

Could the Trump Administration Mean a New Beginning for the Kurds?

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The shift of United States (US) foreign policy from a heavy international focus with traditional alliances over the past century to the anti-globalist administration promised by President-elect Donald Trump will necessarily upset longstanding regional relations in the Middle East and North Africa. This Policy Paper discusses some of the Trump administration's most likely foreign policy advisers and their positions on Kurdish self-governance, as well as those of some previous policymakers whose legacies he will be unable to escape. It must be noted: there has never been a less predictable incoming President than Trump. To this point he has had no game plan and his closest advisors have repeatedly been replaced so it is unknown how many of those he has relied on thus far for foreign policy advice, or even if those he has named to cabinet positions, will actually make it into his administration. While based on the best information currently available regarding the more reliable of his potential advisers, allies and appointees, none of these prognostications or recommendations can be taken for granted.

Known Unknowns: President-Elect Donald Trump and his Advisors

Trump himself is rather hard to pin down on the Kurdish question, in July 2016 he stated:

I'm a fan of the Kurds, you understand ... I'm a big fan of the Kurdish forces. At the same time ... we could have a potentially very successful relationship with Turkey. And it would be really wonderful if we could put them somehow both together (New York Times, 2016).

By the same token, and in the same interview, he said of the Turkish Prime Minister *'I give Erdogan great credit for turning the coup around'*, while remaining silent on the jailing of members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Of course, there are more worrisome statements, like his minimizing of Hussein's genocidal Al-Anfal campaign and its culmination in the Halabja massacre where thousands of Kurds died:

Saddam Hussein throws a little gas, everyone goes crazy, 'oh, he's using gas!'... He was a bad guy... But you know what he did well? He killed terrorists. He did that so good (Berrien, 2016).

This quote shows a severe lack of nuance, or a belief that Kurds are terrorists. Other quotes about Kurds linked to Trump have excited many Kurdish activists abroad, but it is difficult to find original quotes from solid sources, a general problem of believing what Trump is reported to have said – it may change tomorrow, or may never have been said.

On that point, Vladimir Putin was very supportive of Trump's candidacy, and Trump has been quite complimentary of the Russian leader. In fact, that has been among the most stable pillars of his campaign. However, given the mercurial nature of everything Trump, it is uncertain what the Trump-Putin relationship will look like by inauguration day. Moreover, if it stays positive, it is still uncertain what that means for the Kurds in general. In February 2016, the Rojava Democratic Self-Rule Administration declared itself the government in Kurdish Syria and opened its first embassy in Moscow. Putin sent 200 military advisers to Qamishli to secure an airport (Matthews, 2016), and was declared "Godfather of Kurdistan". However the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) believes that in October Moscow gave approval to Turkish airstrikes against Kurdish forces set to take the city of Al-Bab (Al-Monitor, 2016). Russia is no more reliable an ally to the Kurds than the US.

There are, however, some signs from which Trump's direction on the Kurdish question can be divined. Trump has no foreign policy. He ran as a populist dealing entirely with domestic issues. It is thus vital to know who he is surrounding himself with and who he is putting in charge of foreign policy when he comes to power. In a move that has shocked many observers Trump has named ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State. There is no reason, however, that this should come as a surprise. Carter Page, a major Trump campaign advisor, runs an investment and consulting firm with former Gazprom executive Sergey Yatsenko, specializing in the Russian and Central Asian oil and gas markets. According to Bloomberg Politics in March 2016, *'Yatsenko says he worked with Page on helping a Russian investor explore an oil investment in Iraqi Kurdistan... Page wouldn't discuss specific deals'* (Midler, 2016). After an investigation into Page's possible connection to the Kremlin, he was fired from the campaign, but oil's influence on Trump's campaign and nascent administration remained.

There is nothing revolutionary about Trump bringing an oil executive into foreign policy. Hunt Oil, for example, one of America's largest privately-held companies, started working in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 2007, repeatedly referring to it as an independent country (Lando, 2011). This would not matter so much, private citizens and corporations can do as they please, but most private citizens and corporations have not spent nearly \$7,000,000 on political contributions since 2000, almost all to Republicans (Center for Responsive Politics, 2016), most notably to

House Speaker Paul Ryan and the National Republican Committee. Marathon (Marathon Oil, 2016) and Hess (Oil & Gas Journal, 2011) have had similar interests in the region and made similarly enormous contributions to the Republican Party (Center for Responsive Politics, 2016). Perhaps in the same way as Hunt, Tillerson himself has taken the autonomy of the KRI to mean outright sovereignty over their resources. According to ExxonMobil biographer Steve Coll,

In Kurdistan, during the Obama Administration, Tillerson defied State Department policy and cut an independent oil deal with the Kurdish Regional Government, undermining the national Iraqi government in Baghdad. ExxonMobil did not ask permission... The goal of ExxonMobil's independent foreign policy has been to promote a world that is good for oil and gas production (Coll, 2016).

As long as the KRI has oil and can offer that oil to US firms, the Republicans and the Tillerson State Department will likely be the best ally the KRI can hope for.

Tillerson, however, is not a policymaker, and he will not be involved in the finer points of foreign policy, even in a region as near and dear to him as the KRI. There have been other names put forward for top positions in the administration that, regardless of their role, will remain influential. Walid Phares is one of Trump's earliest foreign policy advisers, a Lebanese Maronite who survived the presidential campaign and remains with Trump today (a rare feat). Most of Phares' quotes on the Kurds come from a June 2016 interview. While complimenting the role of the Kurds and the Peshmerga in the international coalition against the Islamic State (IS), Phares gave the vague, short-sighted view that US policy toward anti-IS allies is '*based on now*'. The interview continues with promises of US support for civil society consisting of all ethnic groups, to create "*a freedom area*" in Rojava. The "freedom area" is presented as largely a dumping ground for Middle Eastern refugees in order to take pressure off the European Union (EU) and make access by humanitarian groups easier. '*[R]efugees and IDPs [internally displaced people] can be protected and helped in the freedom area until their areas ... are liberated from [IS] so that they can return to their homes*', he elaborated as Trump's policy.

Congressman Michael McCaul (R-TX) is Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, a member of the Kurdish American Congressional Caucus and was a top pick for Trump's Secretary of Homeland Security before General John Kelly got the nod. Despite losing the top spot, McCaul, based on his vocal support for Trump and his role in Congress and several Trump-affiliated think tanks, will remain influential in administration policy. McCaul has focused on supporting Kurdish self-governance within Iraq. He even prefers arming Peshmerga forces against IS through the central government, stating in May 2015:

I think there is a way to streamline the process of getting the weapons to both the Sunni tribes and the Peshmerga, where it is desperately needed to defeat [IS], while at the same time not undermining the government of Iraq in Baghdad (Schemm, 2015).

Jeff Sessions, Trump's Attorney General nominee, has been sponsoring similar bills since 2014.

Additionally, Bob Corker (R-TN), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who had been mentioned as a possibility for Secretary of State also weighed in on the issue: '*check[ed] it out myself in Baghdad... we've made sure that the weapons that we send to Kurdistan make it to Kurdistan*'. (Sulaivany, 2016) When pressed on Kurdish self-rule, though, he is cautious at best:

People of Kurdistan have to choose their own way, but [independence is] something that should be looked at very slowly and cautiously because there is so much right now to contend with... I've met with your President [and] Foreign Minister on many occasions and I've said the same thing... [There is] a lot of trouble right now in the region, maybe it makes sense to be cautious about how you move forward (Sulaivany, 2016).

Of Trump's listed top picks, none had more experience with the Kurds than former commander of the coalition forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus. When asked for his views on the future of the Kurds, in addition to stating that the Peshmerga deserve more support from the US than they have received, his response in March 2015 was far more comprehensive than the rest:

[S]ome of these developments [with Turkey] have been reassuring to the Kurds, but probably not all. The... difficulties of getting assistance to the YPG in Kobane is one that is remembered. And... there are developments with the exports of oil that have also been somewhat challenging as well... The enormous support the KRG is giving to hundreds of thousands of refugees in Kurdish provinces. But you also see the desire by the Syrian Kurds to have their own autonomous region, not necessarily to be part of a greater Kurdistan... [T]hat's a[n] interesting development, to see... what the relationships will be between Iraqi Kurds, Syrian Kurds... (Lihony, 2015).

Petraeus was the first of these candidates to discuss the Kurds outside of Iraq, but another name on the list, John Bolton, former US Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) under George W. Bush, also had an understanding of the Kurds beyond Iraq. Bolton's introductory speech to the UN was an announcement that there is no such thing as a United Nations and that the work they do could be equally effectively performed without 95% of their staff or building space. However, Bolton's qualms with the UN are not humanitarian but militant. His end goal is unstoppable US military power and less power for any who would act as a balance on that imperial power. Bolton's a perfect fit for Trump, and is also truly supportive of an independence for the Kurds of Iraq:

I think the government of Iraq has collapsed. I don't think it can be put back together. I have said the Kurds in Iraq have demonstrated being capable of governing themselves. I don't see them ever going back voluntarily... I believe the United States should be supportive of their legitimate aspirations (Rudaw, 2016).

He also gave possibly the strongest expression against Erdogan's crackdown of any US official:

I am extremely concerned about the suppression of the coup [and] the direction that president Erdogan is taking... [He has] cleared the board of any political and intuitional opposition. Turkey has been in its secular days a staunch ally of the [US]. (Rudaw, 2016)

Tillerson, Bolton, Corker, McCaul, Petraeus and Sessions are more pro-Kurd than any of their predecessors, and they all have Trump's ear to a certain extent, making Trump's administration potentially the most supportive toward Kurdish aspirations in US history.

Regardless of who is at the helm, conventional conservative foreign policy wisdom is unlikely to be overturned. A key source of this wisdom is the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank close to Bolton and McCaul with major connections to the Trump-tied Heritage Foundation and therefore likely to have traction in the administration. Both organizations are based on the promotion of their own interpretation of "freedom" (free markets, not free movement of people, free elections so long as they suit US interests). Their 140-page policy brief *Kurdistan Rising* by Michael Rubin, former Iraq and Iran country director for the Defense Department and lecturer at the Universities of Sulaymaniyah, Salahaddin, and Duhok, is one of the most comprehensive US policy papers on Kurdish independence. Without synopsising it in full, the most vital takeaway is: despite their freedom-centrism, AEI believes the KRI as a potential state is not yet in a position to handle independence (Rubin, 2016).

So, the conventional wisdom in Trump's incoming conservative foreign policy community seems to be that none of the Kurdish areas are yet capable enough to handle their own independence. This does not mean the US does not support their aspirations. It is simply that the KRI and perhaps Rojava need American support to achieve those aspirations. It can be difficult to see the danger in this "wisdom" through its subtle phrasing, but the Atishaari Plan in Kosovo and the Dayton Accords in Bosnia give a glimpse of its true meaning.

Extractivism in the Humanitarian and Diplomatic Industries

The Dayton Accords are worth shortly exploring as the basic blueprint of Democrat-led international occupation with a humanitarian façade. The benefits of protracted conflict and non-peace peace like Dayton to US (and NGO) interests are manifold, with the multi-billion-dollar industry of diplomacy and humanitarianism in modern occupied Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as strategically-valuable staging grounds for the US military. This could easily be Kurdistan's fate.

The lesson of Dayton, in a single sentence, is this: if a nation desires to become a state, they better win, and win convincingly, or they will be an imperial puppet from the onset, and a weak state when they finally push out their imperial masters, vulnerable to the predations of the mid-size powers on their borders. *'You have five days left, that's all. What you don't win on the battlefield will be hard to gain at the*

peace talks. Don't waste these last days' (Shawcross, 2002). This quote is from Richard Holbrooke, architect of the humanitarian extractivist framework for modern Bosnia, to the Croat strongman Franjo Tudjman, who he preferred as a US ally over the Serbs or Bosnians and thus gave this advice, which proved true for the less fortunate Bosnian parties, who came to the Dayton treaty negotiations largely voiceless.

Dayton is important here because Holbrooke had much to say about the KRI prior to his death, and his words should be understood both in the context of his tactics and of the Democrat deification of his legacy. Holbrooke was the Democrats' biggest shaper of foreign policy in the 1990s and 2000s. It remains important to look at this Democrat diplomacy, as a purge of non-Trump thinkers is unlikely in the Trump administration, simply because foreign policy was never important to him, nor to Tillerson outside of its usefulness to oil interests. It is probable that there will be many old-school Democrats continuing to work in US foreign policy and remains worth knowing their perspective and technique.

In talking about "limit[ing] the terrible fallout from the Iraq war," Holbrooke stated in 2007:

Despite centuries of enmity, rapprochement is in the long-term interests of both Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds. But such an effort could be undertaken only with strong American encouragement. ... After years of mishandling relations with Turkey, last year the administration appointed retired Gen. Joe Ralston, the universally respected former NATO commander, as special envoy for the PKK problem. Ralston's intervention helped avoid a Turkish attack in Iraq last summer, and he is accelerating his efforts to get Irbil to rein in the PKK. ... Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan need each other. Kurdistan could become a buffer between Turkey and the chaos to the south, while Turkey could become the protector of a Kurdistan effectively cut loose from a non-functional Iraq government. Turkey also has a major economic opportunity in north Iraq. Rapprochement would require major undertakings by both sides. The legendary Kurdish leader Barzani needs to rein in the PKK and pledge not to interfere in Turkish affairs. A compromise taking into account legitimate Turkish concerns would be necessary; while this would be difficult, I believe it needs to be attempted, with strong American encouragement (Holbrooke, 2007).

To Holbrooke and Democrats like Clinton and Kerry who deify him (Kerry, 2010), Turkish Kurds are terrorists, Turkey is an indispensable US ally, and KRI aspirations should be supported insofar as they benefit Turkish interests as a business generator and buffer against regional conflicts, but it is the Kurds who must 'tak[e] into account legitimate Turkish concerns', never vice-versa. Holbrooke, however, was a back-room dealer, publicly espousing cooperation while privately pushing his preferred ally toward advantageous bargaining positions, as with Croatia and his "five days" advice. Holbrooke's style is trademark Democrat "statesmanship". The US prefers Turkey as an ally in maintaining the balance of power and support for the KRI, or indeed Kurdish forces in Turkey or Syria, under conventional US foreign policy goes only so

far as it does not oppose Turkish, and thereby US, interests. A Trump administration, especially one informed by AEI's policy briefs, is unlikely to change this.

An end to Development Aid

Trump is not a game changer on much of the Middle East. One element he has promised to shift, though, is foreign aid. In the KRI, US non-military, non-refugee aid through USAID provides training for around 3,000 medical professionals, funding to nearly 300 medical centers, the building of some 60 medical centers, over \$18 million for medical care (AK News, 2012). USAID has provided aid to the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Syria as well, but the numbers are less secure. On the topic of foreign aid, though, Donald Trump declared during the campaign:

It is necessary that we invest in our infrastructure, stop sending foreign aid to countries that hate us and use that money to rebuild our tunnels, roads, bridges and schools — and nobody can do that better than me (Gharib, 2016).

This disdain for foreign aid is a common Republican populist refrain, and Trump capitalized on the line '*Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo*' (Blake, 2016). According to Trump, the Kurds may not hate the US, but Kurdistan is not a country and is located within "countries that hate us" like Iran or Syria or, at times, Iraq.

It is not just direct aid that should worry the Kurds. The US is the world's largest aid donor. If the \$30 billion in annual global aid given by the US disappears, other donors will reroute funds from projects deemed superfluous, like infrastructure or schools, into projects deemed critical to human survival, such as disease or disaster relief formerly funded with US capital. If development aid dries up, the Kurds may be the first to feel it.

Kurdish aspirations, and a new international respect for the autonomist option

The question Kurdish independence activists must ask themselves is: what will the state of Kurdistan, if founded today, look like in 70 years? What will the state narrative be? Will the KRI be the dominant Kurdish culture, able to claim the victimhood of Halabja and Hussein's betrayal to dominate the sympathies of the world, or will it be Rojava's, with the siege of Kobani and the battles against IS, Assad, and Turkey, who take dominance? Will Iran and Turkey use Kurdish independence in either of these areas (KRI or Rojava) as an excuse to ethnically cleanse themselves of the Kurds now that there is a Kurdish state to receive them, and will those other Kurds become second-class citizens within their new land without claims to their own historical tragedy? Will Zaza, Gorani, and Pehlewani be erased in favor of either Kurmanji or Sorani as the single mainstream dialect and language? Will the Kurdish history of welcoming other cultures and of peaceful coexistence with one's cohabitants remain, or will the recent history of conflict result in anti-Arabism as a response to generations of Arab repression?

Pure ethnic sovereign statehood is dangerous, and the founders of any modern Kurdish state must be mindful of this. Independence, however, is often an unnecessary, destructive distractor. Kurdistan is a multicultural, multi-ethnic confederation, ideally. Even within a single ethnic frame, there are multiple Kurdish cultures living generally peacefully with one another but not with ruling regimes seeking to destroy their multi-and-inter-ethnicity. Building protections of cultural, linguistic, religious, and economic autonomy into broader national constitutions and laws could have yielded a secure Kurdish future. Autonomy is often a longer process than independence, and can be undermined, but given the nonviolence of autonomist methods (legislation and constitutions), it is less likely to be met with violence. There are indeed more modern cases of the successful protection of one's people, culture, and resources through autonomy than through independence, and autonomy often does lead to independence (Gallant, 2015).

The Kurds have a long autonomist history, from Sheikh Abdullah in 1880 through to one of the most successful non-EU autonomist movements today in the KRI, in addition to experiments in "democratic autonomy" in Rojava today. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS), founded to promote Kurdish economic and cultural autonomy, was in 1960 declared a separatist organization, its leaders imprisoned (with obvious parallels to the HDP in Turkey today). The KRI has sought independence or autonomy since 1970, with increasing self-governance since 1991 up to the incredible autonomy the 2005 Iraqi constitution granted them. The Kurdish National Assembly of Syria (KNAS) was basically a 2006 revitalization of KDPS, inspired by the KRI, seeking to turn Syria into a federal state with power to provincial governments like the Kurds, a movement succeeded by a form of democratic autonomy some are referring to as "stateless democracy" in Rojava since the civil war. The Kurds are already quite familiar with autonomy.

Pure ethnic sovereignty as an independent Kurdistan forces struggles over the inner and outer faces of Kurdistan to create a unified of Kurdish identity. Autonomy would have allowed the multiplicity of Kurdistans to experience Kurdishness in their own way. However, as secure borders were necessary against hostile regional actors, and a strong defense and central planning are needed to rebuild after years of conflict, autonomy seemed insufficient. It looked like the Kurds had been pushed into being well-armed but regionally despised, they could take independence now and build an imperfect state, or risk annihilation. But without a strong ally, no Kurdish state could win a war for independence. Potential allies have long been happy to be distracted from Kurdish self-governance movements that would force changes to the long-standing balance of power. Nobody wanted Kurdistan to win, not really. Change is frightening, especially to Great Powers fond of the semi-controllable, profitable constellation in the Middle East. Starting in the 1970s, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger built a realist US foreign policy based on the concept of "Balance of Power", a strategy that became a US obsession in the decades to follow, openly

admitted by Colin Powell as the reason for the Bush administration's 1991 betrayal of the Kurds in Iraq (Powell & Persico, 1995): Iraq and Iran, played against one another by Kissinger and his successors, maintained a balance of power, so the US never supported Kurdish aspirations in any real way there. Additionally, for the Clinton administration, Turkey as a regionally-dominant power could be loyally deployed against the rumblings of more Islamist states, and the betrayal of the Kurds throughout the region and through the decades was a small cost to maintain that balance of power (Chomsky, 2008).

This may not change regarding independence, but in regards to autonomy there is reason for optimism. Prior to the Trump administration, the US, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and NATO had viewed autonomy as "*poor man's entertainment*" (Gallant, 2015), with some in the Clinton State Department and OSCE going so far as to declare that autonomists should declare independence or nothing. Donald Trump's top picks seem to have a real respect for autonomy in both the KRI and Rojava that none of their predecessors possessed. Just as surprisingly, with Putin as Rojava's "Godfather", Russian antipathy toward autonomy (in Ossetia, Crimea, etc.) must be recalled, but Russian officials in September 2016 were supporting a Kurdish 'special status within the framework of Syria' (Bozarслан, 2016), similar to Petraeus' stance in the earlier-mentioned 2015 interview. While Assad rejected it outright, Russia and the US even considering autonomy, let alone supporting it, is remarkable. It is a hard path, but not hopeless.

Independence is easier, energizing activists and fighters alike in a way that seemingly-theoretical modes of governance like autonomy do not. Autonomous Kurdistan would have to be ever vigilant not to be undermined, while independent Kurdistan could be defended simply with soldiers on their borders. War can be won definitively, and international powers are more willing to respect what was won through force than through diplomacy. The easiest path is rarely the best, though: if the KRI or Rojava were to win independence, it is highly likely that it would be in name only. If the Kurds of the KRI or Rojava go all in for independence, they should take Holbrooke seriously: '*What you don't win on the battlefield you won't gain at the peace talks*' (Shawcross, 2002). The US respects power, and will respect the Kurds if they have power. US leaders talk a lot about freedom and supporting all peoples' pursuit of it, but the US doesn't actually root for the underdog. The US respects Erdogan, as with Hussein, because he has power and he is geopolitically necessary to stop America's enemies. Based on Kissinger's realist philosophy, '*America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests*' (D'Souza, 2002), the Kurds should cease to think of the US as their friend. America will not actually care about the Kurds until they are in a powerful position.

If a nation pursues independence militarily but achieves it without a definitive win and a prepared national constitution and defense, they come to the table weak, to be granted statehood at the expense of their independence. In this instance, the Kurds

would cast off the chain of Turkish, Iraqi, or Syrian oppression only to become the colony of a greater power, wholly answerable to a US, EU, or Russian high representative (e.g. Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, South Ossetia, Eastern Ukraine).

The Kurds of KRI and Rojava are well-armed and have shown their capacity to defend themselves militarily. As such, forces both hostile to and supportive of Kurdish aspirations view both of these Kurdish regions as already on the march toward independence. Military might does not necessitate an independence push, though: it can simply show that a people has the will and ability to defend themselves should their autonomy be threatened. An independent Kurdistan would occupy only the Iraqi part or the Syrian part, unlikely to grow any larger, and stands a high risk of isolation. Meanwhile a multitude of autonomist Kurdistans could over time, starting in the Iraqi and Syrian parts, occupy the entire Kurdish region and build coherent regional policies on everything from education to trade, to defense.

Autonomy is still possible as a long-term solution: Trump's are the first major US administration figures to show an understanding that independence is not a binary, but a gradient with autonomy as a viable middle ground. While Russia is still supportive of autonomy, and while Donald Trump is still supportive of Russia and listening to foreign policy actors sympathetic to Kurdish self-governance, this may be the final window of opportunity for the Kurdish people to make that choice.

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