

# The United States Foreign Policy Towards Kurds

## Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the role of Kurds in the US foreign policy towards the Middle East. This paper presents an alternative approach that pays attention to the role of non-state actors in the US foreign policy and interactions between the state and non-state actors. Our study claims that it is possible to investigate the impact of Kurdish opposition movements on US foreign policy by understanding how the foreign policy of Kurdish opposition movements as non-state actors is produced in interaction with the international system, local system / order, identity and power relations. In this context, it is of particular importance to examine the nature, parameters and limits of the relationship between the Kurds and the US, the most influential state on the Kurds. As a result, it has been observed that ethnic opposition movements try to legitimize their actions against state power with their relations and discourses developed at an international level. On the other hand, it is argued that these movements are used as a leverage and implementer by the global powers.

**Keywords:** the US, Kurds, KDP, PUK, PKK, PJAK, PYD-YPG

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Received:01-11-2019  
Accepted:14-12-2019

## ABD'nin Kürt Politikası

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı ABD'nin Ortadoğu'ya yönelik dış politikasında Kürtlerin rolünü tahlil etmektir. Bu çalışma, devlet dışı aktörlerin ABD dış politikasındaki rolü ile devlet ve devlet dışı aktörler arasındaki etkileşimlere dikkat eden alternatif bir yaklaşım sunmaktadır. Çalışmamız Kürt muhalefet hareketlerinin ABD dış politikasında etkisini araştırabilmenin devlet dışı aktörler olarak Kürt muhalefet hareketlerinin dış politikasının uluslararası sistem, yerel sistem/düzen, kimlik ve güç ilişkileri ile etkileşim içinde nasıl üretildiğinin anlaşılması ile mümkün olacağını iddia etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Kürtler ve Kürtler üzerinde etkili devlet olan ABD arasındaki ilişkinin niteliğinin, parametrelerinin ve sınırlarının incelenmesi özel bir önem taşımaktadır. Sonuç olarak etnik muhalif hareketlerin uluslararası düzeyde geliştirdikleri ilişkileri ve söylemleriyle devlet gücüne karşı eylemlerini meşrulaştırmaya çalıştıkları gözlemlenmiştir. Öte yandan, bu hareketlerin de sistem içinde özellikle küresel güçler tarafından bir kaldıraç gücü ve uygulayıcısı olarak kullanıldığı tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** ABD, Kürtler, KDP, KYB, PKK, PJAK, PYD-YPG

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Geliş Tarihi:01-11-2019  
Kabul Tarihi:14-12-2019

## السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة تجاه الأكراد

### ملخص

ان الغاية من هذه الدراسة هي تحليل دور الأكراد في السياسة الخارجية لدى الولايات المتحدة نحو الشرق الأوسط. هذه الدراسة تقدم مقارنة بديلة تحتم بدور ممثلات غير الحكومية في السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة والتفاعلات بين ممثلات الحكومية و غير الحكومية . تدعي دراستنا أنه من الممكن التحقيق في تأثير حركات المعارضة الكردية على السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة من خلال استوعاب كيف يتم إنتاج السياسة الخارجية لحركات المعارضة الكردية كأطراف فاعلة من غير الدول بالتفاعل مع النظام الدولي ، والنظام المحلي / النظام ، والهوية وعلاقات القوة. و في هذا السياق ، من الأهمية بمكان دراسة الطبيعة ومعايير وحدود العلاقة بين الأكراد والولايات المتحدة ، الذي هي أكثر الدولة نفوذاً على الأكراد. نتيجة لذلك ، شوهده أن حركات المعارضة العرقية ان تجعله شرعاً على تصرفاتها ضد سلطة الدولة من خلال العلاقات والخطابات التي تطورت على المستوى الدولي. و من ناحية أخرى ، تم ناقشة إن هذه الحركات تستخدم كأداة للضغط والتنفيذ خاصتن من جانب القوى العالمية في النظام. كلمات مفتاحية : الولايات المتحدة، الأكراد ، الحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني، الاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني، حزب العمال الكردستاني، حزب الحياة الحرة PYD-YPG

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## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on the relationship between the United States and Kurdish opposition movements. It analyses the role of Kurds in US foreign policy towards the Middle East without considering the complex history of the Kurds. However, we could say that the theoretical approaches are mostly insufficient for the study of the foreign policy of ethnic opposition in the international relations literature. In this context, my approach is that foreign policy of Kurdish opposition movements, as non-state actors, is produced in interaction with the international system, local system/order, identity, and power relations. Therefore, the examination of the nature, parameters, and boundaries of the relationship between the Kurds and the US, which is the most influential state on the Kurds, is of special importance.

The Kurdish studies have been dominated by a focus on the socio-political history and anthropology of the Kurds. As for the international relations studies, they focus on the regional and internal political effects of the Kurds in the Middle East, but these studies are scarce. Outside of the following literature, there is not much research on US-Kurdish relations. Lokman Meho's book, *The Kurdish Question in U.S. Foreign Policy: A Documentary Sourcebook*<sup>1</sup>, Marianna Charountaki's book, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*<sup>2</sup>, Michael Gunter's book, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*<sup>3</sup> and his articles on this subject<sup>4</sup>. Besides Mohammed Shareef's book, *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds, Shock, Awe*

<sup>1</sup> Lokman I Meho, *The Kurdish Question in U.S. Foreign Policy: A Documentary Sourcebook*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945*. 1st ed. London, UK: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, London, UK: Hurst & Company, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "Erdoğan and the Decline of Turkey." *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4, December 15, 2016, pp.123–35; Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: the Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, New York/Basingstoke, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Michael M. Gunter, *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*. 1st ed., London, UK: Routledge, 2018; Michael M. Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, Isis and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey." *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1, March 9, 2015, pp.102–111; Michael M. Gunter, "Arab-Kurdish Relations and the Future of Iraq." *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 9, October 31, 2011, pp.1623–35; Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring." *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3, May 24, 2013, pp. 441–57; Ahmed, Mohammed M.A, and Michael M Gunter. "The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds." *The Middle East* 68, no. 3, January 2014, pp. 479–80; Michael M Gunter, "Foreign Policy towards the Kurds" 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 93–106; Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective." *World Affairs* 166, no. 4, January 2004, pp. 197–205.

and *Aftermath*<sup>5</sup> and Bryan R. Gibson's book, *Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War*<sup>6</sup> are important.

This study presents an alternative approach that pays attention to non-state actor Kurds' role in US foreign policy, and interactions between the state and non-state actors. Ethnic opposition movements create subjectivities by using alternative relations in international politics in their struggle against the state power which they think are hegemonic. Thus, ethnic opposition movements try to legitimize their struggle against the state power at the national level with their relations and discourses developed internationally. In this respect, it is important to examine the nature of these international relations developed between states and non-state actors.

Along with examining the general nature and tendency of US foreign policy towards non-state actors, focusing on the role of the Kurds as non-state actors in the Middle East as leverage or implementers of US foreign policy in Iraq and Syria can help us to predict developments in the future. While the US is trying to use the Kurds in Iraq and Syria to reach its goals in the region, the Kurds, in these countries, are also trying to use the US for their own agenda. Sometimes the goals and strategies of the US and its Kurdish allies do not overlap, it is therefore important to examine closely the emerging tensions<sup>7</sup>. The biggest separation between the US and Kurdish movements is on the idea of an independent Kurdish state. But it is understood that the goal of all Kurdish opposition movements in the region is to establish an independent Kurdish state. The PKK has revised its goal as '*Democratic Autonomy*' instead of '*National State*' with the new ideas of Abdullah Ocalan<sup>8</sup>. PYD-YPG has tried to implement this theory in northern Syria. But it is not possible to say that it has completely abandoned the idea of an independent Kurdish state.

The US policy towards various Kurdish movements is different because there is no monolithic US policy towards the states which Kurds inhabit. But, the US approach to "the Kurdish identity" and the "Kurdish question" is holistic in its Middle East strategy. Three political movements in the Middle East

<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Shareef, *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath*. 1st ed., New York, NY, USA: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Bryan R. Gibson, *Sold out?: US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Hasim Karami and David Romano, "Sub-State Actors and Trump's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Kurdish Forces in Iraq and Syria," in *Trump and the Middle East*, Deakin University Burwood, 2018; Mohammed M.A, Ahmed and Michael M Gunter. "The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds." *The Middle East* 68, no. 3, January 2014, pp.479–80.

<sup>8</sup> Seevan Saeed, *Kurdish Politics in Turkey: from the PKK to the KCK*. 1st ed., London, UK: Routledge, 2016.

have authority over a large portion of the Kurdish political realm. They are the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey (PKK), Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq. All three of these parties have sister parties in Iran and Syria. The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) and the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) have adopted the PKK's ideology. Subsequent Kurdish parties in Syria and Iran, have generally related to Kurdish movements in Turkey or Iraq.

Considering that Kurdish opposition movements have influenced the region since the 1980s and especially in the period after 1990, two states, Turkey and Iraq, have been prominent in this context. The Kurdish Question has moved to the centre of Turkish politics since the PKK started terrorist activities in 1984. Kurds in Iraq obtained autonomy in the early 1990s and this structure, which was formed in northern Iraq, has significantly affected the Kurdish movement. In other words, when viewing the Kurdish political scene after 1990, two states, Turkey and Iraq, stand out compared to other states in the region. In these countries, the main dynamics of the Kurdish movements are the PKK and KDP. After the Arab Spring, the PKK's sister party PYD-YPG became an important actor in the Syrian civil war.

## 2. History of the US-Kurds Relations

In the last century, it is possible to say that the state that most affects the fate of the Kurds is the United States. The US' intervention in the Kurdish Question began with President Wilson's emphasis on self-determination rights in his fourteen-item declaration<sup>9</sup>. The twelfth article addressing the possibility of the autonomous development of non-Turkish nations under the Ottoman rule and the fifth article regulating the principle of self-determination rights of nations led to the belief that all nations of the Middle East will be given independence<sup>10</sup>. In this period, the disintegration of the Anatolian lands was prevented by winning the War of Independence. At the same time, Great Britain did not allow independence or autonomy in the Kurdish oil-rich region in order to balance Baghdad's power. Thus, the first stage of the US foreign policy towards the Kurds ended<sup>11</sup>. But the Kurdish rebellions continued in the Middle East. A partial list of Kurdish uprisings includes the

<sup>9</sup> Arthur S Link, Woodrow Wilson, and Wayne J Campbell. "The Papers of Woodrow Wilson." *The History Teacher* 4, May 1971, p.86.

<sup>10</sup> Charountaki, Marianna. *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, p.39.

<sup>11</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "Erdoğan and the Decline of Turkey." *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4, December 15, 2016: pp.123–35; Edgar, O'Ballance and Nigel Clive. "The Kurdish Struggle 1920–94." *International Affairs* 72, no. 4 October 1, 1996, pp. 853–54.

Kocgiri revolt of the 1920s; the Sheik Said rebellion of 1925; the revolt of Agri Dagh in the 1930s; the Dersim uprising of 1937 and 38 in Turkey; the Simko rebellion of the 1920s, the 1946 Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in Iran; the Barzani led revolts of the 1960s and 1970s in Iraq; and the 2004 uprising of Serhildan in Syria<sup>12</sup>.

After World War II, a second stage started in the US-Kurds relations. At the beginning of 1946, the Truman administration was alarmed when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) tried to continue the occupation of northern Iran. At the same time, the Soviet government supported the Azeri and Kurdish separatists. On January 22, 1946, the Kurdish leader, Gazi Mohammad, declared the independent Mahabad Republic in Western Iran and applied for Soviet support. In Iraq, Mulla Mustafa Barzani founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party and targeted the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy in Baghdad<sup>13</sup>. However, when the Soviets withdrew from Iranian territory under pressure from the US on May 9 the Iranian army destroyed the Mahabad Republic on December 17, 1946. President Kadi Mohammad, the Prime Minister Haji Baba Sheikh and the Minister of Defense Mohammad Hussein Han Seyfi Kadi were hanged on March 31, 1947, at Tsarchira Square, where the Republic was founded. The Barzani tribe who joined the establishment of the Mahabad Republic, returned to Northern Iraq in April 1947<sup>14</sup>.

The political atmosphere and rivalry of the Cold War affected US foreign policy towards the Kurds. In this period, the US wanted the Soviets to have no influence on the Iraqi Kurds. One of the primary indications of US approach was the Aga and Rudawe Hefteyiyekan, which emerged in 1949 afterwards the US Information Service began to publish a bulletin in Kurdish. For a similar reason, the US Information Service likewise upheld the use of Kurdish with the Voice of America (VOA). On August 6, 1951, the US Embassy in Tehran sent a telegram to the US Secretary of State, arguing that the VOA's Kurdish publications would be valuable to counter the Kurdish propaganda of the Kurds. The telegraph also recommended avoiding encouraging nationalism among Kurdish politicians<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Mehmet Gurses, *Anatomy of a Civil War: Sociopolitical Impacts of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey*, Michigan, USA: University of Michigan Press, 2018; Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Little, "The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 4 November 15, 2010, pp. 63–98.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan R. Gibson, *Sold out?: US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> David Romano, Rikar Hussein, and Stephen Rowe. "The United States and the Kurds of Iraq: Strange Allies." *Between State and Non-State*, March 24, 2017, pp. 179; Saeed, Seevan. *Kurdish Politics in Turkey: from the PKK to the KCK*. 1st ed., London, UK: Routledge, 2016.



Even though the US and the Soviet Union have competed for influence over Iraq, the US relations with the Kurds during the 1950s and 1960s were limited to few contacts. During this time, the US had established good relations with the Iraqi government, therefore, it urged the Kurdish Question to remain a local issue which should be resolved without any external intervention. The US relations with the Ba'ath Party were very good at the beginning, and the new regime opposed the Soviet influence in Iraq. At that time, the Kurdistan Democratic Party President Mullah Mustafa Barzani applied for US support after realizing that the Ba'ath party would be indifferent to Kurdish rights like the previous administrations. However, the US refused to support the Kurdish question in Iraq<sup>16</sup>.

However, in the early 1970s, which could be called the second or "Barzani phase" in US foreign policy towards the Kurds, the United States supported Mulla Mustafa Barzani's rebellion against Baghdad. Iraqi Kurds became "good Kurds" in terms of US foreign policy. The United States followed this policy for three reasons. The first was that, the Iranian Shah was a good US ally. The second was that, during the Cold War, Iraq was seen as an ally of the Soviet Union. The third was that, the Arab nationalist Ba'ath party was weakened by the pressure from Israel<sup>17</sup>.

Accordingly, US President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, then later foreign minister Henry Kissinger, first urged Iraqi Kurds to rise against Baghdad, but when the Algerian Agreement was signed in 1975 between Shah Mohammad Reza Pehlevi and Saddam Hussein, the US withdrew its support from the Kurds. Kissinger would then interpret this policy as follows: "*As a case study, the Kurdish tragedy provides material for a variety of conclusions: the need to clarify objectives at the outset; the importance of relating goals to available means; the need to review an operation periodically; and the importance of coherence among allies. All these maxims were, in fact, addressed at one time or another, though perhaps not with the requisite care. But their application to the situation at hand proved elusive.*"<sup>18</sup> In other words, Iraqi Kurds have played an indispensable pawn role for US foreign policy<sup>19</sup>.

The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 also radically affected regional relations in the Middle East. In such a conjuncture, Iran immediately contacted Kurds after the war with Iraq in 1980, and two anti-Baghdad actors organi-

<sup>16</sup> Romano, Hussein, and Rowe. "The United States and the Kurds of Iraq: Strange Allies.", p.180.

<sup>17</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy Towards the Kurds." *Insight Turkey* 13 January 2011, p.43.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, New York, NY, USA: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy Towards the Kurds.", p.43.



zed joint operations against the Iraqi forces in the strategy of co-operation against the common enemy. In order not to strengthen Iran, the US chose to overlook Saddam Hussein's massacres against the Kurds. On March 16, 1988, the Baghdad administration used chemical gas in Halabja against the Kurds who had cooperated with Iran. The US believed that the conflict between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini was beneficial to its interests <sup>20</sup>.

In the 1980s, the United States' silence to the atrocities that the Iraqi Kurds were subjected to stemmed from the attitude against the strengthening of revolutionary Iran in the region. The US feared that revolutionary Islam would destabilize pro- American governments like Saudi Arabia and governments in the Gulf region. Thus, the United States began to approach Iraq because of Iran's achievements on the battlefield. In December 1982, the Reagan administration began an intervention in the war in order to balance Iran's gains. The US provided \$210 million of agricultural loans to Iraq, what US Secretary of State George Shultz called "a limited balance of power policy" <sup>21</sup>. US leaders did not react as long as the two sides destroyed each other, because both Iran and Iraq had weapons and ideological anger that could harm the US. A clear victory for Iraq was not also in the interests of the United States. The Americans impeded the clash between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. During this period, the Baghdad administration began to evacuate Kurdish people more in 1982 and subjected many of them to forced displacement<sup>22</sup>. A similar situation took place after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. When the US encouraged the Iraqis to revolt against Saddam in the late 1990s, the Kurds rebelled. But when the Bush administration withdrew its support for Kurds based on the idea that it undermined the concept of a united Iraq, Saddam's military forces were successful in suppressing the rebellion as hard as the massacre <sup>23</sup>.

### 3. New Area in the US-Kurds Relations

The sudden invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein on August 2, 1990, followed by the defeat of Iraq in Operation Desert Storm opened a new door for the Kurds to continue their rebellion against the Iraqi government <sup>24</sup>. On

<sup>20</sup> Power, Samantha. *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> İsmail Sari, "The Syria Safe Zone and the US Policy towards the Syrian Kurds," 2019. <https://iramcenter.org/en/the-syria-safe-zone-and-the-us-policy-towards-the-syrian-kurds/>

<sup>24</sup> Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, p.150.

March 5, 1991, the Kurdish uprising against the Iraqi government began, and, because of this, the Iraqi army was evacuated from most of the Kurdish regions in less than three weeks. After the US and its allies stopped their attacks on the Iraqi army, Saddam Hussein could reorganize his troops. Afterward, he launched a major attack against the Kurds in the North. The attack led to a humanitarian crisis with the flow of millions of Kurds to Turkey and the Iranian border and with the fear of possible usage of chemical weapons against them. The Turkish government with the fear of the possible flow of the large number of Iraqi Kurdish refugees from its borders pushed the US, Britain, and France for the solution this problem. As a result, the US, France and Britain, on April 5, 1991, together with Turkey implemented the UN Resolutions (UN Resolution 688 in 1991) which adopted a no-fly zone for Iraqi Kurds in northern Iraq<sup>25</sup>.

The making of a protected zone for the Kurds would, at that point, lead to open relations between the US and Iraqi Kurds. The Kurdish area, secured under the no-fly zone, turned into the base of the CIA, which was facilitated with the Iraqi restriction to oust Saddam Hussein. After the First Gulf War, the United States considered the toppling of Saddam Hussein as the best choice to secure American interests in the area. Nonetheless, this new technique for Iraq would prompt the arrangement of the Kurdish self-ruling locale. While the CIA utilized the protected zone as a base to organize plans against Saddam Hussein, the Kurds transformed this into a chance to set up their very own new foundations, for example, the Kurdistan National Assembly in 1992, and in this way fortify their real independent areas<sup>26</sup>.

The Kurdish safe zone became an imperative region for putting pressure on Saddam Hussein's system and securing US interests in the area. The CIA and Iraqi opposition groups which were organized as a part of the Iraqi National Congress, used the Kurdish area to make several unsuccessful attempts to assassinate Saddam Hussein. The Kurdish region became therefore necessary for the long run of the future of US-Iraq plan that, with the US, had to intervene for the cease-fire with the outbreak of clashes between the two major Kurdish parties that dominated the region, the KDP and the PUK in 1994. In addition, in the summer of 1996, when Saddam Hussein sent his troops to Erbil to interfere in the civil war in the Kurdish region, President

<sup>25</sup> Romano, Hussein, and Rowe. "The United States and the Kurds of Iraq: Strange Allies.", p.182; David Romano and Mehmet Gurses. *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria*, New York, NY, USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Romano, Hussein, and Rowe. "The United States and the Kurds of Iraq: Strange Allies.", p.183.

Clinton ordered airstrikes in opposition to Iraqi targets.<sup>27</sup> The Washington administration eventually supervised the peace talks between the Kurdish parties that led to the Washington Treaty in September 1998. The agreement was announced by Foreign Minister Madeleine Albright at a press conference on September 17, 1998. In case that Saddam Hussein carried out an attack the Kurds again, he demanded an allied administration in the Kurdish region, and the US gave an assurance of military protection. Both Barzani and Talabani appreciated US support and their endeavour to mediate the peace accord. Barzani said, "For the first time, Americans have made it clear that they will not allow Saddam to harm us"<sup>28</sup>.

Within the framework of Washington's policy of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, the new era in US-Iraqi Kurdish relations continued in the 1990s. In this period, relations became more institutionalized. The US Congress, in October 1998, acknowledged the "Iraq Liberation Act" which must be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. From this period to the Second Gulf War in 2003, the Kurds became more and more important for America's new policy in Iraq. The United States began to cooperate with the Kurds in other areas in addition to the goal of overthrowing the Saddam regime. For example, when the extremist group Ansar al-Islam began to threaten the stability of the Kurdish region, the United States interfered to support the Kurds. In February 2003, the US Special Operations Division (SOD) and the Army's 10th Special Forces Group collaborated with the Peshmerga and attacked Ansar al-Islam bases on the Iraq-Iran border<sup>29</sup>.

In March 2003, when the US attacked the Iraqi regime in the Second Gulf War, the Kurds were in a much better position than during the first Gulf War in the 1990s. Both the KDP and the PUK decided to consolidate their relationship and worked as a united front to cope with the situation that they expected arising from an American intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The Kurds also emerged as the most capable and united indigenous Iraqi political group that promoted toppling the Saddam regime. Moreover, Turkey's unwillingness to participate in the 2003 Iraq War further enhanced the role of Kurds. Bashur Airport in the Kurdish region, which was 50 km to

<sup>27</sup> Romano, Hussein, and Rowe; David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; David Romano, "Iraqi Kurdistan: Challenges of Autonomy in the Wake of US Withdrawal." *International Affairs* 86, no. 6, November 3, 2010, pp.1345-59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the northeast of Erbil, became the main airbase for coalition attacks<sup>30</sup>. The Kurdish forces were the main ground forces against the Iraqi Army on the Northern Front. Subsequently, the Kurds were able to reinforce their de facto autonomy in the new federal state that emerged in Iraq<sup>31</sup>.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, a new era opened for the Kurds<sup>32</sup>. The Kurds constantly supported the US in Baghdad and thus played an important role in rebuilding Iraq<sup>33</sup>. For the first time in Iraq's history, a Kurdish president was elected in January 2005. Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were also Kurdish. Also, at the premiere of Jaafari, the Kurdish leadership succeeded in raising expectations for the preparation of a permanent constitution. During this period, the Kurds also supported Zalmay Khalilzad's attempts to prevent Jaafari from running for office of the premiere after the December 2005 general elections for the permanent government. The Foreign Minister and the CIA argued that the Kurds would have no important national role beyond the northern Iraqi borders in both institutions. These comments proved to be inaccurate because many Kurdish leaders played important roles in appointed and elected governments<sup>34</sup>.

From the 2003 Iraq War to the withdrawal of US military powers in 2011, not a solitary US trooper was executed in the Kurdistan Region. Moreover, the advancement of moderately solid vote-based system and resilience in the Kurdistan Region, yet the ascent of sectarianism in the remainder of Iraq, drastically improved the picture of Iraqi Kurds in the world. "The Other Iraq" turned into the basic title characterizing the welfare and success of the Kurdistan Region. For international people, who reprimanded the US for neglecting to carry security and majority rules system to Iraq, the Kurdistan Region went to the fore as a solitary positive result of American mediation in Iraq<sup>35</sup>. These elements improved US-Iraqi Kurdish relations in the post-Saddam time.

But the reconstruction of the post-2003 Iraqi administration system in an ethnic (Kurdish Regional Government) based federal structure and the relative progress of this region in security, stability, and economic context, compared to other regions, have pushed other fractions to form an ethnic-based (Arab-Kurdish) or a sectarian-based (Shiite- Sunni) federal region. The

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. P.185.

<sup>31</sup> Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East*, p.16

<sup>32</sup> Shareef, *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath*.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Romano, Hussein, and Rowe. "The United States and the Kurds of Iraq: Strange Allies.", p.186.

central government, on the other hand, is weak, unable to withstand terrorist attacks, insufficient when providing basic services to citizens and doomed to corruption. The radical groups and militias who exploit this situation infiltrate the security units and destabilize the country. Sectarian strife, which is one of the most prominent features of the political process, has become the chronic problem of Iraq and has been the fundamental cause of endless political and security crises in the country since 2003<sup>36</sup>.

#### 4. After the Arab Spring the US-Kurds Relations

The Arab Spring improvements have created great changes in the Middle East and brought chaos and conflict to the region. In this conjuncture, the Kurds had some opportunities. However, these opportunities have also revealed greater risks. As the civil war continued in Syria, the Kurds gained de facto autonomy in 2012 with the withdrawal of the Assad regime from the north. With the support of the US, the PYD/PKK the most organized structure within the Syrian Kurds, got control of this area. On July 19, 2012, after the withdrawal of Assad's regime from northern Syria, the Syrian Kurds, which had never been on the agenda before, suddenly emerged as a potential game changer in the Syrian civil war. The PYD/PKK, which is the most organized structure, took control of this region and created a situation which seriously affected neighboring Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Indeed, the rapid rise of the Kurds in Syria and the indisputable reality of the cross-border character of the Kurdish question have made them an option that can be used in different equations for other actors (US, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia) in Syria<sup>37</sup>.

The ascent of ISIS can be acknowledged as subsequent stage for US-Kurdish relations. President Obama who did not want to intervene in the Syrian Civil War, started to support Syrian Kurds who were ready to fight against ISIS and other jihadist groups after the end of 2014. Cooperation between the US and PYD/PKK started when ISIS captured Mosul and moved across Syria and Iraq. The basis of the cooperation depended on the falling apart of Iraq forces and Assad forces which wink at the spread of ISIS in the opposing region because of focusing on the front of Aleppo and Damascus. So, Washington supported the PYD which was directly linked to PKK due to ignoring the whole objection of NATO ally Turkey. Washington always claims that it is tactical cooperation, but it already goes over the limit. Turkey

<sup>36</sup> Emin Salihi, *Irak Devleti'nin Çöküşü ve Çatışma Süreci*, İstanbul: Kaknus Yayınları, 2017, p.17.

<sup>37</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, p.121.

wants to end the US-PYD/PKK relations which were tactical and based on the struggle with ISIS.

Northern Syria became problematic after 2014 for Washington and Ankara relations because of the PYD/YPG armed by the US Military. After the start of the Syrian Civil War, the PYD/PKK gained their own autonomy and demanded protection from the US against Turkey and the Assad Regime. The Assad Regime wants to gain control of Northern Syria again and Turkey wants to eliminate the terrorist organizations which are clearly linked to the PKK. The PYD/PKK may fight with local challengers, but it is impossible to challenge the Turkish Military Forces. The PYD/PKK wants to create relations with other actors in the region following any kind of political change in Washington. However, it is not against their relations with the US. After World War II, the US built strong relations with Kurds or other non-state actors due to Washington's short-term gains. Long-term relations or alliances with states were more valuable for the US. Cooperation between Washington and Kurds is generally temporal and shallow. If there is a need, Kurds can be accepted as ally, but it is barely dispensable. In the history of US-Kurds relationship, there were a lot of examples of this.

Since the end of March 2018, President Donald Trump has stated that he will withdraw US troops from Syria, but it is possible to say that they will stay there longer. The presence of the US in Syria will continue in the short and medium term to end the conflict in Syria. Because they provide leverage in diplomatic efforts to counter the Russian and Iranian influence in the region, the increasing influence of Iran in Syria and Iraq has emerged as a key policy issue, because Iran has the potential to become a hegemonic power in the region. Such a possibility would change the balance of power in the region and be perceived as a major threat by two close US allies Israel and Saudi Arabia in the region <sup>38</sup>.

In contrast to the attitude adopted by the Kurdish movement in Iraq and Syria, the US has supported the Turkish perspective towards PKK. The US categorized Kurds as "good Kurds" and "bad Kurds" <sup>39</sup>. Turkey's defining the PKK problem as "separatist terrorism" is being accepted by the United States in the international arena <sup>40</sup>. Turkey, which is a key and strong member

<sup>38</sup> Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East*, p.17

<sup>39</sup> Brendan O'Leary, "The Kurds, the Four Wolves, and the Great Powers." *The Journal of Politics* 80, January 2018, pp.353–66; Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds."

<sup>40</sup> Mitchel P. Roth and Murat Sever. "The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 10, August 22, 2007, pp. 901–20; Chris Kutschera, "Mad Dreams of Independence: The Kurds of



of NATO, has political and security relations especially with the US. In the 1990s and 2000s, the US provided the Turkish army with advanced technology weapons to make war on the PKK. When the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan left Syria in 1998, the US helped Turkey to capture him in Kenya in 1999<sup>41</sup>. In Ocalan's capture process, an editorial from the U.S. State Department broadcast by the Voice of America (VOA) declared: "*It is neither U.S. practice nor policy to provide an international platform from which terrorists can expound their views or try to justify their criminal actions. No one should doubt our views on Ocalan; the United States considers him a terrorist who should be brought to justice for his crimes.*"<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Turkey is using its alliance with the United States to limit the PKK's political field<sup>43</sup>. PKK is a question of national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity in Turkey. Although the United States also formally supports Turkey, there are many assertions that the PKK sometimes is used against Turkey by the US.

## 5. Limits of the US-Kurds Relations

There are many debates about what the US targets in the Middle East. However, there is a consensus that the United States follows three main objectives in the Middle East. Accordingly, the first goal of the US foreign policy towards the Middle East is to ensure the supply security of hydrocarbons in the region. On the one hand, the United States uses its ability to control energy flows to influence regional and international policy-making tendencies, at the same on its rivals which include Japan, Germany and especially China but also on its allies in Europe and the Pacific, and the international economy who are highly dependent on imports of continuous hydrocarbons from the Middle East time ensuring energy security and economic growth by facilitating continuous energy flow<sup>44</sup>.

The second objective of the US is to guarantee a steady perceived leverage in the Middle East and to forestall the ascent of Iran. As John J. Mearsheimer states, except for such experiences as the Iraqi invasion during the Bush

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Turkey and the PKK." *Middle East Report*, no. 189, 1994, pp.12–15, Ersel Aydinli, "Between Security and Liberalization: Decoding Turkey's Struggle with the PKK." *Security Dialogue* 33, no. 2, June 1, 2002, pp.209–25; Ozlem Kayhan, "Turkeys Military Victory over the PKK and Its Failure to End the PKK Insurgency." *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 5, April 21, 2015, pp. 727–41.

<sup>41</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "The Continuing Kurdish Problem in Turkey After Ocalans Capture." *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 5, August 25, 2010, pp. 849–69; Kutschera, "Mad Dreams of Independence: The Kurds of Turkey and the PKK.", pp. 12–15.

<sup>42</sup> Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds.", p.43.

<sup>43</sup> Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East*, p.40-80; Ali Kemal Ozcan, *Turkeys Kurds: a Theoretical Analysis of the Pkk and Abdullah Ocalan*. 1st ed., London, England: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Karami, Hasim, and David Romano. "Sub-State Actors and Trump's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Kurdish Forces in Iraq and Syria.", p.12.



Administration and Libya intervention and partly Syria policy of the Obama Administration, “offshore balancing” is the basic tendency of US foreign policy rather than “onshore balancing”. The offshore strategy of the US is based on two pillars; “outsourcing” and “containment”. The US evades direct military action against the regional challenger and instead places it on the shoulders of the countries in the region.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds have restricted the impact of Iran in Syria and Iraq. After the Arab Spring, they conveyed the re-appropriating undertaking to make Turkey incur security issues because of the differences which happened between this nation and the US following the Arab Spring. In the Middle East, the balance of power is one of the primary goals of the US. Yet, it goes without saying that, the Kurds had three main expectations from the US in turn: security, autonomy and support against competitors<sup>46</sup>.

The third target of the United States is the fight against Islamist extremist forces. The US foreign policy focused on using forces to tackle Islamic extremists in the Middle East. Some analysts believe that the US policy of using hard power in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the 9/11 attacks. The US invasion of Iraq also proved that the power of the US in the region is costly and difficult to spread. For this reason, the United States preferred to use, Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish forces to fight against the Jihadi groups in the region<sup>47</sup>. As it can be seen from the above historical process, the US supported to Kurds as leverage and implementers of its objectives in the Middle East, but the given support was withdrawn when Kurdish actions contradicted these objectives. The US support for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria is surprisingly reflective of the US agenda rather than the Kurds’ own agenda. Therefore, Kurds cannot receive any political support from the United States for their agenda to maximize their self-determination. Since the US’s desire to maintain the balance of power in the region is pushing Washington for a united Iraqi policy, the US does not favour the willingness of Iraqi Kurds to be independent. Although the United States has adopted policies to support separatist movements in the region, it is still very sensitive to redrawing the boundaries in the region<sup>48</sup>. The United States wanted to defeat ISIS in Syria, and it created military

<sup>45</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M Walt. “The Case for Offshore Balancing A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy.” *Foreign Affairs*, 2016

<sup>46</sup> Sari, “The Syria Safe Zone and the US Policy towards the Syrian Kurds,”.

<sup>47</sup> Karami, Hasim, and David Romano. “Sub-State Actors and Trump’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Kurdish Forces in Iraq and Syria.”, p.6; Phillips, David L. *The Kurdish Spring: a New Map of the Middle East*. 1st ed., New York, NY, USA: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Karami, Hasim, and David Romano. “Sub-State Actors and Trump’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Kurdish Forces in Iraq and Syria.”, p.3; Gunter, “The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds.”, pp.93-106.

cause to work with PYD/PKK. Despite this cooperation, Washington was not shown to be persuaded about the desire an independence of Syrian Kurds in the region. When the Syrian Kurd's Military Operation did not impact the struggle with ISIS, the US did not support them. Similarity of these kinds of acts prove that; Iraq and Syrian Kurd forces were used like a means to an end for just the US' short-term foreign policies. The United States or other states always prefer their long-term allies or relations with other states instead of these kinds of sub-state actors such as Syrian Kurds. Until the Trump administration might decide middle-term or long-term strategy for the Middle East, prospects for Kurds will not change very much.

## 6. Conclusion

Relations of the US with Kurds or other non-state actors are based on the US short-term interest especially after the Second World War. Surely, this is not limited for the US. The British also used the Kurds in Mosul against the Ottoman State at the beginning of 1920s. Moreover, the Soviet Union supported the Mahabad Republic in Iran with Tehran's petroleum issue at after the Second World War. The worst example of this was the support of Iraqi Kurds to rebel again in Baghdad by the US in the 1970s so as to weaken the state which created increasing relations day by day with the Soviet Union. It allows gaining independence or even an autonomy of Kurds. The support of the US ended with the Treaty of Algeria which was signed between Saddam Hussein and Shah Muhammed Riza. With the treaty, the Kurd rebellion failed, and Iran and Baghdad agreed on new borders.

There was a similar situation which occurred when Iraq occupied Kuwait in 1990s. USA supported to Iraqis for rebel against to Saddam rulership at the end of 1990s. It caused an immigration wave of Iraqi Kurds from Iraq to Iran and Turkey. Also, in this case the US and its allies acted to protect Iraqi Kurd refugees in northern region. However, the US left alone the Shia Rebels whose live in the south. The UN resolution of 688 in 1992 became the legal basis of establishing an autonomous Kurdistan Region which located Northern Iraq and provided a safe zone for it. The autonomy of the Kurds in Iraq may not be the political preference of the US or a direct aim of the US, it emerged under the auspices of the US. The United States worked with the Kurds during the occupation process of Iraq in 2003. Generally, the US used the Kurds against Saddam in March 2003 for opening northern fronts or to provide stability in the Sunni region and Baghdad. In 2005, Iraq was convinced to withdraw from Kirkuk and Mosul due to Article 140 of the Iraq Constitution. However, support of the USA for Kurdish political aims never became reality.

When American goals and the US' approach to Iraq are considered, the opposition of Washington to the 2017 independent referendum of Iraqi Kurds was not surprising. Nevertheless, a surprise occurred when the Iraqi army of the Trump administration and Shiite militias who support Iran took over the Peshmerga for the Kurdish leadership in Iraq. When objected to, to oppose Iran would be priority from the desire for stability and a 'united Iraq' policy. The result of the struggle was that it inevitably caused a crisis for Washington against the Kurds who were located around Kirkuk and there was a struggle between the Peshmerga, pro-Iranian Shia militias and the Iraq Shia Army. While these events occurred, the USA left Iraq's political policy in the hands of Brett Mc Gurk who was its autopilot and envoy. American policy probably was restricted to Baghdad behind closed doors by saying "no permission for any kind of operation against Kurds" that meaning in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah <sup>49</sup>.

There is uncertainty about the political role of the Syrian Kurds because, on the one hand, civil war continues in Syria and the two great powers, the US and Russia, have not yet reached a definite agreement on the end. On the other hand, a major regional power and NATO's accepted ally of the United States, Turkey, is perceived as a serious threat to security of cooperation with the US and PYD/PKK. After the end of the civil war in Syria and the transition to a political stabilization phase, the existing cooperation will probably decrease, and the Syrian Kurds may be deprived of an important political role in Syria. On the other hand, the US may choose to maintain the pressure on the Assad regime to limit Iranian designs in Syria and even continue as possible leverage against a Turkish state whose policies are increasingly a risk <sup>50</sup>.

Operation Peace Spring which Turkey launched on October 9, 2019 has a heavy importance with respect to altering the near-term development in the region. What Turkey aims to reach with this operation is clear. In his speech at the UN, President Erdogan first stated that he hopes to establish a corridor with a depth of 30 km (18 miles) and a length of 480 km. Secondly, he explained that he wanted to draw the depth of this safe zone to Raqqa and Deirizor line by providing the settlement of 2 million Syrians in this region. Thus, Turkey aims to constitute a borderline between PYD/PKK and themselves by

<sup>49</sup> Karami, Hasim, and David Romano. "Sub-State Actors and Trump's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Kurdish Forces in Iraq and Syria", p.5.

<sup>50</sup> Vittoria Federici, "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict." *S AIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 2, 2015, pp. 81-90; Ghadi Sary, "Kurdish Self-Governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition." *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, September 15, 2016.

establishing a security zone which can be called the “Arab belt”. The Trump administration, on the one hand, has not given up its relations with the PYD/PKK but also seems to have given a consent to this belt. The cease-fire agreement reached between Washington and Turkey can be read on this axis. The discussions which will take place within the US itself will determine the course of US-Turkey and US-Kurdish relations. As for Turkey, it seems that a solution for the short and medium term was found for its security concerns with the formation of the “Arab Belt”.

In addition to this, it is known that the US and Israel support Kurdish opposition movements that want Iran to be destabilized. In 2004, journalist Seymour Hersh reported that both the US and Israel supported the PJAK and other Kurdish organizations. In July 2007, PJAK leader Rahman Haj Ahmadi, who lived in exile in Germany, went to Washington in July 2007 and met with some US officials. It is stated that Ahmadi’s meeting in Washington was with senior officials and that the future of Iran was discussed<sup>51</sup>. Although the US describes the PKK as a terrorist organization, it tolerates PJAK, the arm of the PKK in Iran. It is known that the US and Israel always regard the Kurdish card as an important asset in increasing its strategic interests in the region<sup>52</sup>.

US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement in May 2018 and reinstatement of economic sanctions and Trump’s maximum pressure strategy has the potential to destabilize Iran. This could create more opportunities for Kurdish political parties to organize stronger actions. On the other hand, this may encourage Iran to follow a more violent policy against Kurdish political activists. As a matter of fact, the armed attack in Ahvaz on September 22, 2018, has once again shown that Iran is facing security problems created by ethnic terrorist organizations in the country. These organizations include the Movement of Nidal, Sistan-Baluchistan, Joshua al-Adl, which is based in Khazistan, Ahmad, and the PJAK, and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (IKDP). For the United States, which wants to destabilize Iran, Kurdish terrorist organizations are more useful among these illegal organizations.

<sup>51</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, “Plan B: As June 30th Approaches, Israel Looks to the Kurds,” 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/06/28/plan-b-2>.

<sup>52</sup> Hersh; Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle East*; Michael M. Gunter, “The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process Stalled in Neutral,” *Insight Turkey*, 2014.

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