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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Strategic Arab-Kurdish Alliance": Syria's Support of Kurdish Organisations during the Cold War

Angelika Pobedonostseva
Saint-Petersburg State University

Siarhei Bohdan
Hokkaido University

ABSTRACT: All major Kurdish political movements interacted with foreign states in search of resources and support. Besides superpowers, it was the Arab nationalist regime of Syria that cooperated with foreign Kurdish radical groups in the most stable way as well as instrumentalised them. The paper fills the gap in scholarship by focusing on Damascus' relations with the Iraqi Kurdish groups in the 1950s – 1990s and noting their significance for Syria's alliance with Kurdish militants from Turkey. What drove them, how the dynamics of these relations changed, what role did this cooperation play in Kurdish politics and which consequences it had? The most active phase of these relations included the 1970s and the 1980s. The Assad regime's Kurdish policies were closely related to Syria's rise as a regional power enabled by its tapping into external resources. These were provided by a number of states driven by Cold War developments. The paper focuses on the question of Kurdish own agency in such interactions: how the Kurdish groups succeeded or failed in avoiding dependency on the Syrian regime. The research relies on Iraqi, Iranian, Turkish and Soviet media reports and political documents of the time, archival records, memoirs.

KEYWORDS: Cold War; Iraq; Kurds; regional security; Syria

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): apobedonostseva@gmail.com

The Syrian civil war has highlighted the repressive aspects of the Ba'th regime. Important as they are, they do not suffice to explain how the Ba'th established and maintained its rule in a country whose majority opposed it and whose economy could not bear the burden of a militarised state. Some clues to this puzzle lie in the foreign policy of the Ba'th under Hafez Assad. The Syrian leader has been credited with constructing a system of sophisticated alliances and was dubbed "an Arab Bismarck" by Henry Kissinger. The peculiar circumstances of the Cold War made this foreign policy possible.

While Assad's dealings with both Cold War superpowers, his intrigues in Lebanon or cooperation with Islamist Iran have been studied by some scholars (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997; Goodarzi 2009), an important part of Syria's foreign policy — its relations with non-Syrian Kurdish organisations — remains neglected in the literature. Meanwhile, the emergence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey has been linked to Syria's regional policies. Few works deal with the Syria's Kurdish population's links with the PKK (Özkan 2019, Tejel 2009, Schmidinger 2018), and next to nothing exists on Syrian government relations with the PUK and the PKK. Although researchers of Kurdish politics like David McDowall (2004) or Chris Kutschera (1979, 1997) mention Syria's relations with the Kurdish movement, they did not elaborate on the respective activities of Kurdish organisations. However, their mere presence in that country was only possible with the permission of the Ba'th leadership, which had established a police state in Syria.

This paper investigates how the Syrian regime supported the Kurdish national movement. Given the decline of Syrian support for Kurdish insurgencies after the end of the Cold War, we ask to what extent the unique circumstances of the Cold War enabled Syria to play 'the Kurdish card', largely by using the resources and assistance of third parties.

When small players punch above their weights

Already the first Kurdish experiment in modern state-building, the so-called Mahabad Republic, declared with Soviet assistance in 1946, was inextricably linked with the earliest conflicts of the Cold War. On the Eurasian borderlands, warned Michael Reynolds (2011, 18), "Nationalism […] is best understood as a form of geopolitics, not as a phenomenon that springs from some non-political base." This paper applies his approach to Kurdish nationalism. We argue that ideas of political empowerment and the national and social emancipation of Kurdish population in the Middle East, as an ethnic group, became the basis of sustained political movements in the sociopolitical environment shaped by Cold War geopolitical transformations. The global superpowers, through their rivalry and alternative modernisation drives, changed the geopolitics of the region and made possible the emergence of a mature Kurdish nationalism. The latter, despite its historical roots, had been fragile prior to WWII, as illustrated by Kurdish uprisings that remained largely tribal, with strong religious and anti-modernist motives. New Kurdish movements during the Cold War were increasingly non-tribal and non-sectarian, as well as progressive and modernising, making them attractive partners for global and regional players.

According to Odd Arne Westad (2017, 1), the Cold War was the last great international system, "in the sense that the world's leading powers all based their foreign policies on some relationship to it." He admits that some conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli or those in South Asia, were driven more by regional developments than by Cold War processes (Westad 2007, 4, 87-109). Yet many aspects of even regional conflicts were

touched by the dynamics of the Cold War. Several scholars have highlighted how regional players in regional conflicts of the Cold War exploited the interests of great powers to achieve their own aims, e.g., Asher Orkaby (2017) did it for the Yemen Civil War and Nicholas Khoo (2011), for the war in Vietnam.

By capitalising on its role in certain Cold War entanglements (above all the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also Soviet ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean), Syria tapped the external resources necessary to pursue its ambitions in the region. For Syria, the availability of these resources provided a unique opportunity to pursue a foreign policy far beyond its own means – by clashing with Israel, occupying Lebanon, and supporting Iraqi (and Turkish) Kurds.

Syrian relations with foreign Kurds always remained compartmentalised from its policies towards its own Kurdish population. The latter suffered from discrimination: subsequent Syrian regimes insisted that most of the country's 1.5m (1991) Kurds were descendants of migrants from other parts of the Ottoman Empire and refused to provide them with documents. Legal Kurdish parties in Syria did not articulate the grievances of the Syrian Kurds. One of their functions was to act as liaison with foreign Kurdish organisations in the service of the Syrian government: a splinter faction of the Kurdistan Democratic party of Syria (KDPS) came to be connected with Iraq's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Iran's Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, while the mainstream KDPS was linked to its namesake from Iraq (Ballı 1991, 553).

This international nature of the issue makes it possible to investigate it in this paper through non-Syrian sources. US intelligence documents provide routine and even casual reports about Syria's Kurdish entanglements, often as part of documents dealing with other topics. These records are complemented with some Lebanese intelligence documents, media and official publications of the time, memoirs from Kurdish and non-Kurdish personalities.

Syria between superpowers and Kurdish insurgents, 1955-1974

The Syrian leadership first took an interest in the Kurdish movement in the mid-1950s. On 16th July 1955, Syrian politician Ali Buzu secretly met the exiled Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani[1] in Baku, Soviet Azerbaijan. An influential man in Damascene politics, Ali Buzu served as Interior minister in 1954-1956 (WCDA 1946). The following year, a young Iraqi Kurdish activist, Jalal Talabani, became a political refugee in Syria, where he was awarded a government scholarship. At the same time, Iraqi Arab nationalists helped the KDP[2] link up with Arab nationalists at the helm in Syria (Talabani 2018, 94, 521-522).

These contacts with the Kurdish movement came after Syria was drawn into the Cold War. Defying attempts to include it in the pro-Western Baghdad Pact, Syria became the first Arab country to establish close relations with the Soviet Union in 1955, by accepting Soviet aid, political and diplomatic support and purchasing Soviet weapons. In April 1955, when Syria clashed with Western-allied Turkey, the USSR gave Damascus security guarantees against Turkey and its allies like Iraq (Pir-Budagova 1978, 84-85). Moreover, in 1956-1957, Moscow through its intelligence, diplomacy and military countermeasures effectively prevented a probable US-backed Turkish operation against Syria (Easter 2017). After Syria and Egypt established the United Arab Republic in 1958, Damascus relied additionally on the support of the strongest Arab state. This came to include

[1] Mustafa Barzani (1903-1979)—the chairman of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in 1946-79, widely recognised back then as the leader of Kurdish movement in Iraq and beyond. He lived in the USSR in 1947-1959.

[2] Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—one of the two biggest Kurdish parties in Iraq, established in 1946 and hence controlled by the Barzani family.

the Kurds. Cairo, for its part, was pro-active toward the Kurds: Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser mediated the return of the exiled Barzani to Iraq and reached out to the KDP.

Between 1958 and 1961, Iraqi Kurdish activists developed relations with "some countries bordering on Iraq" to secure their support for the uprising they were preparing. The KDP asked Syrian authorities to provide arms, communication gear, and "whatever they could provide for armed struggle" (Talabani 2018, 143-144). When the rebellion began on 11th September 1961, Syria let Soviet arms pass through its territory to supply Barzani (Kiselyov 2000, 111, 117-145). Then, on the 28th September, a military coup ended Syria's union with Egypt. The secessionist government launched repressions against the Communists, weakened the ties to the USSR, and put an end to Soviet supplying Barzani via Syria. It even made him look for help in the West and Iran.

In 1963, the Ba'th party, represented by national chapters, took power in Syria and Iraq, although the Iraqi Ba'thists were ousted by the end of the year. The brief episode of Ba'th parallel rule in the two countries saw the Syrian military intervene in Iraq against Barzani on the behalf of Baghdad. After this, a lull in Syria's Kurdish policies followed: state structures were crippled by infighting, and Damascus' radical policies prevented it from attracting external resources or support. Political transformations in Syria, and in the wider region, altered the situation. In 1969-70, a faction led by Assad prevailed inside the Syrian Ba'th over the followers of the more radical Salah Jadid. Assad cemented the Alawite minority's grip on power in Syria and extended unprecedented assistance to Kurdish movements abroad.

It began under inauspicious circumstances. In 1968, the Iraqi Ba'th returned to power and moved to stop the war with the Barzani-led Kurds. In March 1970, it promised to introduce autonomy for the Kurds, transferred some local powers to the KDP, and began negotiations with Barzani. Damascus lost no time in criticising the new leaders in Baghdad for that, accusing them of "negligence of Iraq's Arabism."

At the same time, the Syrian government was looking for partners among the oppositional elements of the Barzani movement. As soon as the KDP started the talks with Baghdad in 1970, the dissenters of the Barzani movement established the "Marx-Lenin Association of Kurdistan" (MLAK). The Association operated secretly inside the Barzani movement till 1975. In 1972, one of its leaders, Talabani, fled from territory Barzani controlled. Over the next three years, he worked in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon for the KDP, the secret MLAK, and the Syria-linked Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Concurrently, the MLAK started despatching cadres to Iraqi Kurdistan through Syria (Talabani 2018, 276-277, 291-292, 296-297). The Iraqi Ba'thists believed Damascus had "established relations of cooperation with the Barzani's clique" after their 1970 armistice with the Kurdish rebels. When the talks between Baghdad and the Kurds collapsed in March 1974, the Syrian secret service supplied the Barzanist movement with weapons during the last phase of its struggle in 1974-1975 (ABSP-I 1983, 59).

Iraqi Kurdish activists praised Alawite politicians and ordinary Alawites for treating the Kurds better than Syria's Sunni or Christian populations treated them (Talabani 2018, 520, 524). However, it makes sense to look also for more material reasons for the Syrian Alawite leadership's turn towards support of Kurdish groups after 1970. By this point, Assad had brought Syria out of its international isolation by restoring relations with numerous Middle Eastern and Western states. Capitalising on its role in the conflict with Israel, Assad began to extract resources from both conservative Middle Eastern regimes and the USSR.

Beginning in the early 1970s, Syria became a top destination for Soviet military aid and arms sales. Although Moscow offered Syria terms considered "favourable" even by Western intelligence services, Damascus mostly failed to pay even a minimum price. By the end of 1970, it received Soviet arms worth $527m yet repaid only 17% of its debt, a pattern which continued till the end of the Soviet Union (CIA 1971, 15-17, 20). By 1991, Syria had amassed $14.5bn in debts from Soviet armaments (TASS 2015). The bulk of these arms were

supplied from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, at which point Moscow started to reduce these transfers. The Soviets were generous because, after Egypt expelled the Soviet military personnel in 1972, Syria became the key Soviet ally in the region. Moscow valued this partnership not only because of Syria's role in confronting Western-allied Israel, but also because of Assad's promises—only partially fulfilled—to provide the Soviets with strategic opportunities in the Mediterranean, e.g., with naval bases.

At the same time, in April 1973, Damascus restored diplomatic relations with Imperial Iran, which had been severed in 1965 when Ba'th radicals objected to the Shah's regional expansion and its effects on Arab countries. Tehran, embroiled via Barzani's rebellion in a conflict with Iraq, courted Assad, who fought with his fellow Ba'thists in Baghdad over regional leadership and Euphrates water rights (Alam 1991, 284).

The comeback of Kurdish insurgency

The Kurdish rebellion in Iraq persisted, till the Shah and the Iraqi government concluded the Algiers Accords on 6th March 1975. Iraq renounced its claims in the Shatt al-Arab river in exchange for Iran giving up its support of Barzani. The Kurdish rebellion subsequently collapsed in a few days. Visiting the region shortly after, Western diplomats described Iraqi Kurdistan as "quiet," noticing its complete control by Iraqi forces. They added that "the estimated 9,000 Kurdish fighters who vowed ... to continue the struggle have thus far not made their presence known" and, in any case, assessed their attempts as doomed because "lacking outside support—[the insurgents] could do no more than harass government units" (CIA 1975b, 8).

The Shah, eager to develop a new *modus vivendi* with Baghdad, limited the Kurds' opportunities to continue the struggle, not allowing them to use Iran as a base. Syria, meanwhile, was waiting in the wings to take over the support for the Iraqi-Kurdish rebels. On the one hand, already in April 1975, the Congress of the Syrian Ba'th Party condemned the "suspicious right-wing regime" in Iraq for its deal with Iran, undermining Arab solidarity and betraying the Palestinians (CIA 1975a, 14). On the other hand, Syria had prepared itself to deal with this eventuality. By early 1975, Damascus offered refuge not only to MLAK activists but also other elements from the KDP, such as Omar Dababa (Talabani 2018, 301). The Iraqi leadership lamented this: "After the defeat of the insurgency, the Syrian regime's secret service gave the [Kurdish] insurgents full backing" (ABSP-I 1983, 59).

Damascus needed resources to embark on such an endeavour. The Syrians and their Kurdish partners found a solution in Libya, which supported radicalism globally. Shortly before the Algiers Accords, Talabani visited Qaddafi and swore to him that he would continue the struggle, in the case that the Shah and Saddam had made a deal, and with the help of "Libyan and Syrian friends" he could emancipate the movement from its subservience to Iran. Qaddafi promised help and funding. Talabani informed the Barzani brothers of the Libyan commitment but they rejected it. After the Algiers Accords, Qaddafi repeated his offer to Talabani who tried to convince Mustafa Barzani to keep fighting because "Libya is certainly ready to help, and I have met president Hafez Assad, and he is ready to help." Barzani ignored the offer (Talabani 2018, 302). This decision probably had to do with the KDP leadership's stay in Iran, which was trying to implement the Accords. However, the Shah did not mind Kurdish activists going to Syria to resume fighting. In fact, Tehran established a close relationship with Syria. From the 28th to the 31st December 1975, Syrian leader Assad visited Iran, enjoying "one of the warmest welcomes accorded a foreign visitor here" and receiving financial assistance (NYT 1975).

It is against this backdrop that the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was established with the support of the Syrian government. According to the PUK, the decision to found the party was taken on 22nd May 1975 in Damascus "as a response to the end of the previous Kurdish revolution" with the founding statement being issued on the 1st June 1975 in the same venue (PUK 2024).

After its establishment, the PUK joined the structures of the Iraqi opposition allied with Syria. According to one of the PUK leaders at the time, Omar Sheikhmus, their activities were planned by the leadership in Syria and the first three-year plan envisaged no armed insurgency but rather political and diplomatic efforts. However, when pro-Syrian Iraqi Ba'thists shared their plans of a military coup in Baghdad, the PUK leadership in Syria ordered its cadres in Iraqi Kurdistan to form guerrilla units (Hamad 1999, 43-44).

Official PUK history reports that the decision to begin armed struggle was taken at a meeting of the PUK founding committee in Damascus on 23-24 May 1976. This coincided with Syria's intervention into the ongoing civil war in Lebanon. On 1st June 1976, as the Syrian army was entering Lebanon, the so-called "Badinan Group" of PUK fighters headed from Syria to Iraqi Kurdistan (PUK 2024). The PUK sources note an emerging discrepancy in the Union's activities: while it had numerous supporters in the Sorani-speaking Sulaymaniyah region, it deployed these guerrilla units to the opposite part of Iraqi Kurdistan—the Kurmanji-speaking Badinan region in Dohuk province, on the border with Syria (Hamad 1999, 44-45).

The invasion of Lebanon overshadowed the deployment of the first PUK units, but the latter was not as risky as it might seem. Assad supported the PUK, which had grown out of the KDP splinter faction of Ibrahim Ahmad, Jalal Talabani and Omar Dababa, because he knew he was not alone in his backing of the group—Tehran also cautiously backed the PUK. The Shah was disappointed with Barzani when the latter had cut his deal with Iraqi authorities, known as the 1970 Autonomy Agreement. In the aftermath, the Iranian special service officer in charge of the Iraqi Kurdish operation, Isa Pezhman, told Ibrahim Ahmad that "The Shah is ready to provide any necessary support to you" (Ghane'inefard 1390/2011, 589). Damascus also knew that in any clash with Baghdad, it could count on support from the West and pro-Western regimes since, after all, Assad had intervened on behalf of right-wing Christian and pro-Western factions in the Lebanese Civil War to prevent the victory of leftist, Muslim and Palestinian factions close to the USSR and Iraq. During the summer of 1976, the Iranian government was repeatedly asked by the US and Jordan to back Assad who was facing, as they feared, an imminent Iraqi attack. The Shah agreed, asking the Saudis to support the Syrian regime. Outside of diplomatic interventions, loans and investments, Tehran supplied oil to Syria in 1976-77 (Alam 1991, 493, 501, 513, 546).

This multilateral support was granted to Assad mainly in the context of his intervention in Lebanon, but it nevertheless protected Damascus. This protection became more necessary when PUK activities launched from the Syrian territory became widely known. On 23rd June 1976, the Financial Times reported on Syria's assistance to Kurdish rebels in Iraq. This was followed by reports elsewhere. Iraqi foreign minister Saadoun Hammadi lamented that "the Damascene regime accorded the same assistance to Kurdish rebels as do the Americans and Israelis. This is real treason to the Arab cause" (Saint-Prot 1984, 190). Iraq responded by increasing its military presence on the Syrian border in July 1976. In total, Baghdad deployed to the Iraq-Syria border about two thirds of its combat brigades (CIA 1976, 8).

Decisive logistics

Syrian support extended beyond the MLAK/PUK. Between 1975 and 1976, Damascus began to cooperate with the KDP. In the most critical period of KDP history, before the Shah resumed his support for the party, Masoud Barzani recalled that "the main connections [of the KDP] after the 1975 setback were with Syria and Libya." Syria was also host to various Kurdish activists who fell out with the Barzani-led KDP. Another group of KDP dissidents came to Damascus in 1976 united around former members of the KDP Political Bureau Mahmud Othman, Shamsaddin Mufti, Adnan Mufti, and Qadir Jabari who established the "Preparatory Committee of the Kurdistan Democratic Party." Othman tried to relaunch the KDP's media outlet "Xebat," yet it was not welcomed by the Syrian authorities and ended after the first issue (Salar 2018).

Whilst Syria supplied the PUK with resources, its fighters could not infiltrate Iraqi Kurdistan through the Syrian-Iraqi border and had to enter Iraqi Kurdistan by crossing the areas with heavy KDP influence in Turkey and Iran on their borders with Iraq (Hassanpour 1994). This is confirmed by eyewitnesses who reported that after 1976 arms and supplies were sent to the PUK fighters in Iraq from Syria via Turkey (Bruinessen 1986, 24). Only by using this route the guerrillas could efficiently operate in the Syrian-Iraqi border region, an absolute priority for Damascus.

Meanwhile, the PUK's main operating zones inside Iraq were far from the Syrian border, on the Iranian and Turkish border, respectively. Syria finally received the Shah's reluctant permission to continue supplying the PUK via Iran but the situation on the Turkish border remained complicated. In pursuing its feud with the rival party, the KDP fought the PUK and incited the local population against the PUK in Turkey's Kurdish-populated regions on the Turkish-Iraqi border. The bloodiest event of these clashes occurred when PUK fighters entered the Syrian-Iraqi border region of Badinan in Dohuk province of Iraq, which was considered a traditional KDP realm. On 19th September 1976, some four dozen PUK fighters led by one of the most qualified party commanders, Ibrahim Azo, were killed during the confrontation. A publication close to the PUK highlighted "the choice of Badinan was not accidental. It was an important strategic zone where weapons for the PUK came from Syria, and where the PUK's military forces were insignificant" (Hamad 1999, 46, 58-59).

The conflict between the movements undermined Assad's Kurdish policy. At the beginning of 1977, the PUK and their Syrian benefactors, in an attempt to settle the dispute, invited Masoud Barzani to Damascus. His first visit to Syria, the talks with officials in Damascus seemed, at first, "excellent" yet produced nothing concrete. Barzani blamed this on the PUK's plotting (Al-Barzani 2002, 369).

The failure could also have been linked to Barzani's rejection of Damascus' request that the KDP cooperate with the Syrian-linked structures in the Iraqi opposition. He refused because the KDP could still rely on Iran. Assad could not outbid the better resourced Shah when courting Kurdish groups. Even when, on 1st March 1977, Barzani signed a cooperation agreement with the PUK, the latter paid for it by transferring a significant amount of arms and ammunition to the KDP (Hamad 1999, 59).

Concurrently, the PUK made futile attempts to negotiate with the Iraqi government. At the end of 1977, when Baghdad increased its military pressure on the Kurdish rebels and Iraq and Syria tried *rapprochement*, caused by the Egyptian entreaties to Israel, the PUK finally entered talks with Baghdad. The situation deteriorated further in 1978 when Iraq and Iran moved to implement the Algiers Accord more thoroughly. Iraq limited the activities of the Iranian opposition on its territory and expelled Ruhollah Khomeini, whilst Tehran launched strikes against the Kurds. As PUK sources noted in the summer of 1978, the "cooperation of Iraq and

Iran in joint suppression of Kurdish forces [has] gained a more efficient character," as the Iranian military bombed Iraqi Kurdish rebels and supported Iraqi army operations (Hamad 1999, 49).

In seeking to recover from this setback, the PUK sought to develop the routes via Turkey. In June 1978, Talabani sent a detachment, led by his most popular commander Ali Askari, to the Turkish province of Hakkari on the border with Iraq (Stansfield 2010, 87). Local KDP loyalists wiped out the detachment and executed Askari and Khalid Said, both leaders of the Socialist Movement of Kurdistan (SMK). It was followed by a serious backlash against the PUK's Syrian connections, because the SMK, alongside the MLAK and the so-called "General Line" faction, was one of three founding factions of the PUK. The new SMK leader, Mahmud Othman, criticised the PUK for following the line of the pro-Syrian Iraqi opposition, which sought the "Iraqisation" of the Kurdish uprising, i.e. achieving regime change in the whole of Iraq rather than focusing on Kurdistan. Othman instead demanded a more friendly attitude towards the Iran-linked KDP. In March 1979, the SMK withdrew from the PUK structure and established, together with another group, the United Socialist Party of Kurdistan (USPK) (Hamad 1999, 72-74).

The PUK became the backbone of the pro-Syrian Iraqi opposition, and Damascus intensified its anti-Baghdad activities after its brief rapprochement with Saddam ceased in the summer of 1979. The "Iraqisation" strategy continued. On 17th May 1979, pro-Syrian Iraqi Ba'th militants joined the PUK in its camps near Sulaymaniyah, aiming at a joint struggle against Baghdad (Hamad 1999, 75).

The PUK engaged also with Kurdish militants from Turkey, Syria's links with them grew out of Damascus' support for the Iraqi Kurdish organisations. It was against the backdrop of the Hakkari massacre that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was established in November 1978. This organisation, fighting against Turkey, would become tightly linked to Syria and the PUK. Talabani (2018, 521) claimed that he stood behind the PKK's alignment with Syria. Besides nationalist sentiments, the emerging PKK could be strategically useful for the PUK. By operating in districts on the Turkish-Iraqi border, the PKK could undermine the power of local strongmen loyal to the KDP and help secure supply routes for the PUK and Damascus.

In building this element into its Kurdish policies, Damascus continued to fall back on the support of its allies. Such support reached its height in 1978-1985. In 1980, Damascus and Moscow signed a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with security components, and, in the early 1980s, some Soviet forces were deployed in Syria against Israel. Damascus continued to receive a flow of Soviet supplies much of which it did not pay for. Meanwhile, Assad was free to ignore Soviet interests, because of Syria's strategic value, the USSR hesitated to put pressure on it. At the time the CIA stressed (1986b, 11) "Syria's reluctance to permit the Soviets a free hand on their territory" despite huge debts to Moscow. In addition to Soviet military and diplomatic cover, in the 1980s Damascus received aid from conservative Arab regimes. This new inflow came after the 1978 Baghdad Arab summit where Syria was promised $1.8 bn annually to help it confront Israel, though they never provided the full amount. When it came to Assad's support for Kurdish insurgencies, the government was financed with extra resources from Libya's Qaddafi. As the Iraqi government complained, "the Libyan regime has also established relations with the puppet and dubious elements who seek to revive insurgency" (ABSP-I 1983, 59-60).

The Highpoint of Syria's Regional Influence

Moreover, in February 1979, Islamist revolutionaries overthrew the Shah. For the Kurds, the new regime could reopen its supply routes for the PUK and weaken the KDP, who had been linked to the Shah. Iran's

Interim Government, at that point in the hands of the Freedom Movement, an Islamist faction known for its proximity to Syria, allowed the PUK to open an office in Tehran and transit supplies—mostly from Syria—through Iran to PUK units in "Kurdish areas." Khomeinist activists lamented that the government let the PUK operate "at the time when this group had relations with all counter-revolutionary groups, and supported them in some way" (Shaikh-Attar 2003, 180-181). Indeed, during the revolutionary chaos of 1978 and 1979 its fighters participated in the operations of left-wing Iranian Kurdish organisations as they sought to take control of Iran's Kurdish areas and clashed with the central government.

The opportunities for the PUK began to dwindle, however, when relations between Tehran and Iranian Kurdish organisations collapsed. They were further limited when Syrian-Iranian relations suffered strains after the Freedom Movement lost power. Tehran was upset with Talabani's reluctance to give up relations with Kurdish organisations in Iran. In October 1980, Tehran began intercepting arms shipments from Syria destined for the PUK (Ghareeb 1981, 184). The Iranian supply route was especially important because of Iran's contiguity to Iraq's Sulaimaniya region, the PUK's stronghold.

In September 1980, Iraq invaded Iran. To support Iran in this conflict, the Syrian government convinced the major Iraqi oppositional forces to found the Progressive National Democratic Front (PNDF) (Ismael 2008, 194). When it was founded in Damascus on 12th November 1980, the Front encompassed the PUK and almost all Iraqi secular opposition groups such as the USPK, the Socialist Party of Iraq, pro-Syrian Iraqi Ba'thists, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and a number of "independent democrats." The PNDF operated out of Damascus.

However, as a PUK activist lamented, "the KDP, with its known influence in the Badinan region, was not part of the PNDF. This meant that the KDP had at its disposal significant capacities that could not be ignored." The ICP and USPK, backed by Syria, established another Iraqi oppositional forces' front, except now with the KDP and without the PUK. In Iran's Kurdish areas, they signed the charter of the National Democratic Front (NDF) on 28th November 1980. Following news of the agreement, skirmishes broke out between the PUK and the USPK in Iraqi Kurdistan (Hamad 1999, 84-85).

Attempts to unite the two fronts failed because the PUK demanded the exclusion of the KDP and the USPK from any potential alliance (Ismael 2008, 194). The Kurdish factions prevented the unification of the Iraqi opposition despite its importance to Damascus and Tripoli. This was on display when PNDF delegates met with Assad on 6th December, after which he publicly welcomed the creation of the Front. A few days later, on 13th December 1980, representatives of the Front were received by a key member of the Libyan leadership, Abdessalam Jalloud, and Libya agreed to provide the PNDF with "material assistance" (Hamad 1999, 84).

Damascus continued its attempts to reach out to the KDP, which after the revolution restored its relations with Tehran. In 1981, Masoud Barzani visited Syria for the second time. During talks with President Assad, Barzani assured him of the "strategic choice to preserve Arab-Kurdish brotherhood" and urged him "to keep his door open" for the KDP. Unlike his first visit, this time Barzani was satisfied, and from then on regularly met with Syrian leaders (Al-Barzani 2002, 369).

Damascus cultivated the Iran-based Barzani brothers who led the KDP but continued to look for new partners amongst the KDP dissenters. The Party once again split at its ninth congress (December 1979), when activists led by Sami Abdurrahman distanced themselves from the Barzani leadership due to its close ties to the new Iranian government. Abdurrahman subsequently headed to Iran, and then to the US and Europe, but failed to find a base for political activity (Kutschera 1997, 49). Finally, this group of former KDP members arrived in Syria and, on 26 July 1981, founded the People's Democratic Party of Kurdistan (PDPK) in Damascus, a group which stressed its opposition to Iran. A few months later, the PDPK sent its fighters to establish a base in the Badinan region of Iraqi Kurdistan yet they failed to mount bigger operations. The PDPK

joined the PUK-centred PNDF, Abdurrahman stayed in Damascus and managed the party's publications (Hamad 1999, 93-94).

Damascus's Kurdish policy did not go unnoticed. In 1982, the Iraqi government admitted that the prospects of its own Kurdish policies were limited. To blame was the odd coalition behind the Kurdish opposition, described as "the imperialist forces, the Zionist entity, the Syrian and Libyan regimes, certain forces attached to the Socialist camp, the Iranian regime". Baghdad accused Syria and its partners with whom it worked "in full coordination"—Iran, the Communists and the Shi'ite Islamists—of playing "a special role" in troublemaking (ABSP-I 1983, 59-60). Yet, disputes, emerging in 1982, between Damascus and Tehran changed the situation. The Syria-linked Freedom Movement lost power in Tehran and Khomeini ordered the withdrawal of Iranian volunteers in Syria who came to fight against Israel in the aftermath of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

Adding to this was a dispute relating to the Kurds. For a while, Damascus had managed to mediate the conflicts between the PUK and Iranian authorities. This mediation collapsed. Tehran stopped the transit of supplies from Syria intended for the PUK in Iraq and confiscated some shipments. It also moved to suppress the PUK in the autumn of 1981 and re-embraced its rival, the KDP, the Shah's key Kurdish ally. In 1982, Syria sent a pro-Syrian Iraqi Ba'thist leader Abduljabbar al-Kubaisi to Tehran with a mission of repairing the PUK's relations with Iran (Shaikh-Attar 1382/2003, 181-183). It failed, endangering PUK guerrilla activities in Iraq.

The PUK, after the ties between Tehran and Damascus cooled, allied itself with the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (DPIK). The DPIK was, at this time, fighting against the Iranian government. Skirmishes between the NDF (KDP and its allies) and the PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan proliferated, and, in October 1982, NDF units surrounded the headquarters of the PUK and the DPIK inside Iranian territory. Only after the Syrian government, with Libyan support, intervened in Tehran, could it stop the operation initiated by the KDP leadership. On 7th March 1983, the PUK signed a truce with the KDP. Realising such a truce was unsustainable, the PUK established contact with Baghdad (Hamad 1999, 106-107).

In December 1983, the PUK agreed to a ceasefire with the Iraqi government. In subsequent talks, it secured a pledge from Baghdad for cultural autonomy, the right of return for deported Kurds, and for its fighters to keep their weapons. A PUK official emphasised that the deal with Saddam was meant to provide the party with a breathing space: "We know the agreement will not last, but at least it has proved that we are independent from Damascus or any other regime" (Entessar 1984, 923). The PUK, according to Western intelligence, helped Baghdad restore its "control over a major part of Iraq's Kurdish territory" before the negotiations collapsed. When, in February 1985, the Iraqi army attacked its bases, the party attempted to restore cooperation with Syria and Iran (CIA 1985a, 4).

That was no easy task. By that time, Damascus had established cooperation with the PUK's rival and in October 1984, the KDP began joint operations with the Syrian-backed Iraqi Communists against the Iraqi government. The new alliance was highlighted by Massoud Barzani's visit to Damascus, during which he spoke to the press, adopting the idiom of the Syrian regime. This time, Barzani, known as a conservative, latently pro-American politician, attacked the US as an imperialist power manipulated by Israel. He complemented this by lashing out at Turkey and its NATO membership (CIA 1985a, 9-10). After successful talks, Damascus provided Barzani and other KDP functionaries with documents, and Barzani proceeded to seek help in Libya and Eastern Europe (WCDA 1984). Looking back at the 1980s, a KDP veteran who was also in charge of the party's external relations noted that "a visit to Damascus became *de rigueur* for the leaders of several Kurdish parties" (Vanly 1992, 158).

Syria's regional ascendancy, driven by its strategic positioning in alliance with the Eastern Bloc and oil-rich Libya, convinced the Kurds of the need to strengthen their relations with Damascus. In June 1985, the CIA (1985a, 7-8) reported that "the Kurdish resistance [in Iraq and Turkey] is heavily dependent upon outside assistance. Syria and Libya are the principal suppliers of arms and finances. Syria also provides training and safe havens." Likewise, Soviet diplomats reported that Syria had become a principal base for KDP guerrillas. This came to be useful for the Soviets when between 1983 and 1986, through the mediation of Yassir Arafat and Syrian Kurdish politician Salah Badreddin, they successfully negotiated the release of Soviet citizens kidnapped by the KDP in Iraq (Kolotusha 2020, 249-50).

In 1985, Syria even provided the KDP and smaller Iraqi Kurdish groups with qualitatively new weapons—a kind of Soviet Stinger—SAM-7s. The CIA noticed that it "has altered the balance of power in the north [of Iraq]" because the Kurds now possessed the ability to bring down Iraqi helicopters (CIA 1985a, 10). Indeed, in the last years of the Iran-Iraq war, when the southern front hardly moved, in Iraqi Kurdistan the joint forces of the Iranian army and Kurdish parties advanced.

From the PUK to the PKK

Switching from the PUK to the KDP helped Damascus develop the Turkish Kurdish PKK. In the early 1980s, Ankara started threatening Syria's water access as a consequence of a modernisation programme in Turkey's Kurdish-populated regions. In response to this, Damascus viewed pressure on Ankara, especially through PKK operations, as more important than wrangling with Baghdad. Damascus diverted its own and third parties' limited resources to the PKK at a time when it needed substantial direct support, illustrated, e.g., by the fact that about a fifth of the PKK members were Syrian citizens (Kajjo and Sinclair, 2011). The nature of the Syrian police state meant that it was solely possible for them with Assad's sanction to join the party, a fact that indicates the high priority of the PKK for Damascus willing to mobilise Syria's Kurds for that mission.

In moving from cooperation with the PUK to the KDP, Damascus released resources to invest into the PKK. The Barzani brothers emphasised their ties with the Damascus-Tripoli axis, and in 1986, Masoud Barzani again visited Assad and Qaddafi (Al-Barifakani 1996, 468-470). However, Syria's partnership with the KDP was not as close as its previous alliance with the PUK and required less resources as the KDP was primarily supported by Iran. The Barzani brothers were resident in Iran, and Tehran offered them more resources than Syria. According to Soviet intelligence, in 1985, Revolutionary Guards initiated training of "Iraqi Kurdish fighters," almost certainly the KDP (Uturgauri 2013, 229).

The KDP also traditionally enjoyed the loyalty of the Kurdish population on Turkey's border with Iraq, and for years Turkey tolerated the KDP's activities on its southern borders (Talabani 339-340, 343-344). As this was where the PKK concentrated its activities, the two movements supported by Damascus succeeded in synergy. In 1983, when Baghdad allowed Turkish cross-border raids against the Syrian-backed Kurdish and Armenian guerrillas on Iraqi territory, these operations were, in the assessment of Western intelligence, "largely unsuccessful." This was not only because of Syrian and Iranian protests against them but more crucially because "the Barzani Kurds offered the PKK cadres protection" (CIA 1985a, 7).

Turkey was then irritated by Syria's support for Iraqi Kurdish organisations, because they "directly threaten large areas of Turkish Kurdistan," alongside Syrian support of Armenian and Turkish radicals (CIA 1984, 37). Indeed, in August 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, established by activists from Turkey, started combat operations just on the border with Iraq. The entanglement of the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish organisations was

obvious to observers on the ground. As late as 1986, US intelligence commented that "the Syrians openly harbour anti-Turkish refugees and tend to turn a blind eye to terrorist activities directed against Turkey. Syrians strongly support Kurdish rebels in Iraq and would find it difficult to prevent Iraqi Kurds from helping their Turkish cousins" (CIA 1986b, 13). Damascus tried to conceal much of its anti-Turkish activity through a variety of tactics. It placed some PKK facilities in the Syrian-controlled part of Lebanon, Syrian-linked Palestinian groups (especially, the PFLP) supported the PKK (like earlier, the PUK), Kurdish activists and structures from Iraq helped their counterparts from Turkey (CIA 1985b, 12). However, even in his police state, Assad sometimes lost control of his 'clients,' and, for example, Kurdish organisations in Syria split over internal quarrels relating to developments in Iraq (Kajjo and Sinclair 2011).

Neighbouring states nevertheless attached Damascus to Kurdish dissident groups' operations and threatened retaliation. The setting of the Cold War, however, enabled Assad to take risks. In 1986, the CIA (1986a, 16) believed that "both countries [Syria and Turkey] probably realise that a significant military confrontation [because of Syria's Kurdish policies] would invite superpower involvement." The Soviet-Syrian alliance reduced the Turkish willingness to retaliate. Meanwhile, Western intelligence analysts stressed Assad's autonomy in the case of Kurdish matters: "The Soviet connection to Kurdish extremism seems to exist only at fourth remove — for example, Kurdish trainees in Palestinian camps under Syrian auspices reportedly receive training on Soviet weaponry" (CIA 1985b, 10).

Decline of the Syrian Regional Power

Syria and Iran were in no rush to re-embrace the PUK when it came back in 1986. They already had other Kurdish allies, the KDP and the PKK. According to observers, the PUK was "virtually defunct... for months Talabani hung on in a kind of limbo, on the run in the mountainous north country" (Pelletiere 1991, 17). Finally, in October 1986, the PUK fighters started operating alongside the Iranian army, and, in November, the PUK and KDP agreed on joint operations. Talabani's meeting with Iranian leaders, on 7th November 1986, was likened to "going to Canossa" (Tageszeitung 1986a; Tageszeitung 1986b).

Nevertheless, relations between the principal Iraqi Kurdish parties remained strained. As Iraqi intelligence reported in 1987, they barred each other from entering their respective zones of activity. During the war with Iraq, Iran provided supplies and sanctuary to both the KDP and the PUK, even if Tehran treated the KDP more favourably and Syria preferred the PUK. Iraqi records noted that "Syrian officers trained PUK fighters and supplied them with weapons," yet Damascus allowed the Kurdish groups to maintain only representative offices. Moreover, it still "tried to coordinate [Kurdish activities] with the entire [Iraqi] opposition camp," i.e., sticking to its policy of "Iraqisation" of the Kurdish actors' activities (Rabil 2002, 5-6).

In addition, the PUK and KDP in November–December 1987 agreed to establish the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF), which was officially launched in May 1988 with the participation of smaller parties (Aziz 2011, 196). Iraqi intelligence reported that the establishment of the front was the result of prolonged discussions, mostly in Damascus, and the Syrian regime (alongside Iran) backed the Front thereafter (Rabil 2002, 5-6; Ishow 2003, 175).

After 1987, the Assad regime attached itself ever more to Iran in its Kurdish policies. Syria's economic and international situation deteriorated. Tehran possessed more resources which could be spent on Kurdish parties helping it fight the war. Observers on the ground in 1988 insisted that the Kurds, particularly the PUK, threw their lot in with Iran for "survival reasons," as Talabani's fighters critically depended on the KDP and Iranian

forces in its operations. This "desperate" situation made the PUK leader tighten ties with the Turkish-Kurdish PKK and even seek support in the US (Maarouf 1988, 10). Iraqi intelligence at the end of the Iran-Iraq war reported that, although Libya still supported the PUK and even trained its fighters, the group now worked more with Iran and the KDP (Rabil 2002, 6).

When Iran accepted an armistice in July 1988, Iraqi Kurds found themselves in an even more destitute situation than before the war. The Iraqi government drove the IKF forces from Iraqi territory and intensified ethnic cleansing in Kurdish areas. In December 1988, Western observers reported Kurdish guerrilla presence and movement on the Iran-Iraq border, but no operations against the Iraqis (Schneider 1989, 3). Iraqi intelligence agencies agreed that, after the ceasefire, "Syrian and Iranian support for the Kurdish opposition became more circumscribed," but both of them continued to help Kurdish fighters infiltrate Iraq. Iran, however, put more limitations on the Kurdish militants, prohibiting them from attacking Iraq from its territory or along the Iran-Iraq border (Rabil 2002, 7).

In the late 1980s, besides supporting the guerrilla war, Syria continued to host Iraqi Kurdish politicians and activists. Among them was Mahmud Othman, the leader of the Socialist Party of Kurdistan and one of the leaders of the IKF, who had been refused refuge in Great Britain (Ballı 1991, 462, 464). The Syrian partnership with the Iraqi Kurds, however, looked hopeless.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the US-led response and military operation against Iraq "came as a reprise for the embattled parties of the IKF" (Stansfield 2010, 95). The Kurds (and other Iraqi oppositional forces) struggled to navigate the new situation. Already in September 1990, Talabani signalled a move towards Damascus by launching a cooperation between the PUK and the pro-Syrian Iraqi Ba'thists (Ballı 1991, 500). Iraqi military intelligence from October 1990 to January 1991 reported that although Iraqi opposition groups intensified their efforts to coordinate their activities, they hesitated to support the imminent US-led intervention. Reportedly, the PUK discussed seeking an agreement with the Iraqi regime even up to a month before the US-led operation, and the KDP was more interested in recovering its positions in Iraqi Kurdistan rather than in regime change (Rabil 2002, 7-8).

This cautious stance came out of the context of the Iraqi Kurdish parties, which were stranded in Syria and Iran. At this stage, both countries lacked the resources to help them challenge the Iraqi regime. For Damascus, from the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union started reducing, eventually cutting, its aid, and refused to provide Syria with diplomatic and military cover. Arab countries increasingly reduced the financial aid they pledged to provide to Damascus just as the first economic sanctions were imposed on Syria by the European Economic Community and the USA in 1987. Iran was devastated by war and was ambiguous over the Iraqi confrontation with the West. Libya supported Iraq, leaving Assad to fund his Kurdish projects himself.

The Syrian government was worried about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, fearing Iraqi aggression against itself. Because of its shrinking resources, Damascus would find such an assault difficult to repel. Assad was willing to support the US-led coalition, and Syria became one of the first countries to send the Saudis troops in order to defend the pro-Western monarchy against Iraq.

Concurrently, Assad tried to make a play through his Kurdish allies. Damascus organised several meetings of the Iraqi opposition to discuss a joint plan of action. Now that the Syrians worked with both major Iraqi Kurdish parties, they did not face the problem of the KDP's control of western and northern access routes into Iraqi Kurdistan. The Syrian government even invited the KDP to open bases and a headquarters on its territory and further promised to support its military operations. Damascus was willing to establish a military headquarters for all the Iraqi oppositional groups next to the border with Iraq and Turkey—i.e., next to Badinan, which had frustrated many of its plans for decades. Unsurprisingly, the PUK agreed, the KDP and

the Communists responded with reservations, citing their worries about strengthening Syrian positions and showing instead their willingness to coordinate with the US and their allies. Turkey also restrained Syrian ambitions: Ankara let Syria, alongside Western states, establish operational centres in the Turkish province of Hakkari—bordering on Badinan—but prohibited operations against Iraqi forces along the Iraqi-Turkish border (Rabil 2002, 8).

By the end of 1990, it seemed that Damascus might have found new sponsors for its Iraqi Kurdish endeavours as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states took an interest in the Iraqi opposition which had been stranded for years in Damascus. In December 1990, relying on these new partnerships, the Assad regime brought the Iraqi opposition (whose backbone was the Kurdish parties close to Syria) together in Damascus to establish the so-called 'Joint Action Committee'. With this, Damascus and Tehran began preparing an all-Iraqi opposition congress to guarantee themselves a place at the negotiating table once the Saddam regime was defeated. At the same time, they kept their Kurdish partners away from active participation in the Western war preparations.

However, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states not only stuck with the West but also established their own Iraqi oppositional groups. Other Iraqi oppositional activists also kept their distance from Damascus by operating from London. Despite these setbacks, the congress opened in Beirut in March 1991 just as rebellion erupted in Iraq. The event failed to legitimate Damascus' claims to influence Iraq's future. Moreover, the policies of Damascus and Tehran prevented Kurdish parties from taking a leading role in the uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan from the beginning.

While in Southern Iraq the US-led coalition let Baghdad suppress the rebellion, in Iraqi Kurdistan it established a no-fly zone for the Iraqi air force on 1st March 1991. This enabled the PUK and KDP to establish control over regions on the borders with Iran and Turkey. The Kurdish entity that was beginning to emerge in the region had a narrow way of access to Syria, and, in the context of Syrian-Turkish antagonism, Iraqi Kurdish authorities chose to develop relations with the pro-Western and economically more advanced Turkey to the detriment of links with Syria. Although Assad participated in the 1991 US-led international operation against Iraq, his country became marginalised in the new regional order.

Under these circumstances even the old Kurdish friends of Syria looked for new allies. In a meeting with Turkish president Turgut Özal on 5th June 1991, Talabani lashed out at Syria and Iran as "not real friends," proclaiming that "the only way is to go to Ankara." Barzani also voiced his worries that the Iraqi Ba'th regime could be replaced by either Shi'ite Islamists or a puppet of Syria. The Kurdish leaders rejected the "Syrian-Iranian axis" as an alternative to Saddam (Çandar 2012, 119). In a symbolic move, after learning of the travel restrictions imposed on Talabani and Barzani by Syria, Turkish president Turgut Özal provided them with Turkish passports (Ergan 2003).

The new Kurdish policy of Özal facilitated this reorientation as he also started talks with the PKK. Talabani, in a meeting in Ankara on 26th June 1992, promoted daring ideas of a Turkish penetration into Northern Iraq through an alliance with Iraqi Kurds and offered help to solve the 'PKK problem' (Cemal 2003, 335). Indeed, on 17th March 1993, Talabani and PKK leader Öcalan held a press conference at which they announced the first unilateral ceasefire by the PKK. It collapsed when Özal died in April.

As Syria, Iran and Libya increasingly lacked resources, Iraqi Kurdish politicians began frequenting Ankara, as well as Western capitals. The 1991 Gulf War, followed by the Soviet collapse and the Madrid peace conference, accelerated the demise of left-wing Arab regimes and their Islamist allies which had started in the late 1980s. Damascus and Tehran could not stop their Kurdish partners from switching their allegiances to the

West. After 1997, when the US launched its policies of dual containment and had brokered peace between the Iraqi Kurdish parties, the reorientation of the Iraqi Kurdish parties towards the West became unstoppable.

Damascus' partnership with the PKK followed the decline of its partnership with the Iraqi Kurds. First, in the 1990s Iran played an ever bigger role in supporting the PKK. Syria had ever less resources for its ambitious foreign policy, including its Kurdish projects, and the US and its allies succeeded in increasingly isolating it along with similar states that challenged the West and the new international order. The relations between the Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish partners of Damascus were complicated as by then the PKK had become an important player also in Iraqi Kurdistan. As the PUK and KDP consolidated their control of Iraqi Kurdistan concurrently to developing relations with Turkey, the PKK encountered more constraints on its operating out of Iraqi Kurdistan. As a result, it also sought a place in the new regional order by proclaiming new unilateral ceasefires with Turkey in 1995-96 and 1998-2004. All of them failed, and in October 1998 Turkey forced Syria, under threat of war, to expel Öcalan and he was captured the following year. The Turkish Kurdish projects of the Syrian regime rose and fell together with its Iraqi Kurdish projects.

Conclusions: Powerless Superpowers and Free Radicals

The history of Syria's interaction with Kurdish political movements in the Middle East spans several decades and covers different actors—from Arab nationalists at the beginning of the Cold War to the later Ba'thists, from all the major Kurdish parties of Iraq to the Marxist PKK in Turkey. It reveals a paradoxical interest in the Kurdish movement on the part of the Syrian establishment which all the while were suppressing the Kurds inside Syria. Damascus' orientation to external Kurdish organisations shifted a great deal, yet Syria's major "Kurdish projects" abroad were interwoven. Thus, the support for the PKK in Turkey was connected with previous contacts with the PUK in Iraq, and the cooperation with the PUK resulted from earlier interactions with the Barzani movement. However pragmatic or even cynical this support was, it created opportunities for Kurdish national and social emancipation and shaped important parts of current Middle Eastern politics.

Alone, the Syrian government had few resources to funnel to Kurdish groups and was too vulnerable, domestically and regionally, to take on the risks the support would entail. However, the circumstances of the Cold War made it possible for the Syrian state to draw in the external support necessary to engage in ambitious regional policies, including the support for external Kurdish organisations. Most of the resources and support came from Moscow between 1955 and 1991, but Damascus also received a substantial amount from the pro-Western Middle Eastern regimes, radical nationalist Libya and Islamist Iran. Even Libyan and Iranian resources began shrinking when the unique Cold War circumstances dissolved, and the West curtailed the operational opportunities of these regimes—thanks above all to the collapse of the Eastern bloc which functioned as a counterbalance to the West preventing the latter from an unrestrained crackdown on anti-Western actors.

Despite this, Damascus was nobody's proxy, as proven by Assad's moves against Soviet allies and interests, for example in Lebanon. Syria's Kurdish allies possessed a similar autonomy. The PUK switched loyalties between antagonistic regimes while the KDP did not hesitate to reject the requests of its Syrian or Iranian partners. Kurdish nationalists, far from remaining "proxies" devoid of agency, used their client status largely for their own benefit. Their alliance with Syria allowed them to secure military resources, safe haven, prestige, and diplomatic support. This paper shows that this kind of agency in the hands of smaller states and non-state

actors stemmed from the basic feature of Cold War global politics, namely that the apparent imbalance of forces and interests on a global scale, i.e. the Soviets' overwhelming power over Syria and Damascus' power over the Kurds, was frequently secondary, or even immaterial, on a regional or local scale.

The end of the Cold War resulted in the decline of Syrian regional influence, in particular amongst the Kurds. The disappearance of the earlier available external resources was one of the defining factors of said decline. As a result of these global and regional transformations, major Kurdish political organisations allied with the West and pro-Western regimes in the region.

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Authors' Information:

Angelika Pobedonostseva, PhD in History, Associate professor, Department of History of the Middle East Countries Faculty of Asian and African Studies, Saint Petersburg State University.

Siarhei Bohdan, Dr. rer. pol. (FU Berlin), at the time of the writing of this paper, Specially-Appointed Associate Professor at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University, Japan. He would like to thank the Foreign Visitors Fellowship Program of the Center for supporting this research.