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## **The Kurds: A Channel of Russian Influence in the Middle East?**

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*Igor Delanoë*

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*Editor: Dorothee Schmid*

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## Abstract

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With the Syrian crisis entering its fifth year, the changing security context in Syria and Iraq since the summer of 2014 has highlighted the increasingly important role played by the Kurds as a fighting force against Islamic State (IS). In a more general context of renewed Russian influence in the Middle East since the late 2000s, the development of Russo-Kurdish relations has entered a new phase since the beginning of the current decade. Russians and Kurds have several converging interests, the main focus of which is currently the fight against IS and cooperation in the energy sector. Russo-Kurdish relations are not without contradictions, however, due to Moscow's multifaceted diplomacy in the Middle East. The Kremlin is one of the rare strategic players in the region that has the ability to negotiate with all of its countries. Turkey, Syria and Iran, which are equally strategic partners for Moscow, all fear the danger of Kurdish separatism. Until now, the Kremlin's diplomatic balancing act has enabled it to strengthen its ties with the Kurds, without compromising its relations with neighboring countries concerned about the issue of Kurdistan.

# Introduction

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With the Syrian crisis entering its fifth year, the changing security context in Syria and Iraq since the summer of 2014 has highlighted the increasingly important role played by the Kurds as a fighting force against Islamic State (IS). Both an interstate and an intrastate actor, the Kurds seem to be the forgotten people of the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed by France and the UK in 1916<sup>1</sup>. During his visit to Moscow in February 2013, Masoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, pointed out that the Kurdish people represented some 45 million individuals, making them the world's "largest divided nation"<sup>2</sup>. Some 60 years after his father, Mustafa Barzani, arrived in the USSR, the historic visit of the leader of the Iraqi Kurds to the Russian capital demonstrated the mutual desire of Erbil and Moscow to develop their ties, a testament to a longstanding Russo-Kurdish friendship born in the middle of the last century<sup>3</sup>.

In a more general context of renewed Russian influence in the Middle East since the late 2000s, the development of Russo-Kurdish relations has entered a new phase since the beginning of the current decade. Russians and Kurds have several converging interests, the main focus of which is currently the fight against IS and cooperation in the energy sector. For the Kremlin, it is also a case of perpetuating and developing links with an actor that has been called to play a key role in reshaping the geopolitics of the Middle East following the Arab Spring. Russo-Kurdish relations are not without contradictions, however, due to Moscow's multifaceted diplomacy in the region. The Kremlin is one of the rare strategic players in the Middle East that has

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Translated from French by Frances Thomas.

<sup>1</sup> The Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed on 16 May 1916 by the British and the French, with the assent of Russia and Italy. It provided for the Ottoman possessions in the Middle East to be divided between France and the UK, which placed the new states (Lebanon, Mandate Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait and Iraq) under their direct influence.

<sup>2</sup> V. Naumkin, "Russia's Kurdish Dilemma", *Al-Monitor*, 26 January, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In June 1947, the Kurdish leader, Mustafa Barzani, took refuge in the USSR after fleeing northern Iran, where a Kurdish state had briefly been established (see below). According to Kurdish folklore, he stood before the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower with his men and knocked on the doors, shouting "The Kurdish people are knocking on the door". M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia renews Kurdish bonds", *Asia Times*, 25 February, 2013.

the ability to negotiate with all the countries in the region<sup>4</sup>. Turkey, Syria and Iran, which are equally strategic partners for Moscow, all fear the danger of Kurdish separatism<sup>5</sup>.

The question, therefore, is how can Russia cultivate fruitful ties with the Kurds without jeopardizing its relations with Turkey? Moscow's guiding principle remains to protect the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, but how can it guarantee that in the medium term when Kurdish fighters increasingly appear to be no longer an auxiliary force, but an essential one in the fight against IS on the Syrian and Iraqi fronts? Until now, the Kremlin's diplomatic balancing act has enabled it to strengthen its ties with the Kurds, without compromising its relations with neighboring countries concerned about the issue of Kurdistan: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

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<sup>4</sup> When discussing Russian policy in the Middle East, M. N. Katz talks about "the art of making friends with everybody" in "Russia's Greater Middle East Policy or the Art of Making Friends with Everybody", *Russie.Nei. Visions*, No. 49, April 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See H. Bozarlan, *Conflit kurde : le brasier oublié du Moyen-Orient [Kurdish Conflict: the Forgotten Hot Spot of the Middle East]*, Paris, Autrement, 2009, cited by D. Schmid, "Introduction : le moment kurde" ["Introduction: the Kurdish moment"], *Politique étrangère*, 2014/2, p. 10.



# Moscow and the Kurds: a Long History

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## *The USSR and the Kurds*

From 1921, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) recognized the Kurdish people as a nationality. In 1923, a Kurdish district was created in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), on the border with the Armenia SSR, with its capital at Lachin, located in what is now the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Though known as 'Red Kurdistan', this Soviet Kurdish district became the cradle of the national liberation movements for the Kurds of Iraq (then under British rule), Syria (then under French rule), Turkey and Iran. According to the 1926 census, Soviet Kurds constituted a small minority of around 70,000, of whom 67,000 lived in the Caucasus and a little under 3,000 lived in central Asia<sup>6</sup>. According to other sources, this figure may have been closer to 160,000, but either way, the Soviet Kurds appeared to be a small minority compared with those living in the Middle East, who formed communities numbering several million people<sup>7</sup>. Though the Soviet Kurds enjoyed considerable cultural and linguistic autonomy in the 1920s, during the 1930s they were subject to a policy of sovietization that was manifested primarily through the russification of family names. With the exception of the Kurdish Yazidi communities living in the Caucasus and those that settled in Turkmenistan, the Soviet Kurds were deported to central Asia, mainly to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan<sup>8</sup>.

Shortly after the Second World War, Moscow supported the creation of the autonomous Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, which was proclaimed in Iranian Kurdistan on 22 January 1946. Defeated by the Iranian army, the Kurdish fighters, led by Mustafa Barzani (the father of Masoud Barzani) took refuge in June 1947 in the USSR, where they spent 12 years in exile. The Kurds participated in Soviet political life: in January 1959, three Kurds were among the 459 deputies who

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<sup>6</sup> S. Ivanov, "Sud'ba sovetskih kurdov" ["The Fate of the Soviet Kurds"], *Vostok*, No. 6, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bennigsen, « Les Kurdes et la kurdologie en Union soviétique » ["The Kurds and Kurdology in the Soviet Union"], *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 1, No. 3, April-June 1960, p. 514.

<sup>8</sup> S. Ivanov, *art. cit.* [6].

sat in the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Armenia<sup>9</sup>. In 1958, Mustafa Barzani and his men left the USSR, and in the 1960s they fought for the creation of a Kurdish state within Iraq. Moscow, through the intervention of Yevgeny Primakov, then a young correspondent for *Pravda* in the Middle East, helped to draw up a peace agreement between the Kurds and Baghdad that was signed on 11 March 1970, providing for the autonomy of Iraqi Kurds whilst recognizing their ethnic identity<sup>10</sup>. From then on, the ideology of and support for a national emancipation movement were seen as key elements of relations between Moscow and the Kurds, as well as instruments with which to exert Soviet influence in the Middle East. On the eve of the collapse of the USSR, there were officially around 153,000 Kurds living in Soviet territory, though their actual number was probably between 300,000 and 500,000<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Kurdistan: a unified territory?***

The Kurds live in a territory that extends across northern Iraq, eastern Iran, eastern Turkey and north-eastern Syria. There are also clusters of Kurds in the Caucasus and in central Asia. However, aside from the fact that the territorial continuity of Kurdistan is subject to discussion in certain areas, the political unity of the group is currently non-existent, since Kurdish communities are beset by clan rivalries that have led to clashes in the past, especially in Iraq<sup>12</sup>.

Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but some clans follow Shia Islam, such as the Twelver Shias of the Iranian province of Khorasan and those of Turkmenistan, while another group is represented by the Yazidis, who are found mainly in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, where there is also an Alevi Kurdish community<sup>13</sup>. The diversity of this religious landscape echoes the disparity within the Kurdish political scene, with a clear fracture between the Kurdistan Workers' Party<sup>14</sup> (PKK) and the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) – secular Marxist-Leninist groups – on the one hand, and the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barzani on the other.

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<sup>9</sup> A. Bennigsen, *art. cit.* [7], p. 516.

<sup>10</sup> Y. Primakov, *Le monde sans la Russie ?* [A World without Russia?], Paris, Economica, 2009, p. 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> S. Ivanov, *art. cit.* [6].

<sup>12</sup> See below.

<sup>13</sup> A. Bennigsen, *op. cit.* [7], p. 514.

<sup>14</sup> The PKK was founded in 1978 by a student at the Istanbul Law Faculty, Abdullah Öcalan (born in 1949), who established it as a national liberation movement guided by Marxist-Leninist ideology. In 1984, the party began an armed struggle aimed at obtaining substantial autonomy for the Kurds, who represent between 15% and 20% of Turkey's population.

The Iraqi Kurdish community, which represents just under 20% of Iraq's population (5 million people) and is based on a clan system, has undergone a split that once threatened its cohesion and was born of a rivalry between the KDP and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)<sup>15</sup>. These divergences led to armed clashes between 1994 and 1996, and to the brief existence of two Iraqi Kurdish entities, with the KDP being based at Erbil and the PUK at Sulaymaniyah. Though the US invasion of 2003 put an end to these fratricidal wars, a form of rivalry between Iraqi Kurds persisted: whereas Masoud Barzani became president of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq, Jalal Talabani became president of the entire country of Iraq, holding the post between April 2005 and July 2014.

The relations between the Kurds of Iraq and those of the PYD and the PKK are complicated to say the least, as demonstrated by the measures taken by Erbil to restrict Syrian Kurds' access to Iraq after the outbreak of civil war in Syria. The Iraqi Kurdish authorities gave authorization for humanitarian aid and refugees to pass through, but forbade individuals from crossing the border alone and blocked cross-border trade<sup>16</sup>. While the Syrian Kurds - whose population is estimated to be around 2.2 million, or 10% of Syria's population - want to contribute to a political solution to the crisis in Syria, they want to do so separately to the Syrian opposition, and without being grouped together into a single Kurdish party<sup>17</sup>. This split came to light in autumn 2013 during preparations for the Geneva II conference, which began in January 2014. While the Kurdish National Council, which groups together most strains of Syrian Kurdish politics, was fighting to join the ranks of the Syrian opposition, the PYD wanted to take part in discussions within the framework of a rival entity: the Kurdish Supreme Committee<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the terms of the Kurds' participation in the Geneva II conference reflect a struggle for influence between the big powers, with Moscow supporting the

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<sup>15</sup> Jalal Talabani was born in 1933 in Iraqi Kurdistan. He is the founder of the PUK party.

<sup>16</sup> A. Zaman, "Syrian Kurdish Leader Urges Turkey to End Support for Salafists", *Al-Monitor*, 9 October, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> V. van Wilgenburg, "Syria's Kurds Divided over Geneva II Conference", *Al-Monitor*, 9 October, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> The Kurdish National Council (KNC) was founded in October 2011 in Erbil, under the sponsorship of Masoud Barzani and the KDP. The KNC, which was intended as an opposition group to Bashar al-Assad, was created shortly after the founding of the Syrian National Council in September 2011. The KNC groups together just under 20 Syrian Kurdish political parties and factions, but does not include the PYD. Under the mediation of Masoud Barzani, the Kurdish Supreme Committee was founded on the initiative of the PYD and the KNC in July 2012 as an additional measure to unite Syria's Kurds. The People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the PYD and the Kurdish Supreme Committee, plays a minimal role in the fighting against Bashar al-Assad, but is very active in the campaign against IS.

positions of the PYD, and Washington and Ankara, those of the Kurdish National Council.

The Iranian Kurds – around 8 million people – have so far kept a careful distance from the tumults affecting the neighboring Kurdish regions since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria. Distant descendants of the Kurdish tribes deported in the 16th and 17th centuries to the eastern banks of the Caspian Sea by the Safavid Shahs, they took part in the revolution against the Shah of Iran in 1979. In 2004, they set up a political and militant organization, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), which is affiliated to Turkey's PKK, and which has fought since 2004 for greater cultural and political autonomy for Kurds within the Islamic Republic. The fight for their independence is believed to have cost them tens of thousands of lives, and today their operational combat activity has been scaled back considerably. The Iranian Kurds have opted for non-violent activism, with the aim of achieving recognition of their cultural and political rights within the Islamic Republic<sup>19</sup>.

The scattered Kurdish population offers Russia different strands of influence in the Middle East, which the Kremlin reactivated during the 1990s when it reoriented its diplomacy towards the Middle East upon Yevgeny Primakov's appointment as foreign minister.

### ***Towards a renewal of Russo-Kurdish relations***

The reactivation of ties with the Kurds during the 1990s was a response to the Kremlin's need to obtain levers of pressure on Ankara. On the one hand, Moscow sought to diminish Turkish influence in a Caucasus destabilized by the war in Chechnya (1994-1996), and where Ankara filled the strategic void created by the collapse of the USSR by highlighting the dynamism of its economy and playing the turkophone and Muslim ethno-religious card<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, Russia, whose economy is dependent on gas and oil exports, wanted a way to temper Turkey's tendencies to restrict the flow of tankers passing through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. The Kurdish question became an apple of discord between Russians and Turks in 1994, when Moscow announced the organization of an international conference on Russia's Kurds, and then in January 1995, when two Kurdish exiles from Turkey, Ali Yigit and Necdat Buldan, visited the Russian capital in order to explore the possibility

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<sup>19</sup> "Iran's Kurds seek coexistence with Shia as life improves", *Financial Times*, December 3, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> G. Minassian, « Le Caucase du Sud entre les anciens empires » ["The South Caucasus between former empires"], *Questions internationales*, No. 37, May-June 2009, p. 73-75.

of establishing a Kurdistan parliament in exile there<sup>21</sup>. The PKK has been engaged in permanent guerrilla warfare against the Turkish army in the south-east of the country since 1984, a conflict that has led to some 40,000 deaths and resulted in the displacement of around two million people over the last three decades<sup>22</sup>. Boris Yeltsin's appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as foreign minister in January 1996 (a post he held until September 1998) also prompted a regeneration of Russo-Kurdish relations. A true networker and eminent specialist in the Middle East, Yevgeny Primakov retained the ties he had made with Kurdish leaders in the 1960s, particularly his relations with Jalal Talabani and the Barzanis<sup>23</sup>. In 1998, Primakov received a KDP delegation dispatched to Moscow by Erbil, whose mission was to secure representation for the Kurdish party in the Russian capital<sup>24</sup>.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein marked the opening of a new chapter in Russo-Kurdish relations. Russia was one of the first countries to open a Consulate General in Erbil<sup>25</sup>. However, during the 2000s, Moscow underexploited its ties with the Iraqi Kurds in order to keep Turkey sweet and avoid being seen as a supporter of a separatist movement. When visiting Iraqi Kurdistan in 2008, Primakov, then president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, lamented the lack of Russian businesses expanding into a region with a growing economy and a stable security situation at the time<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> R.W. Olson, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1996, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> J. Marcou, "La politique kurde de l'AKP : chimères ou réalité ?" ["The AKP's Kurdish Policy: Pipe Dreams or Reality?"], *Moyen-Orient*, No. 26, April-June 2015, p. 41-42.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Primakov, *op. cit.* [10], p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Y. Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood*, New-York, Routledge, 2014, p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> Russia opened a Consulate General in Erbil in late November 2007. The Czech Republic opened the first Consulate General there in May 2006. See the website of the Department of Foreign Relations of the government of Iraqi Kurdistan: <<http://dfr.gov.krd/p/p.aspx?p=37&l=12&s=020100&r=363>>.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Primakov, *op. cit.* [10], p. 56. Yevgeny Primakov was president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry between 2001 and 2011.

# The Kurds: an Instrument for Russian Influence in a Middle East in Crisis

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## *Russia and minorities in the Middle East*

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Russia's political elites have talked a great deal about the importance of protecting minorities in the Middle East. The Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, mentioned the issue during the 28th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, which was opened in Geneva on March 2, 2015<sup>27</sup>. The discourse taking place at the highest level of the Russian government about the need to preserve and protect Russia's Christian roots and values<sup>28</sup> is therefore being extended to the Middle East with the issue of protecting Eastern Christian minorities. This is also an instance of history repeating itself: the Russian Empire became the official protector of the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire pursuant to the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), which put an end to the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, Russia, which is currently home to some 23,200 Kurds and approximately 40,600 Yazidis<sup>29</sup>, has associated the protection of Kurdish minorities with that of Christian minorities in the Middle East in its discourse. In summer 2013, when Syrian Kurds began to be targeted in the Aleppo region by Islamists, the Russian foreign minister condemned "attacks by radicals against the peaceful Kurdish population"<sup>30</sup>. Moscow fears an Iraq-style scenario for the Christian and Kurdish minorities of Syria. The US invasion of 2003 caused a dramatic decline in Iraq's

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<sup>27</sup> "Speech by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a high-level event on issues of protecting Christians", website of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

<sup>28</sup> "Russia will Defend National Identity, Based on Religious Values – Putin", Interfax, 20 September, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> 2010 census, cited by M. Suchkov, "Will Russia Play the Kurdish Card?", *Al-Monitor*, 9 December 2013. Most of Russia's Kurds live in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but there are also Kurdish communities in Astrakhan, Yaroslavl, Rostov-on-Don, Saratov, Tambov, Novosibirsk and Kursk.

<sup>30</sup> "Syrie : les autorités et l'opposition doivent chasser les terroristes d'Al-Qaïda" ["Syria: the Authorities and the Opposition must Drive out Al-Qaeda Terrorists"], *Sputnik News*, 1 August, 2013.

Christian community, whose population fell from 850,000 before the war to just 250,000 in the early 2010s. Though some Iraqi Christians fled persecution by opting for self-imposed exile in the West, the majority sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, whose Christian population more or less doubled during the 2000s<sup>31</sup>. In Iraq, the proclamation of a neo-caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS, on 29 June 2014 in the Great Mosque of Mosul was followed by the launch of a campaign of ethnic cleansing carried out by jihadists against the Yazidi and Christian minorities of the province of Nineveh in Iraq. Russia is therefore keen to prevent a potential influx of Kurds into the Caucasus, which would undoubtedly affect the region's denominational and ethnic mosaic<sup>32</sup>. The Kremlin's efforts to associate the Kurds with a political solution to the crisis in Syria are therefore intended to prevent ethnic cleansing. Russia is also seeking to develop and consolidate ties with a fighting force that is becoming increasingly indispensable in the campaign against IS in Iraq and Syria.

### ***The fight against Islamic State***

Seen from Moscow, the Kurds represent a secular, moderate Sunni force that is increasingly important in the fight against IS, which poses a threat to Russian security interests. The fight against terrorism and IS was therefore one of the issues discussed during the meeting between Nechervan Barzani, the prime minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, and Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's deputy foreign minister and Vladimir Putin's special envoy to the Middle East, when the latter visited Erbil in January 2015. Though the Kurds have been receiving arms from the US, France, Germany and the UK since summer 2014<sup>33</sup>, they have not received any military assistance from Russia. Moscow has cooperated with Baghdad and Erbil on operational intelligence, however, and has also provided humanitarian aid<sup>34</sup>.

The Kremlin's reticence to provide military aid to the Kurds may at first sight appear to contradict Russia's stated goal of fighting extremism and terrorism, particularly in the Middle East. Furthermore,

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<sup>31</sup> C. Therme, "La puissance russe au Moyen-Orient : déclin ou retour inéluctable ?" [Russian Power in the Middle East: Decline or Inevitable Revival?], *Études de l'IRSEM*, no. 33, 2014, p. 33-34.

<sup>32</sup> Some 15,000 Kurds are believed to live in Georgia currently, while there are thought to be between 30,000 and 40,000 Yazidis in Armenia. The largest group of Kurds can be found in Azerbaijan, however, where their population is thought to be between 150,000 and 250,000. In central Asia, Kazakhstan is believed to be home to 150,000 Kurds, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan both have clusters of Kurds numbering several thousand. S. Ivanov, *art. cit.* [6].

<sup>33</sup> "Soutenir les Kurdes, un défi pour les services" [Supporting the Kurds: a Challenge for the Services], *Intelligence Online*, No. 718, 3 September 2014.

<sup>34</sup> "Russia and Kurdistan Focus on Stronger Ties", *Bas News*, 21 January 2015.

the Kurds appear to be all the more precious as partners in the fight against IS since they aspire, according to Yevgeny Primakov, to create "an absolutely secular, democratic society"<sup>35</sup>. The explanation for Russia's caution lies in its desire both to avoid compromising the territorial integrity of Iraq by arming a force that still has separatist tendencies, and to keep its Turkish and Iranian partners sweet.

### ***What are the prospects for cooperation in the energy sector?***

During his visit to Iraqi Kurdistan in late January 2015, Mikhail Bogdanov discussed with the Iraqi prime minister the idea of reinforcing Russo-Kurdish cooperation in the energy sector<sup>36</sup>. The subsoil of Kurdistan may contain oil reserves equivalent to 141 billion barrels, or 17% of Iraq's oil reserves<sup>37</sup>.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, Moscow has been able to develop a form of energy cooperation with Erbil without compromising the renewal of its partnership with Baghdad<sup>38</sup>. Russian energy companies began to be active in Iraqi Kurdistan in summer 2012, when Gazprom Neft launched the development of two oil blocks, Shakal and Garmian. According to the Russian company, the two blocks have combined estimated reserves of 3.6 billion barrels, with production scheduled to start in 2015<sup>39</sup>. Gazprom Neft is the principal operator on the Shakal block, with a share of 80%, whereas it has formed a consortium with Canadian firm Western Zagros for the exploitation of the Garmian block. Gazprom Neft is also involved in a third project in Iraqi Kurdistan, which concerns the exploration and exploitation of the Halabja block, where drilling is scheduled to begin in 2015-2016<sup>40</sup>.

The signing of an agreement between Erbil and Baghdad in December 2014 regulating exports of Kurdish oil could, however, bring about new possibilities for the Russo-Kurdish energy partnership<sup>41</sup>. Pursuant to this agreement, which put an end to a dispute that had lasted almost a decade, Baghdad recognized Iraqi Kurdistan's right to export up to 550,000 barrels of oil per day,

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<sup>35</sup> Y. Primakov, *op. cit.* [10], p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> "PM Barzani meets President Putin's special envoy", official website of the Kurdistan regional government, 21 January, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> "Oil Gives Kurds a Path to Independence, and Conflict with Baghdad", *The New York Times*, 25 October, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> I. Delanoë, "Comment Moscou renouvelle son influence en Irak" [How Moscow is renewing its influence in Iraq], *Russie 2014*, Le Cherche Midi, Observatoire francorusse, April 2014, p. 379-380.

<sup>39</sup> Gazprom Neft website.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> M. Tanchum, "The Kurds' Big Year", *Foreign Affairs*, 12 January, 2015.



including 300,000 barrels from the oil fields of Kirkuk, to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, on the Mediterranean. The Iraqi government will receive all the revenues from the sale of this oil, and in exchange, it undertakes to resume annual payments equivalent to 17% of the national budget and to provide military and financial assistance worth \$1 billion to the peshmerga fighting against IS<sup>42</sup>. If this agreement works, the normalization of relations between Erbil and Baghdad could make it easier for Russian energy companies to set up in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly because the region's natural gas reserves are estimated at 1.8 trillion cubic meters<sup>43</sup>. The appeal for Moscow would be that it could establish itself in a market that Turkey may seek to exploit in order to reduce its strong dependence on Russian natural gas (which accounted for 58% of Turkish natural gas imports in 2013<sup>44</sup>).

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<sup>42</sup> "Iraqi government reaches deal with Kurds on oil, budget", *Reuters*, 2 December, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> S.A. Elliott, L.B. Beryl, "Natural Gas Development in Kurdistan. A Financial Assessment", Harvard Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, August 2012, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> "Energy Deals May Make Turkey Irreversibly Reliant on Moscow", *Al-Monitor*, 12 December, 2014.

# The Ambivalence of Russo-Kurdish Relations

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## *The territorial integrity of the states of the Middle East: a red line for Moscow*

Just as the USSR managed to maintain ties with the Kurds without compromising its relations with Hafez al-Assad's Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Russia is seeking to develop a balanced relationship with both the Kurds and the countries that Kurdistan straddles. The Syrian crisis and their contribution to the fight against IS have provided the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds with a new opportunity to increase their influence and their autonomy within the political context of the Middle East.

The Iraqi Kurdish model of political and financial autonomy within the national framework of Iraq has inspired Syrian Kurds who wish to see the recognition of their cultural and political rights, as well as their self-determination within the republic of Rojava, which was proclaimed in November 2013 and covers several de facto autonomous areas in north-eastern Syria. They are not seeking a federal model and, according to Salih Muslim, the co-chairman of the PYD, the republic of Rojava may even be a transitional administrative structure in place until a political solution to the Syrian crisis is found<sup>45</sup>. This cautious position enables the PYD to benefit from the diplomatic support of Moscow in dealings with Damascus, which to date remains firmly opposed to any form of decentralization. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Moscow is not providing military assistance to the Kurds in the fight against IS, capitalizing instead on the historic ties it has forged with the Talabani and the Barzani, as well as playing the energy card. So far, this strategy has enabled the Kremlin to perpetuate its influence with the KDP, which is close to both Washington and Ankara, whilst also renewing its ties with Baghdad, which remains distrustful of arms deliveries to the Kurds.

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<sup>45</sup> A. Zaman, *art. cit.* [16].

## The Turkish factor Russo-Kurdish relations

With bilateral trade totaling more than \$177 billion between 2008 and 2013, Turkey is now Russia's fourth-largest economic partner. Russia and Turkey hope to boost bilateral trade to \$100 billion per year by 2020<sup>46</sup>. The dynamism of their bilateral partnership proves that Ankara and Moscow have been pragmatic, putting to one side the issues of Syria and the Kurds, which could have been an obstacle to the blossoming of their economic ties.

The Kurdish question was, however, a source of profound disagreement between Russians and Turks during the 1990s, when the PKK sought to obtain political representation in Moscow. For the Kremlin, the Kurdish card was a response to the Turkish authorities' willingness to turn a blind eye to the active support for the Chechen cause provided by Caucasian diasporas in Turkey<sup>47</sup>. Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, the radicalization of Islamist groups and the US invasion of Iraq brought Russia and Turkey closer together. Even so, Moscow has never included the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations. Whereas the Soviet Union provided support to the Marxist-Leninist group, Russia subsequently used it as a lever of pressure on Ankara in the 1990s. In the mid 2000s, the Russian approach to the issue of the PKK evolved: at their meeting in Sochi in July 2005, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed to provide mutual support on the issues of Chechnya and the Kurds<sup>48</sup>. In July 2012, the Kremlin extradited a PKK militant who had been arrested in Russia in July 2011 to Turkey, indicating that the Russian-Turkish entente on this issue is still working, despite the crisis in Syria<sup>49</sup>.

Ankara and the PKK also seem to be on the point of concluding a historic political agreement, which is supported by Abdullah Öcalan, the party's leader and founder, from his prison cell in Turkey, and would put an end to an already dwindling conflict that has lasted more than 30 years. The PKK is not the only actor defending the Kurdish cause in Turkey: the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a left-wing party founded in 2013 as an exclusively pro-Kurdish party and led by Selahattin Demirtas, has chosen to use politics to assert the Kurdish people's rights. At the 2011 legislative election, the HDP obtained 28 out of 550 seats in the National Assembly, while Selahattin Demirtas received 9.8% of votes at the presidential election of August 2014, coming third. The HDP has

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<sup>46</sup> Russian Federal State Statistics Service.

<sup>47</sup> F. Hill, O. Taspinar, "Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus: Moving Together to Preserve the Status Quo?", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 8, January 2006, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> F. Hill, O. Taspinar, *op. cit.* [48], p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> "La Russie extrade un militant kurde vers la Turquie" ["Russia Extradites Kurdish Militant to Turkey"], *Actukurde*, 18 July, 2012.

therefore made its mark on the Turkish political landscape. Its leader visited Moscow in December 2014, when Russia and Turkey sought a rapprochement, with the cancellation of the South Stream pipeline and the announcement of the Turkish Stream project<sup>50</sup>. After three decades, the Kurdish factor seems to have taken on less importance within Russo-Turkish relations and no longer seems likely to ruin them. Meanwhile, Turko-Kurdish relations appear to be on a fragile path towards normalization. Turkey has established an economic cooperation deal with Iraqi Kurdistan that offers it an alternative source of oil to Iran, which provided 35% of Turkish oil imports in 2012<sup>51</sup>. This cooperation on energy comes on top of an already very solid political partnership between Ankara and the KDP.

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<sup>50</sup> V. Naumkin, "Russia and the Kurds", *Al-Monitor*, 5 January, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> US Energy Information Agency.

## Conclusion

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The Russians and the Kurds have become key actors in the geopolitics of the Middle East in recent years, and have developed a partnership underpinned by economic, energy and security issues, with the history the two actors share adding a particular depth to the relationship. Over the last decade, the Kurdish card has become a lever of Russian influence over the geopolitics of the region. Moscow has managed to re-establish and diversify its relations with the Kurds, without compromising its ties with Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. The sympathy currently shown by the Kremlin towards Kurdish aspirations is a remnant of the moderate ideological support that the USSR provided to the Kurdish national liberation movements. Today, however, the partnership between Russia and the Kurds is based primarily on cooperation in the energy sector and the fight against IS. The Kurds are also included in the Russian strategy of building and maintaining dialog with all actors in the Middle East, which enables Moscow to diversify its strands of influence in the region. This strategy is itself part of a proactive policy deployed by the Kremlin with a view to preventing any negative consequences of the Arab Spring for Russia.

The emergence of autonomous Kurdish entities in Turkey and Syria in the medium term could help Moscow's 'Kurdish bet' to pay off, opening up a new way onto the Middle East scene for Russia whilst offering promising prospects for the Russo-Kurdish partnership. In this context, the process of normalization of Turko-Kurdish relations and the schedule for Turkish legislative elections in June 2015 must be monitored carefully, while Syria's Kurds could obtain greater autonomy within the republic of Rojava as part of a resolution of the Syrian crisis. The most important issue for Moscow will be to minimize the diplomatic cost of its ties with autonomous Kurdish entities created within national boundaries coming to fruition. The key for the Kremlin will therefore be to maximize the gains of its 'Kurdish bet', without compromising its relations with its Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian strategic partners.