years ago. You have now had a referendum in Kurdistan. Why do you think the British Government appear to have a different approach to these referendums? Self-determination does not seem to apply to some countries as it does to others. Why do you think that is?

Professor Ihsan: If Iraq were doing the same with Kurdistan as the way the British Government dealt with Scotland, I would back Baghdad and respect it to the end. Before the referendum, no one from Baghdad went to Kurdistan to talk to Kurds and to ask, "Why do you want to go for a referendum?" I was here and remember when the Scottish people went for a referendum; everybody from London went to Glasgow. They were talking to everybody and showing them that it was better for them to be part of the UK and not to go their own way. No one in Baghdad dealt with the issue in that way.

Even in Catalonia, it is a totally different story. The constitution in Catalonia does not give them the right. In Iraq, the constitution does not say "Go for a referendum or don't go for a referendum". The Iraqi high court made a statement in less than 24 hours, which was that it approved it as a political tool in the hands of the Government. That is another shameful thing for the new Iraq and its new democratic processes. If the Iraqi Government dealt with the Kurdish referendum in the way that the British did, I would be more happy.

Dr Begikhani: The referendum is an expression of democracy. What lacks in this region is democracy and human rights. The UK can contribute to developing a culture of human rights and democracy in Iraq and the whole Middle East. That should be done through stopping Iran from strengthening its forces further.

- Q20 **Ian Austin:** It is important to note that the KRG has said that it wants



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calm dialogue and to proceed on that basis. What do you think is the barrier to negotiation between Erbil and Baghdad?

Professor Ihsan: Baghdad is not willing to start the negotiation process. Why? Based on my analysis, it is really because the current Prime Minister in Iraq wants to be portrayed as a hero, because an election is coming. I think some foreign countries support having a hero in Baghdad in order that the other Shi'a factions cannot win the election. They think that the current Prime Minister is going to stop Iran's further involvement. I personally think, no way. The current Prime Minister in Iraq does not have that character, and Iraqi society is not like in Saddam Hussein's time any more. Iran is so concentrated in Iraqi society, so in charge—more than anyone can predict. That is why everyone thought that the Kurds could be victims. Baghdad still thinks there is a big no to negotiating¹⁴, because the state always looks for an enemy and a victim. They think the best they can do is put Kurds under different banners, because memory in Iraq can unfortunately be measured by kilobytes, not gigabytes. History for them—they don't take lessons from history.

- Q21 **Ian Austin:** Looking more broadly at the region, do you think it is possible for Kurdish movements elsewhere to achieve their aspirations through negotiation, or are there places where you see violence occurring in the future?

Professor Ihsan: In Syria there are chances for negotiations. After what went on in Iraq, as my colleague mentioned, they started to engage in negotiations with the regime, with Saddam¹⁵, because they did not want to be "betrayed"—I do not think of it as being betrayed—and they thought they could be sold by the Americans at any minute. That is why there was a chance for them to negotiate with the regime. They will never, ever go back to the pre-2011 Syria.

With the current regime in Turkey, and even with the current regime in Iran, it is hopeless to negotiate.

Chair: Thank you both very much indeed for your time. It is extremely kind of you to make time for us and to give such full and clear answers to our questions.

Examination of witnesses

¹⁴ Note from witness: should read 'Baghdad still thinks that they are the winner and are not ready to negotiate'

¹⁵ Note from witness: should read 'Assad'

Witnesses: Dr Zeynep Kaya and Guney Yildiz.

Chair: Dr Kaya and Mr Yildiz, thank you very much indeed for coming. Can we pick it straight up? Royston, you were going to come in.

Q22 Royston Smith: Thank you for coming to us today. It is very helpful for us to have a good understanding of everyone's position. Is there a fundamental conflict between Kurdish aspirations and the national sovereignty of other Middle Eastern states?

Dr Kaya: Yes, depending on which state you are looking at. Self-determination and demands for separation, and state sovereignty, are two principles that have always been in conflict. Kurdish aspirations, in some contexts and in some historical periods, have been a challenge to the sovereignty of the states. One example could be that in the initial years the PKK wanted independence and separation from Turkey, but then they changed their goals and now they aim for increased Kurdish rights and increased democratisation within the boundaries of Turkey. So during the initial stages, yes, their demands were a threat to the sovereignty of Turkey.

I think we are talking about two types of threat. One of the threats is that demands for self-determination might have implications for the boundaries of the state, and the other is that they might have implications for internal sovereignty structures, taking power from the central Government and decentralising it to certain regions where Kurds are aiming for more administrative or political power. In the most recent process in Turkey, for instance, the PKK's goal of democratic confederalism implies not a change of boundaries in the Middle East, where Kurds live, but demands for increased decentralisation and increased administrative power for those areas, not only for Kurds but for other regions as well. In that sense, that type of demand has implications for the sovereign power of a state within its own boundaries. Being central states, Iraq, Turkey, Syria in the past and Iran do not like that.

Q23 Chair: What are the borders of the Kurdish areas, as you see them?

Dr Kaya: That is a really good question. I do not think that the borders of Kurdistan are clear. It is a territory that has been defined in historical texts as being mainly around the Zagros mountains. That was a small area in the Iranian area, but the official or nationalist definition of Kurdistan has constantly expanded over time. If you are asking that question from the perspective of where Kurds live in the Middle East, I would say that the highest Kurdish population density is in south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-east and parts of north-west Syria, and western Kurdistan. But Kurds live in all parts of those countries; Istanbul is hugely populated by Kurds, for instance.

Q24 Ms Ghani: We have talked about where Kurds live, but what is their population?

Dr Kaya: Again, there are no censuses based on linguistic, ethnic or cultural identity in those countries, except in the Kurdistan region in Iraq. Estimates vary; I would say that the average estimate is 30 million



Kurdish people in the Middle East. The highest number are in Turkey, and I think the second-highest is in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq.

Guney Yildiz: Many experts put the number between 25 million and 40 million—a very broad range—but I think we can safely assume that at least 30 million Kurds live in the region.

- Q25 **Ms Ghani:** We have talked about how one of the things that links all Kurds is their shared cultural identity, but we are talking about people being displaced and living between borders. What differences exist? If you find a Kurdish family from one region meeting a Kurdish family from another region, I am a bit worried that we might be assuming that they will agree 100% on everything—they won't. Could you share what some of those differences might be? That would also help us to understand how different their aspirations are.

Dr Kaya: There are cultural divisions. Linguistic, religious, localised culture varies, even between nation states presumed to have a unified identity. There are separate localised cultural practices among Kurds in the Middle East in general. Linguistically, they have multiple dialects; they also have more localised dialectal divisions. Culturally, Kurds associate themselves with the idea of Kurdish identity, but having lived in different states with different political, national and institutional cultures, they have adopted different political and cultural identities in each country.

There is a lot of discussion about culture and language, but I do not think the multiplicity of cultural and linguistic identities is an impediment to the formation of something unified, because no nation in history has always had a unified identity; even states with national identities have multiple cultural practices. What mainly divides Kurds is the political divisions between them, which have a long history. Talking about how Kurds are divided carries the implication that Kurds were united at some point in the past and are now divided by different states in the Middle East. They were never a united nation—they never had a state—but a sense of identity has historically existed that we cannot deny. The current political divisions are between multiple political organisations that have formed around specific goals with different strategies and ideologies, in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

Guney Yildiz: On the political side, the foreign policies of western countries and regions were traditionally based on assuming that Kurds were a sub-category of each country they lived in: there was a foreign policy towards Turkey, Syria, Iraq or Iran, and Kurdish issues were just a sub-category of that. In the last two decades, that analysis has lost its validity. We now have to look for cross-pollination between different Kurdish movements. By that way only can we explain the rise of Kurds in Syria, for example, and how they receive support from Turkish Kurds, Iranian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, individually coming to fight with them.

Previously, the Kurdish political movements were concerned with the politics in the capital city of the country they lived in. For example, the Turkish Kurdish party would be concerned about Ankara rather than Erbil



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or Kurds in Syria. But it is increasingly the case that Kurds in each of these countries are looking to each other to receive support or increase their morale.

There is also huge division. You are right that when we say Kurds we don't actually mean a united group, but the main division is between Turkish and Syrian Kurds and the Iraqi Kurds, I would say. There are two broad movements that dominate the political landscape of the Kurdish regions, which are pro-Barzani and pro-Öcalan movements. I think we might have the chance to talk about them in detail later.

Q26 Ann Clwyd: You are an expert on gender, Dr Kaya. I wonder whether you would give us a thumbnail sketch of the situation now of women in Iraqi Kurdistan. Some years ago, when I was looking at prisons, I went to a women's prison and I was told that women were there on a charge of adultery. When I asked what happened to the men, there was no answer. Is that still the situation?

Secondly, there is the subject of FGM. There were pockets of FGM in Iraqi Kurdistan. I wonder whether you could give us an idea of what that is like now.

Dr Kaya: I have been working on the status of women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan for the past couple of years. I visited the region and talked to several civil society organisations. The status on paper, legally, of women in the Kurdistan region, is better than for women in other parts of Iraq. The Iraqi legal system is more discriminative against women than the Kurdistan regional legal system. That is mainly thanks to the legal changes initiated in the late 1990s, early 2000s, after the Kurdistan region became officially autonomous. That has had some level of implication for women's experiences of their rights on the ground, but not much, unfortunately.

If you talk to civil society organisations in Kurdistan they would say that the issues that women are facing in Kurdistan are continuing: honour-based violence, FGM, and discriminative practices in the penal code against women, such as the example that you just referred to or polygamy.

There is also the problem of implementation. The Kurdistan Regional Government and the policymakers are, to an extent, genuinely trying to improve the situation but, in an institutional structure where certain practices have become very established, it is difficult to change, to turn legal changes into practice or make change on the ground.

FGM, especially in the rural areas, is widely practised. It became known that this was a practice in the Kurdistan region quite recently. The Kurdistan Regional Government banned FGM legally only five or six years ago, which was quite a welcome development.

That does not mean that FGM is only specific to the Kurdistan region. I think there are other areas in the Middle East where this practice is taking place, but we don't know. The reason why it draws such attention is that we did not know that that practice was that widespread in the region.



Q27 Mike Gapes: I want to go on to this question of the political divisions. Mr Yildiz, you mentioned the Barzanis and the Talabanis. Speaking as somebody with some knowledge, I do not think I have ever seen anything quite as complex as I see in Kurdish politics, and I am somebody who is interested in factionalism, mainly on the far left. Just anecdotally, in Sulaymaniyah I saw a café underground, where old Peshmerga were sitting playing dominos. This was a PUK café, and there were photographs on the wall of Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK. There were pictures of an Iranian Kurdish leader whose name I cannot remember and there was a picture of Mr Öcalan on the wall, but no Mr Barzani, which was significant to me. At the same time I met in the refugee camp in Kurdistan Syrian Kurdish refugees who were totally opposed to the PYD. The PYD were inside Syria. Can you explain to us who the main groupings of personalities are and their relationship to each other? Is it true, as for example the Turkish Government claim, that the PYD in Syria is somehow an offshoot of the PKK in Turkey, or is it different to that, and what is the relationship between those groups?

Guney Yildiz: I agree that the divisions are a bit complex, but let me try to simplify it as much as possible. We can talk about three different personalities. Mr Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party; Jalal Talabani, former president of Iraq, and his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party—he died a few weeks ago—and Abdullah Öcalan, whose Kurdistan Workers' Party is active in different forms across the region. Let me start with the Barzani and Talabani movements.

Mr Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party is nationalist and traditional, seeking territorial control. At the core of that kind of tribal organisation lies tribal allegiances—

Mike Gapes: In Iraq?

Guney Yildiz: In Iraq—tribal allegiances and tribal alliances. They are open to a solution of establishing a nation state for the Kurds in Iraq, or maybe an extreme form of autonomy. The KDP was formed in 1946 in Iran and Mr Barzani took over the leadership of the party from his father.

Jalal Talabani was actually a member of the KDP earlier. When it split in the 1970s, the political differences between the two were more visible. We can say that Jalal Talabani's party was to the left of the KDP. We can consider them at that point a social democratic, socialist-leaning party; but actually, if you look at the situation now, the political differences between these two parties, on broader issues, are minuscule.

As I mentioned, tribal structure is important, because after the illness and eventual death of Mr Talabani we see a huge split within the PUK—different factions are maybe under the influence of different countries and different political forces—whereas the tribal structure in the KDP keeps the party unified, despite the political differences between main figures, including the Prime Minister, President and others. So we can expect that the PUK's fragmentation will continue over the next few years. Talabani's



family is an extended family, rather than a tribe; it is not supported by any tribe.

The KDP is traditionally more pro-Turkey. This has been the case until the referendum. It might change in the next few years, but the KDP is more aligned with the Turkish position, whereas the PUK is more under the influence of Iran. I am just using simplistic terms; obviously, these parties have their independent political thoughts, but neither of these parties is pan-Kurdish. Mr Barzani was talking mostly about Iraqi Kurdistan and making it clear that, when he talks about independence, he doesn't refer to Kurdish regions in Turkey or other parts. Neither party is completely pan-Kurdish.

When we get to thinking about Abdullah Öcalan, it is a whole different issue. The PKK started as a Marxist-Leninist organisation, and it was never in the orbit of the Soviet Union. Right from the beginning, it never received significant support from the Soviet Union. The party formulated itself based on the Vietnamese Workers' Party. The name Kurdistan Workers' Party comes from that. It emphasises independence and self-reliance.

The PKK was a pan-Kurdish political party seeking to establish a greater Kurdistan, not only in the Kurdish regions of Turkey but more broadly. The movement has gone through a significant evolution. The first breaking point came in 1993, when they declared a ceasefire against the Turkish Government, de facto accepting the legitimacy of the Turkish Government. From that moment on the movement was not necessarily arguing for a full independent state, but a negotiated solution to the question. That went on until 2004. A lot of things happened in that period.

After 2004, the party started advocating the establishment of autonomous administrations while continuing to fight against Turkey and to negotiate with the Government—it was doing all three at the same time. Establishing autonomous governments in different regions that were united or had co-ordination between them was put into practice in Syria at a much more advanced level from 2011 onwards.

Now the party firmly rejects the idea of having a nation state. As Zeynep mentioned, it is about democratic confederalism, which is democratic autonomous bodies linked in a confederal system across borders without necessarily changing them. It is quite a complex and novel political project that addresses the complex realities of different regions. The PKK has different policies in each region, even inside Syria in Manbij or in Turkey in Diyarbakir.

Q28 **Mike Gapes:** You are saying the PKK inside Syria—

Guney Yildiz: I am actually simplifying; you are absolutely right. What I am trying to talk about is the PKK movement. Let me try to tackle the problem about the PYD and the PKK.

The PKK advocates autonomous organisations, not only geographically, but politically. There is an autonomous women's movement and an



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autonomous youth movement within the PKK. There are autonomous legal parties. The autonomy also extends to Syria. There are many former PKK members or PKK cadres who set up the political party in Syria long before the uprising. In 2003, the PYD started organising against the Assad Government. There are also many Syrian members who came to the PYD through the PYD and not through the PKK.

Since the situation in Syria is obviously very complex, there is no way that the whole situation can be controlled by the PKK from the PKK headquarters in the Qandil mountains on the Iraq-Iran border, so there is a huge level of autonomy in the PYD and among the YPG armed group there. I was in northern Syria a few weeks ago, and what I observed was that they decide most of the local issues themselves, such as who to appoint where and what to decide about what to do in different circumstances and in different regions inside Syria. The top strategic issues, such as international relations, are influenced by the top PKK leaders, who do not comment on the day-to-day running of the movements. The movements are linked and influenced by each other, but the cadres and the PYD movement is much bigger than the core PKK at the moment.

Q29 Mike Gapes: Are they linked by ideology?

Guney Yildiz: They are linked by ideology and the leadership. You can see Abdullah Öcalan's picture almost everywhere in Syria, but as you know, he has been in prison since 1999. His voice has never been heard by the masses. He was unable to communicate with almost anyone, apart from in one small meeting. He is a kind of figurehead, uniting all these people who do not necessarily focus on nationalism and national borders but are united by the ideology.

Abdullah Öcalan has been emphasising outreach to other ethnic groups beyond Kurds. Inside Turkey, we have the HDP, the People's Democratic Party, which was an umbrella organisation with Turkish left-wing and other groups. In Syria, a similar model has been established with the SDC, the Syrian Democratic Council, the political arm of the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces. It includes a significant proportion of Arabs in different regions and has set up at the local commune level. When I was there, there were elections in the local-level communes—I think there are tens of thousands of communes at the moment, which are the most local level of organisation, composed of local people rather than top-down PYD cadres.

Q30 Mike Gapes: Finally, is there strong evidence of PKK fighters going to fight for other Kurdish groups? I have been told that PKK people have been fighting alongside the Peshmerga against Daesh in Iraq. It is also alleged by the Turkish Government that there is an inextricable link between the PKK from Turkey and the PYD in Syria. How does that work? Do different groups fight alongside each other when they see a common threat, or is it more deep-seated than that?

Guney Yildiz: You are absolutely right. The PKK as PKK fought alongside the Peshmerga in the Talabani area, the PUK area—

Mike Gapes: Near Kirkuk.

Guney Yildiz: Near Kirkuk, exactly. Peshmerga actually fought briefly with PYD/YPG fighters in Kobani during the siege, and former members of the PKK who had split from the PKK are commanders in the KDP Peshmerga, for example. So there is this movement between them. There is also movement of former PKK fighters, mostly of Syrian origin, going back to Syria and setting up YPG organisations and fighting—

Q31 **Mike Gapes:** From Turkey?

Guney Yildiz: Of Syrian origin—Syrian Kurds who used to fight with the PKK against the Turkish Government. In Syria, for example, they talk about their “martyrs” in the struggle—I was told by their martyrs’ organisation set up in northern Syria that 5,000 martyr fighters were killed fighting against Turkey and 8,000 against the Islamic State. That tells you how much these two, the Syrian Kurds and the Turkish Kurds, came together.

Q32 **Chair:** May I jump in very quickly? If the link is as you say and we declare that the PKK is a terrorist organisation, shouldn’t we declare that the PYD is as well?

Guney Yildiz: The decision to put an organisation on the terrorism list or not is more a political issue than—

Q33 **Chair:** I agree, but given the overlap you have just described you are telling me that this is a distinction without a difference.

Guney Yildiz: As I said, the level of day-to-day communication between the PKK headquarters and the Kurdish-led administrations in northern Syria is probably minuscule. If there was constant communication, that would have been intercepted by intelligence agencies, so I expect there is a huge level of autonomy. I also mentioned the local-level communes, which are set up by local people in their neighbourhoods or villages, which means they are not necessarily PYD-established organisations. I am using the term “PYD” in order to simplify, because the mechanisms there are much more complex—they are local administrations, rather than one single party.

Q34 **Chair:** Dr Kaya, what do you think?

Dr Kaya: PYD-PKK links are interesting. Because we are not inside these organisations, we cannot clearly claim whether they are connected or not, or whether decision making is taking place from one source. If you look at the history of the PKK, this organisation was established in 1978 in Turkey and started to carry out its actions in 1982. It has had, with the permission of the Syrian regime, connections in the Syrian areas and has recruited a lot of the Syrian Kurds into its ranks. So there is this long-term historical connection between the Kurds who adhere to the same ideology in Syria and in Turkey.

The other dimension that you need to think about is the pan-ideology of the PKK. There are other organisations in Iran and Iraq that are also



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affiliated or connected somehow with the PKK, and there is the KCK, a Kurdistan organisation that these four parties are a part of. This organisation has a charter and the parties are expected to adhere to the principles of that.

- Q35 **Chair:** Can I cut to the chase? If they have the same command structure and the same ethos and they conduct very similar activities, are they not the same organisation?

Dr Kaya: I would ask the same question. If that is the case, why is there the problem of the US supporting the PYD? It is a big issue, isn't it?

Chair: That is why I am asking the question.

Dr Kaya: Terrorism is a vague concept. The PKK is considered illicit as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and by many western countries who are allies of Turkey. From Turkey's perspective, their concerns are obvious. Considering the connections between PYD and PKK in one form or other is a concern for Turkey. However, we need to look into whether PYD has been a threat and has carried on as a separate organisation, because there is some level of local autonomous administration among the PYD. I think the question boils down to whether they have carried out any terrorist attacks in other states in the region.

- Q36 **Stephen Gethins:** I want to explore some of the points that Mr Gapes and Ms Ghani raised earlier. Mr Yildiz, you raised an interesting point about Abdullah Öcalan trying to bring in other ethnic groups with aspirations for greater autonomy or even independence. Would you both say the idea of Kurdish identity is exclusively an ethnic concept, or is it increasingly civic in nature?

Guney Yildiz: Apart from anecdotal evidence, the best way to look at it is to look at the main political parties who claim to represent the Kurdish population. Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups without a nation state. This creates deep-seated emotions among Kurds. In northern Syria, for example, the PYD clearly pursues a non-ethnic policy. They are after a geographical federation rather than an ethnic federation. But if you speak to Kurds on the ground, you see there is some sort of nationalism. So if you look at the political movements that receive the support of those people, we can say this is more civic.

I do not necessarily think it fits in either of the categories. There is an ethnic Kurdish identity, but the political project is not ethnic. The political project is not necessarily ethnic in Syria and in Turkey, whereas in Iraq we have a movement that is similar to many other movements in the world, which is like an ethnic federation or an ethnic identity, although after the referendum Mr Barzani mentioned that the Kurdistan they would want to establish would be a multi-ethnic country.

- Q37 **Stephen Gethins:** I'm interested in your thoughts on that.



Dr Kaya: Ethnicity and nationalism or nation are concepts that are quite fuzzy. They are defined in several different ways by many experts. It depends on whether you think ethnicity goes back to the genealogical connections, cultural practices or linguistic background or you could consider the concept as a social phenomenon that is socially constructed through historical processes. Whatever you name it, ethnicity and national identity has been a source of mobilisation for these organisations, whether they have adopted a civic or a more nationalistic ethno-nationalistic goal.

If you look at the regional Kurdish political movements, the Barzani and all the Kurdish national movements in Iraqi Kurdistan have adhered to this more traditional form of a nation state formation ideal, of having an ethnic core and developing a national identity around it, and then gradually attaining their own political rule and sovereignty. On the other side, the PKK and its pan-Kurdish ideals relates to this transformation of the Middle East, an area with an idea of confederalism that goes beyond nation state boundaries. They explicitly say that they are not an ethnic organisation, but when you look at the grass roots and the mobilisation, ethnicity and persecution against them, their identity has certainly been a source of organisation for them. It is difficult to differentiate and distinguish a clear-cut ethnic-civic division within these groups.

Q38 Stephen Gethins: How do other ethnic groups, particularly minority groups living in Kurdish areas, feel about aspirations for greater autonomy or for Kurdish independence?

Dr Kaya: In this area that is called Kurdistan by many—not everyone would adopt that definition; they sincerely envisage a multi-ethnic and multi-national idea, however you might define nationalism, identity or ethnicity—there will be a lot of people that could not identify themselves as Kurdish. Whether a Turkish-Kurdish or a regional Kurdish identity, they could not adopt it. I visit eastern Turkey quite often, and there are concerns about the oppression of their own identity, especially in certain areas. If you look at the Syrian section, the PYD administration has adopted an inclusive policy, and their parliament includes quotas for different ethnic minorities. Other experts say that the practice has been very top-down, Kurdish dominated, and other groups have been experiencing abuses or exclusion in that sense. Again, this is not necessarily 100% verifiable information. But yes, especially in the last 10 years, the increase in the presence of Kurdish nationalist movements and their influence on the territories in which they are located has created a sense of exclusion or elimination in those areas.

Guney Yildiz: In Syria, for example, one example is Assyrian Christians who have their own militia and command structure, which is also linked to SDF. They are able to protect themselves and they are allowed to have a different group. In Iraqi Kurdistan, I have been to Christian areas in the outskirts of Iraqi Kurdistan in the Nineveh plains, and also inside Erbil which has a large Christian area. I have heard lots of complaints, but the same people said that compared with the rest of Iraq, the Iraqi Kurdistan region is the most secure and safe place for Christians. But in Syria, this is emphasised more. In areas controlled by SDF the Kurdish population is not



necessarily a majority. We now have Raqqa involved as part of the SDF controlled area, so the SDF and the PYD is, as far as I can observe, extremely careful in having a light Kurdish footprint in majority Arab areas. So I think they are more careful about giving different ethnic groups rights, but other political problems are a different issue.

- Q39 **Stephen Gethins:** Just to clarify, can I get a short answer on how these minority groups feel about autonomy, and has there been any effort from the Kurdish leadership to court support among those groups?

Guney Yildiz: In Syria the autonomy is geographical, so there is not necessarily an ethnic autonomy. Syrian Christian groups and several Arab regions are supporting that kind of geographical autonomy. It is not an independent nation state idea. I have spoken to Turkmen, who are a minority in language. They were also worried about an Arab majority. They were after this multicultural governing system, which has quotas for different ethnic groups, rather than going back to the old Syrian regime-type organisation, or a foreign independent nation state for any of those nations living there. In Syria, that is not necessarily a big issue, but Iraqi Kurdistan is a separate issue. Many groups, including some Kurds of different religious backgrounds, preferred to remain as part of Iraq, rather than Iraqi Kurdistan. Many of them see the main Iraqi Kurdistan region as more safe for them than the rest of Iraq as well.

- Q40 **Mike Gapes:** How was the referendum that was held in September in Iraqi Kurdistan viewed by the non-KDP Kurdish groups?

Dr Kaya: In terms of the referendum, the PUK—the Talabani group: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—was initially cautious about the referendum but then decided to support it. The Gorran party decided to support it at the very last minute. The other main political party, the Islamic party, which is smaller than the others, did not support it. That is the political level.

On the ground, I think a majority of the Kurds who associate themselves with Kurdish identity and have nationalist aspirations supported the referendum—more so in Erbil but maybe less so in parts of Sulaymaniyah. However, even in Sulaymaniyah support on the ground has been strong, I would say.

- Q41 **Mike Gapes:** What about the Kurds outside Iraq?

Guney Yildiz: I was in Syria during the time the referendum took place. I was talking to Kurdish YPG fighters and other people and there was very little enthusiasm about Iraqi Kurdish independence. That is in Turkey as well. As I said, the Kurdish movement is broadly dominated by these two broad movements. Mr Barzani is held in very high esteem among traditional or conservative Kurds in Turkey as well, who supported the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, pro-Barzani parties or political groups are very small in the Kurdish regions of Turkey.

On Iraq, let me tell you one anecdote that was replicated many times. I have spoken to Peshmerga fighters, shopkeepers, taxi drivers and other



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people, many of whom were enthusiastic about the referendum. When I asked if they were ready to fight for the referendum if the Iraqi Government fights against them, many of them said yes. However, when I asked them if they think there will be a war with the Iraqi central Government, none of them said there would. They were ready for a war that is not going to take place was what I observed.

- Q42 **Ann Clwyd:** I want to get back to the Parliament. Who or what has prevented the Kurdish Parliament from meeting over the past two years? What is the obstacle, what are the dynamics and who is making the political decisions?

Guney Yildiz: The main problem is that, over two years ago, President Barzani's term was extended. That extension then came to an end, and the Gorran Movement wanted to challenge that and for the parliamentary Speaker to stand in for the position of the presidency. That was one of the main problems that increased tension between the Gorran Movement, which had lots of seats in the Iraqi Kurdish Parliament, and Mr Barzani's KDP. That was the main reason. The Parliament only opened a few days before the referendum, so the decision to hold a referendum was not actually initially taken by the Parliament, but it was approved by the Parliament a few days before the referendum.

- Q43 **Ann Clwyd:** It's still not meeting though, is it? That meeting was only for a few days.

Guney Yildiz: Masoud Barzani resigned from the post of President, but then apparently, according to many opposition politicians, he is still kind of acting as a de facto President; this is the accusation. I believe that Kurds lost a lot after the referendum, but also the Kurdish parties are also divided between pro-referendum and anti-referendum people, across the political parties, inside the KDP and PUK. The PUK is further fragmented, after the death of Jalal Talabani; so the political fragmentation is extremely high, which is the main obstacle to a united Parliament that can negotiate in a democratic environment.

But responding to the Chairman's earlier comment about having the same command structure and the same ethos, I totally agree that there is the same ethos between the YPG, the PYD and the PKK; but recently a Belgian court used the same format and twisted the logic, deciding if the PKK is fighting against ISIS—they considered the PYD fully as PKK—then we cannot consider them as terrorists. So we can either consider the PYD as terrorists by establishing links with the PKK or vice versa—

Chair: I do not want to get into the decisions of a Belgian court; forgive me.

- Q44 **Ian Murray:** I am glad you clarified that, because that was where my question was going to come from. You said in answer to the Chair earlier that you were unclear about the designation of all these groups—the PKK, YPG et cetera—and whether they should be classed as terrorist organisations. Are these groups and relationships just relationships of convenience? We heard in Turkey the phrase that "my enemy's enemy is



my friend". Is that essentially the way this is being held together right across the region?

Guney Yildiz: I think it is more than that; the issue is—as I said, there is cross-pollination between different Kurdish movements, so people who were members of the PKK were active inside the PYD, and they were key in setting up structures there, but those structures are not necessarily fully linked with the command structure of the PKK, and there is not day-to-day control of the Syrian Kurds by the PKK. What happens is actually a former PKK cadre became a PYD member in 2003 long before the uprising in Syria and set up different structures with local Kurds, local Arabs—and shares power in setting up either communes, cantons or political representative groups, or in a military structure where Arabs can also join and become commanders. I met several Arab commanders inside the YPG—not even inside the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is an umbrella group. Mostly the top YPG and top SDF command level is dominated by the Kurds, but Arabs are slowly rising in the ranks, I would say. So it is not necessarily a relationship of convenience; they share a similar ethos, but the main agenda for Syrian Kurds is the situation in Syria, rather than the fight against Turkey.

Q45 Ian Murray: Can I ask you about the Syrian Kurds in that context: do they trust Assad more than they trust the US?

Guney Yildiz: No. The relationship—let us talk about the parent movement¹⁶, the PKK, and the Assad Government. The Assad Government tolerated the PKK organising in the Beqaa valley of Lebanon, which was under Syrian control at the time, alongside some Palestinian groups. This relationship went on until 1998, but there was never co-operation, so the PKK was organising inside Syria, not necessarily co-operating with the Syrian regime. The PKK started co-operating: the first time the pro-PKK movements have co-operated with a country, with another force, this closely is with the US, so there has never been a case of any foreign country's soldiers working with pro-PKK forces as much as is happening in Syria at the moment. So in that sense, actually, among the Arab population in Raqqa and other places—and I went to meetings of the Raqqa civilian council and other places—Kurds were more reluctant to adopt anything that would lead that administration to go back to the Syrian regime than some Sunni Arabs. The education curriculum was one of the issues, for example. Some Arab tribes and Arab political personalities wanted the curriculum from the Assad regime, whereas the Kurds firmly opposed it.

The previous mainstream narrative was that the PYD was very close to the Syrian regime, but the situation on the ground disproved that. The PYD, or the SDF, and the Syrian regime are now the last remaining groups in

¹⁶ Note from witness: By "parent movement" I mean that the PKK, and its existing structures in Syria prior to the establishment of the PYD in 2003, provided a launching pad for the PYD. But I do not necessarily suggest that it was the PKK that fully and solely gave rise to the PYD



Syria, and either there will be a negotiation between them or we can expect a conflict.

Q46 Ian Murray: So is a territorial deal likely between the Syrian Kurds and Assad? What are the chances of that?

Guney Yildiz: It is not necessarily just about the two forces—the Syrian regime and the PYD. It is also a broader international issue. It depends whether the US will commit to supporting the Kurds, at least against attacks from Turkey or other forces, including the regime. The deal between Russia and the US will also have an effect. Kurds are playing a game they cannot set the rules for.

To respond to a question asked in an earlier session, the UK can play a significant role at many levels among different Kurdish movements. There are many people in the KDP and PUK who have studied, worked or grown up in London. A UK diplomat carries much more weight in these matters than any European diplomat, though not as much as a US diplomat. Pro-PKK movements, including the PYD, have been very clear that they want direct contact with the UK. UK officials are dealing with the SDF through a coalition in Raqqa and other places, and the deputy leader of the coalition is a UK general, but there is no direct contact. The UK's good relations with Turkey and the Baghdad Government are a real asset in bringing together these groups and facilitating talks between them. That may be one of the few things that will bring the UK an advantage after Brexit—that it can act as an independent force to bring those forces together.

Chair: I think you have answered all our questions. Dr Kaya and Mr Yildiz, thank you very much indeed for your time and your insights. It was extremely kind of you to give us the opportunity to hear from you.