

## Arcanum in the news



### THE KURDS AND THE WAY

*October 7, 2015*

*An interview with John Hannah*

The Kurdish forces on the ground in Syria and elsewhere represent, at the moment, the single truly effective military counter to the ravages of ISIS – a fight that plays a potentially key role in the Kurds' larger, decades-long struggle for independence. The desires that animate this conflict are complex and multifaceted. Here, in a penetrating interview with The Octavian Report, former national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney John Hannah delves into the difficult issues around the Kurds and their relationship to Turkey, the U.S., and the rest of the world, as well as the hard questions currently plaguing the Middle East more generally.

**Octavian Report:** Could you begin by talking about the complicated history of the Kurds as a transnational people?

**John Hannah:** The Kurds are absolutely not a monolith. After the settlement of World War I the major Kurdish populations found themselves located in four different sovereign entities, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. And they have developed in those societies in somewhat independent directions, with different kinds of political, sociological, and economic characteristics.

There are linguistic divisions. There are serious political divisions. If you just look at the most developed case of the Kurdish political movement, in northern Iraq, there are sharp differences and a constant struggle for power between the two key political parties, the KDP and the PUK. The PUK comes out of a socialist-driven background based in urban areas. The areas it controls border Iran and PUK leaders have developed especially close links to the Iranian regime. The PUK was founded by Jalal Talabani and the Talabani family continues to dominate the party's leadership today. The KDP, by contrast, has its roots in more conservative, rural, and tribally-based structures and has always been dominated by the Barzani clan – first the legendary Peshmerga fighter and Kurdish nationalist Mulla Mustafa Barzani, and now by his son and heir, Massoud Barzani, who has served as president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) since 2005.

Indeed, as recently as the mid-1990s, the PUK and KDP fought a civil war that required intense U.S. mediation to

resolve. Both parties continue to retain their own Peshmerga units that, when push comes to shove, answer first to their respective parties rather than to the regional government. Even today, the political battles over power and the future of the KRG continue to rage. Despite the fact that the KRG is in the middle of a war against the Islamic State, Iraq's Kurds are in a major fight over the KRG presidency. President Barzani's term (already extended once) expired in late August. The KDP has insisted that the middle of a war is no time to change presidents and that Barzani should receive another extension. Other Kurdish parties, led by the PUK are resisting, leading to a dangerous deadlock in the KRG parliament. For now, Barzani remains in the palace and appears to be exercising the full authorities of that office – but in a kind of legal and constitutional limbo that fuels tensions and threatens stability.

That's just a microcosm of the kind of conflict and disunity that continues to roil and plague the broader transnational Kurdish movement, which has really entered a qualitatively new phase in the past several years. Most fully in Iraq, but to a growing degree now in Syria and Turkey as well, the Kurds have never been closer to achieving their century-old aspirations for self-government. While at the popular level, there's no doubt a growing sense of empowerment and transnational solidarity among Kurds, there remain among the elites of the Kurdish movement significant political differences, distrust, and rivalries that undermine its overall cohesion and ability to advance the historic ambitions of the Kurdish people.

**OR:** Do you think that there will be an independent Kurdistan, and if so, when do you think that is likely to happen and where?

**Hannah:** The obvious place for it to happen is in northern Iraq. Under the cover of U.S. protection that began in the first Gulf War, the Kurds of the KRG have developed their most advanced political and economic institutions. But my guess is that we're still some distance from full-blown independence even there. In part, that's because of these divisions that we've mentioned. But it's also the case that the KRG still faces serious obstacles internationally. First and foremost, the KRG borders two very powerful states, Turkey and Iran, both of whom are very important economically for the KRG, but who are also quite strongly opposed to any formal declaration of a Kurdish state – which they fear would fuel the separatist ambitions of their own large Kurdish minorities. Turkey, of course, is an important NATO ally of the United States, and it would be very difficult for Washington just to disregard legitimate Turkish concerns on an issue of such importance to Turkey's security. Of course, the Arabs of Iraq, both Sunni and Shia alike, have also never been particularly sympathetic to the nationalist claims of the Kurds – especially to the extent that they include disputed, oil-rich areas of the country that contain sizable non-Kurdish populations. It's entirely possible that an effort by the Kurds to break away could quite quickly trigger new armed interventions on multiple fronts. And Baghdad, it must be noted, still retains a certain power of the purse that it can exercise over the KRG, since until recently its budget disbursements made up a major portion of KRG revenues and helped fuel the Kurds' economic boom of recent years. Whether wise or not, Baghdad's recent efforts to punish the KRG for its independent oil sales by withholding budget disbursements succeeded in inflicting substantial economic pain on northern Iraq, exposing a major vulnerability for the KRG.

In the current environment, even the KRG's greatest international friend, the U.S., is still not ready to endorse a move to independence. There's the issue of Turkish concerns that we mentioned. There's also the fact that it's been longstanding U.S. policy since 2003 that our interests would be best served by keeping Iraq together as a functioning,

unified state that could be a strong regional partner. Overcoming that kind of policy inertia is never an easy thing for a machine as large as the U.S. government. On top of that, of course, you also have the fact that the broader region is in meltdown already. Instability and violence are at historic levels. U.S. forces are fighting in the region. Policymakers can legitimately ask whether now is the time to take on the headache of engineering the formal breakup of Iraq as well – which would almost certainly have immediate implications for Syria, too, if not other countries. The death of nations has historically tended to be a rather messy, destabilizing and violent process that brings lots of human suffering. With all these sorts of considerations weighing in the balance, my guess is that it's currently a bridge too far for U.S. decision makers to take on the added burden of midwifing the birth of an independent Kurdistan in a way that they believe will actually end up containing instability and violence rather than exacerbating it.

**OR:** Do you think that a future Kurdistan would be a stable, secular pro-Western state of the kind that people have been looking for in the Middle East?

**Hannah:** I do think that if there's a hope of that happening anywhere, it's probably going to happen in northern Iraq. For the past 25 years the United States has been deeply involved in helping guarantee the well-being of the Kurds of northern Iraq. I think it's been an extremely positive experience. Whatever conclusions you draw about the broader U.S. effort in Iraq, Americans should be rightly proud of what we've done for this ancient and historically brutalized people of Iraqi Kurdistan. A lot of important relationships have been built up at the level of politics, security, and intelligence. The KRG, I think, has gone out of its way to be deferential to U.S. interests, and has made it a matter of the highest priority to be a good and reliable partner for all of our efforts in Iraq and the broader region. And I think there is a genuine reservoir of good will amongst the Kurds towards the United States that you do not see replicated in the rest of Iraq – or the Arab Middle East in general, for that matter. Most Kurds there really do see us as liberators. There are, of course, conservative and religious Kurds, and a relatively small Islamist movement inside of Northern Iraq. It also should be said that there are even Kurds from around the region who have fought for the Islamic State. But I feel fairly confident in saying that the vast majority of the Kurdish people are in favor of a more secular form of government with representative institutions, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. And they overwhelmingly look to the West as the societies that they want to be associated with and emulate, where they believe their prosperity and their wellbeing can be best protected.

**OR:** How do you see the growing conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK playing out?

**Hannah:** The deterioration that we've seen in Turkey since the June 7 parliamentary elections is obviously a very worrying development. In the first place, it's very bad for Turkey itself. Erdoğan appears to have reacted to the AKP's loss of its majority by following the old Leninist adage of "the worse, the better." He's punishing the Turkish people for turning their backs on single-party AKP rule. His message to them is that without Erdoğan and the AKP in complete control of the Turkish state, all hell will break loose. No government can be formed, the currency collapses, and the PKK terrorist threat comes back. So he's now engineered another round of elections for November 1 and is in essence threatening that either you give me the parliamentary majority that I demand or the country falls apart, including the full-on revival of this horrible three-decade old civil war with the PKK that cost 40,000 lives. This is, to say the least, a very cynical and dangerous game.

Of course, the PKK is a genuine problem for Turkey: they are an armed insurgency that since the conflict's revival in late July have engaged in some brutal attacks on Turkish security forces. Their tactics have put large numbers of Kurdish civilians at risk in Turkey's southeast. But the inescapable fact is that this conflict had been dormant for almost two-and-a-half years as a result of the ceasefire that Erdoğan negotiated with the PKK back in 2013. The decision to re-launch the war now in such a large-scale way was almost entirely in Erdoğan's hands and was clearly executed as part of a larger political strategy to serve his ambitions for power that the June 7 elections thwarted. By whipping up fear of the "Kurdish threat" he is desperately trying to mobilize Turkish nationalism behind the AKP and to suppress the vote of the HDP, a pro-Kurdish party (linked to the PKK) that for the first time ever crossed the electoral threshold and won a large bloc of seats in parliament. The bottom line is that all of this manufactured chaos is intended to advance Erdoğan's despotic personal agenda of turning Turkey not just into a country of one-party rule, but one-man rule where his authority is unchecked and unchallenged. Think an Anatolian version of Putin and you'll begin to get the idea.

Erdoğan's war against the Kurds is not simply bad in terms of its impact on Turkey's democracy and stability. It's potentially much bigger than that. Today we're seeing the very real potential that Iraq and Syria could be ripped apart, with the rise of the transnational Kurdish national movement being a major factor in both cases. By re-igniting Turkey's own very serious Kurdish problem in such a violent way, Erdoğan is raising the specter of adding Turkey's disintegration to that list. Erdoğan is riding a tiger that if he's not very, very careful – and in the absence of much wiser leadership emerging – could threaten to put Turkey's future as a stable, unified nation-state at great risk.

I should say that war between Turkey and the PKK raises complicated issues for the broader Kurdish transnational movement as well. It's just a fact that the rivalry and bad blood between the PKK and Barzani's KDP in Iraq have historically been almost as bad as that between the KDP and PUK. In light of the enormous progress made in northern Iraq, Barzani no doubt has increasingly viewed himself as the natural leader of the Kurdish movement internationally, displacing the role of the PKK and its charismatic leader, Abdullah Ocalan. There's also the fact that in recent years, as Turkey's own ties with the KRG have warmed, and economic relations between Ankara and Erbil have exploded, especially in the energy sector, Barzani has been far more of an ally to Erdoğan than to the PKK. The same goes for Barzani's rather hostile attitude toward the PKK affiliate in Syria, the PYD/YPG. But now, to the extent that the Turkish military is systematically attacking and killing Kurds again, it puts increasing popular pressure on Barzani and the KRG to show solidarity with them, potentially putting at risk some of the enormous gains that have been made in relations with Turkey.

Another important aspect to Erdoğan's power play against the Kurds concerns its potentially deleterious impact on the U.S.-led war against ISIS. The PKK has significant forces in northern Iraq that have made an important contribution in pushing back the Islamic State, including in the areas around Mount Sinjar where the Yazidis were being slaughtered in 2014. And the PKK affiliate in Syria, the YPG, has without question been the most effective ground force battling ISIS there and in very close cooperation with U.S. air power. So the current Turkish assault on the PKK almost invariably poses a serious risk of distracting and weakening some of the most potent partners that the U.S. has – and without whose continued ground power the war against ISIS will almost certainly not be won.

**OR:** To what extent does the Turkey-PKK conflict preclude further U.S. involvement with Kurdish ground forces in the fight against ISIS?

**Hannah:** It remains to be seen exactly what this portends for the U.S.-Turkish relationship and for the U.S. fight against ISIS.

On the one hand, it's now quite clear to savvy observers that Erdoğan's decision in late July to allow the U.S. at long last to gain access to Turkish air bases for combat missions against ISIS did not result from a sudden epiphany on his part that ISIS posed a mortal threat to Turkey's national security. Instead, it looks much more like a cynical ploy to secure U.S. silence and acquiescence in the face of his simultaneous decision to re-launch the war with the PKK. That was his real aim. To some extent, the U.S. was snookered. Especially among the U.S. military, the people who have been cooperating with the Syrian Kurds with such great success, I think they saw through Erdoğan's effort to manipulate the U.S. and they resent it.

On the other hand, it must be said that finally having access to bases that are so close to the front is a tremendous military asset, a genuine force multiplier. Not having to fly hundreds of extra miles is a big deal, both in terms of the safety of our pilots and their overall ability to complete their missions effectively against a greater number of ISIS targets.

The question is: at what cost does this come strategically? Is the price that we pay for that access worth the tactical benefit? If in the process we end up fatally compromising the capabilities of our most effective partner on the ground in Syria, and thereby our ability to achieve our war objectives, is it really worth it? Figuring out how to keep the bases while ramping up our cooperation with the Kurds is the needle that U.S. policymakers now need to thread. Erdoğan's war against the PKK makes it far more difficult and complicated.

Our partnership with the Syrian Kurds has been made even more important by the epic disaster that has been the Obama administration's effort to train and equip Syrian Arab rebels. It's been an atrocious failure, an absolute embarrassment that has wasted tens of millions of dollars. Now the U.S. is desperately going back to the drawing board and saying that maybe we should be relying a whole lot more on the Syrian Kurds to be our primary partner in attacking the Islamic State, including in its capital of Raqqa. We're talking about dramatically escalating our support and cooperation with the YPG – a force that Turkey insists is a terrorist group. In just the past few days, the State Department spokesman directly contradicted that claim, saying the U.S. does not consider the YPG a terrorist group, and on the contrary views them as an important part of the coalition against ISIS. Needless to say, the Turks were not happy at all and immediately let their displeasure be known. Where this is all headed, and whether the U.S. can juggle all the tensions and contradictions, remains to be seen. But the bottom line is that Turkey continues on balance to be the source of more problems than solutions in the U.S.-led war against ISIS.

**OR:** Is the fight over the future of Kirkuk and all of its oil going to be a major stumbling block to Kurdish independence?

**Hannah:** Kirkuk is indeed very central to the fight over the future of Kurdistan and the future of Iraq. It's never really been dealt with, although there were provisions in the Iraqi constitution for doing so. Certainly the government in Baghdad doesn't want to deal with it for fear that the people of Kirkuk will use any referendum to attach themselves to the KRG. And if the Kurds were to make a unilateral break from Iraq, there's no doubt that they would attempt to take Kirkuk with them. The city is an obvious flashpoint for ethnic conflicts that can be quite easily exploited and manipulated, with a plurality of Kurds there, but large concentrations of Arabs and Turkomans as well. Add to that

combustible mix the fact that Kirkuk is also a major oil-producing region and you've almost certainly got a recipe for conflict if and when there's any effort to change its status officially, especially unilaterally – conflicts that won't only involve parties inside Iraq, but could easily draw in outside parties as well, particularly Turkey and Iran.

But the reality is that since the ISIS invasion of Iraq last year, and the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in the north, virtually all of Kirkuk, including its oil fields, are now under Kurdish control – specifically by the PUK. Oil that previously was being pumped, transported, and exported by Iraq's North Oil Company, is now being sold by the KRG's Ministry of National Resources. That's probably several hundred thousands barrels per day that is moving through a new Kurdish-controlled pipeline that runs directly to export terminals at Turkish ports, where it is picked up and taken by tankers to international markets. That's in addition to a couple hundred thousand barrels that are being pumped from fields in Kurdistan proper. Production under the control of the KRG may now exceed a half million barrels per day. It's optimistically slated to be much closer to a million by the end of 2015

So while Kirkuk, and the battle over Kirkuk oil, will likely be big fights down the line, the de facto reality today is that since June 2014 the KRG and the Peshmerga now have possession of it. That's a huge development. And the Kurds have sworn never to let it go. In any calculation about the pros and cons of a Kurdish move to independence, and in particular the KRG's ability to sustain itself economically, controlling Kirkuk is going to weigh heavily in the balance of any decision to “go for it.” In a very significant way, it adds to the growing feeling of “We might be able to pull this off.”

**OR:** Do you think there could be a positive relationship between the Kurds and the Israelis?

**Hannah:** There has been an awful lot of history between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq, going all the way back to the 1960s and 1970s. As two vulnerable minority populations trying to keep their heads above water in a sea of Arab nationalist hostility, the Israelis and Kurds naturally had a lot in common. It should also be said that among the Iraqi Jews who fled persecution over the years and found refuge in Israel, there were a significant number of Kurdish Jews. The Israelis were clearly supportive of Mulla Mustafa Barzani in the 1970s in his armed struggle against Baghdad. Iraq's Baathist regime, of course, was particularly antagonistic to Israel's existence and was determined to acquire the military means to do something about it. Israel's relationship with the Kurds no doubt included military supplies and likely training and intelligence as well. There's been a significant revival of that relationship in recent years, especially since 2003. In addition to security elements, it has expanded to business and diplomacy, too. Indeed, when ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly said that the Kurds of Iraq deserved their own state.

A somewhat more recent development, whose importance could also be of major consequence, is the fact that Israeli ports have now become a primary destination for the off-loading of KRG oil exports. Since the Arab government in Baghdad doesn't even recognize Israel, its ability to challenge the KRG exports in Israeli courts, the way it did in the case of exports to the U.S., is severely constrained. As a result, oil from Kurdistan now allegedly constitutes a majority of Israel's total oil imports. In other cases, the oil is apparently being off-loaded and transferred to other tankers that proceed to carry it to third country destinations.

**OR:** How do you see the coming growth in Iranian power affecting the Kurds?

**Hannah:**

One factor that could greatly impact Kurdish interests is the evolving reality that the U.S. is retrenching from the Middle East while Iranian power is expanding. The recent nuclear deal that further legitimizes and consecrates Iran's rising status in the region only adds to the problem. When the U.S. withdrew all its forces from Iraq in 2011, it was the first time since the end of the first Gulf War that the Kurds were left without any direct U.S. military protection. Iran has rushed to fill the resulting vacuum in Iraq, including in the KRG. It goes without saying that the stronger Iran's influence and leverage with the KRG, the less room the Kurds will have to maneuver in ways that run contrary to Iranian interests – be it by deepening ties to Israel or advancing their own goal of independence against Baghdad. As mentioned earlier, Iran is beset by its own rather large and oftentimes restless Kurdish minority that is concentrated primarily in a region that borders the KRG. Iran clearly fears that any KRG bid for independence could destabilize Iran itself. Furthermore, especially in the wake of the ISIS invasion of Iraq, Baghdad finds itself more dependent on Iran for security help than ever before. After the collapse of the U.S.-built Iraqi army in 2014, Iranian-backed Shiite militias have formed the backbone of the forces defending Iraq's Shiite government. With Iraq increasingly under its thumb, Iran has even less interest in seeing the country ripped apart by the Kurds, who would take with them significant oil resources that might otherwise fall under Iran's de facto control.

**OR:** How dangerous is ISIS? Are they just another regional aspirant to statehood? Do they have actual hegemonic plans, or is that merely part of their PR strategy?

**Hannah:** Both could be true to some extent. I do believe that ISIS is incredibly dangerous to U.S. interests and needs to be taken very seriously. It's the next-generation iteration of the global jihadist movement. It's taken things to a whole new level from where Bin Laden and al Qaeda were only a decade ago. It controls a huge swathe of territory. It's wiping away sovereign borders and challenging the international state system in the Middle East. It has a powerful army, good intelligence and rules over millions of people. It has access to daily revenue streams in the millions of dollars. Its success in building the caliphate and exploiting the internet and social media has brought it thousands of recruits from all over the world, and more are still being attracted every day. Even as it maintains and consolidates its control over large portions of Syria and Iraq, its tentacles are spreading far and wide across the region, as branches of the Islamic State spread to the Sinai, Libya, and Afghanistan. And they do so in ways that appear to advance ISIS's declared goal of establishing a caliphate that will eventually rule the world. It may appear delusional to us, but I think they're absolutely sincere and committed to that vision, and are prepared to wreak maximum havoc and destruction in their pursuit of it.

I think ISIS is likely only to get more dangerous over time unless they're finally met by a force that dramatically pushes them back on their heels, they begin to lose large amounts of territory quickly, and their ideological legitimacy is punctured in the eyes of the world's Sunnis. I don't yet see such a force being assembled to impose that kind of sustained defeat on them. It's certainly not visible in current U.S. strategy. So I worry a great deal about the ever-expanding threat from ISIS. The longer that they are able to claim that they are holding their own against a coalition led by the most powerful country on earth, the more legitimacy, recruits, financial support, and strength they will gain. The more likely that they will be able to plan or just inspire a successful terrorist attack against us. And the more costly it will be for us to defeat them.

All of this is not to deny the possibility that these kinds of totalitarian movements always contain the seeds of their own



destruction. That's been true of totalitarian movements in the past, and of communism most clearly as George Kennan noted when he talked about the system's internal contradictions. My concern is that those internal contradictions sometimes take an awfully long time to manifest themselves unless they're sped along by some powerful outside force. Soviet Communism, after all, lasted 70 years and tens of millions of people needlessly died before Kennan was proved right. And even then it likely wouldn't have happened as soon as it did without a major assist from a determined Cold Warrior like Ronald Reagan. That's what I worry about with ISIS. How much horror will they be allowed to inflict on the world before they move to history's ash bin? So I think it behooves us to develop a strategy that will really give them a major shove in that direction, at which point the Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria may indeed rise up, say they've had enough of the brutality and barbarism, and take ISIS down themselves. That's what finally happened in Iraq in 2007 and 2008 when the Sunni tribes revolted against al Qaeda. But it would likely never have happened, or at least not as soon as it did, without the U.S. surge.

The danger of just standing back as we've largely been doing and waiting for ISIS to burn itself out is especially great in this era of globalization and the spread of technology. We're living in an age of asymmetric warfare. Relatively weak actors are now capable of accessing technologies that allow them to inflict destruction on much more powerful states on a scale never before imaginable. It doesn't take much in terms of resources to have profound global effects. The events of 9/11 proved that definitively. And there's no question that the next 9/11, if it were successful, could be far, far worse. It's by no means impossible. Groups like al Qaeda and ISIS would jump at the opportunity if it presented himself. No one should doubt that. So I think the more prudent course of action is to take ISIS quite seriously as a threat to the United States and our interests, and to develop and properly resource a comprehensive strategy to contain, degrade and defeat them as quickly as possible.

**OR:** Is it a strategic decision on their part that they haven't attacked either Europe or the U.S.? Or is that mere luck?

**Hannah:** Well, don't forget the attacks in Paris at Charlie Hebdo and the Jewish market. Those were relatively small operations that had global impact. At a minimum, they seemed to be inspired by ISIS. There have also been a long series of other attacks in different countries, both successful and disrupted, linked to ISIS - including several lone wolf efforts here in the United States. The power of ISIS's mastery of social media to motivate its followers into action is a real X factor in all of this. For sure, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and other U.S. intelligence agencies have never been more concerned about the potential for attacks. Their efforts to preempt and disrupt plots have accelerated dramatically in 2015. Arrests of suspected ISIS sympathizers are way up. It's true that a lot of these lone wolf efforts in particular have been rather amateurish and unskilled. It's also true that, unlike al Qaeda, which did see attacks against the West as its main priority, ISIS is first and foremost focused on building its caliphate in the Middle East. But that doesn't mean that it isn't also very interested in rear-guard actions that damage the enemy at home. It's been crystal clear in its propaganda that those who can't come to the Islamic State to fight should stay in place and do whatever they can to terrorize the enemy where they are. It goes without saying that one ISIS-inspired murderer with a machine gun in a crowded mall at Christmas would change our world overnight. So I would never rest on our laurels or suggest that we can be complacent about ISIS's objective to hit us at home

And while these lone wolf events seem to be ISIS's main avenue of attack in the West for the moment, I think the longer that they're around with a major safe haven, the more likely they are to develop a more focused and



professional capability to launch attacks abroad. I'm not sure anybody knows at this point how many thousands of western passport holders are now on the battlefields in Iraq and Syria, but they are all potential assets in such an effort. Military-trained, battle-hardened, ideologically committed, and able to cross Western borders with ease. That's not a good combination.

**OR:** How do you see the Obama administration's hopes for greater co-operation with the Iranians against ISIS and on other issues post-nuclear deal playing out?

**Hannah:** I'm extremely doubtful of any potential for real collaboration with Iran. We weren't able to push back and decrease Iranian aggression in the Middle East prior to the deal when they were desperate to gain our support for lifting sanctions. So why would the Revolutionary Guards become less aggressive once a deal is in place and U.S. economic leverage has more or less been squandered? It doesn't make sense to me. So I do believe that one unwelcome side effect of the deal is a much higher risk that Iran's destabilizing activities and support for terrorism are likely to increase, not decrease.

In this regard, I'd just point out that, already, the Iranians and Russians have clearly used the opportunity of the nuclear deal and Iran's re-emergence as a legitimate player to cut their own devil's bargain in Syria. They're now pursuing a joint strategy, backed up by a massive infusion of Russian weapons and troops, to consolidate the Assad regime's hold on power – in direct opposition to Obama's demand that Assad must go. That's a direct byproduct, I would argue, of the nuclear deal. Russia is now back in the Middle East as a major military power deciding political outcomes for the first time since Sadat evicted them from Egypt in 1972. To my mind that's pretty good evidence that as far as stability in the Middle East goes, the nuclear deal shouldn't give us grounds for great optimism. On the contrary, the consequences in terms of super-charging Iranian aggression in particular could be very dangerous, indeed.

**OR:** What, in your opinion, are the crises in the region that haven't showed up on our radar to the extent that they should?

**Hannah:** I do think the problem of Turkey is a serious one that the general public hasn't yet fully appreciated. A vital NATO ally, led by an aspiring despot who happens to be a committed Islamist and anti-Semite, is set on a very dangerous trajectory. Its stability and democracy are being systematically subverted, while its foreign policy and worldview are increasingly at odds with those of the United States. What that ultimately means for NATO and the West should be a matter of great concern.

We have issues both in Saudi Arabia and Iran of possibly imminent successions. One is America's most dangerous enemy in the region. The other is arguably our most important and problematic partner. Together, they are the driving forces behind the rapidly escalating Sunni-Shiite war that is brewing in the Middle East. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is old and ailing. The new Saudi king, Salman, is also old and reportedly enfeebled. When Salman passes, we will see a new generation, the grandsons of the Kingdom's founder, finally come to power. I remain doubtful that the transition will go as smoothly as the Saudis want us to believe. I worry that the rivalries and ambitions of competing parts of the royal family will quickly rear their heads in ways that could be quite destabilizing for the world's largest oil producer. I wouldn't be too sure that Salman's son, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed, is ready to stand aside and see

his cousin, Crown Prince Nayef, rise to the throne and rule for the next several decades. Mohammed gives every appearance of being a man in a hurry with no self-doubt about his own ability to lead.

Another big issue that is the cause of great concern is the retrenchment of American power from the region, the unraveling of an American-backed order in the Middle East that has underpinned stability and security for at least the past half century. The view that the U.S. has run out of breath and is on the way out has created a void that will almost surely not be filled by some kind of virtuous cycle of peace. Instead, both friend and foe alike will be forced to pursue strategies of self-help that will more often than not be detrimental to U.S. interests. The advancement of Russian and Chinese power over the region's affairs is not likely to come without the U.S. paying a substantial price. What the Israelis and Saudis do to compensate for their loss of faith in U.S. power and security assurances is anyone's guess. Why wouldn't the Saudis be tempted to acquire their own nuclear weapons? Why wouldn't they dramatically escalate their support for radical Sunni groups across the region who are prepared to do battle with Iran's growing list of proxies? Is the next U.S. administration likely to reverse this dangerous trend and reassert U.S. leadership and dominance in the region in a way that reassures our allies and deters our adversaries? Or is what Obama has started irreversible – at least until the next 9/11 wakes us up again? It remains to be seen. But it's a question that I think is very worth putting before the American people and debating. For all its obvious frustrations and costs, is it better for the United States to remain the region's preeminent power acting to mobilize others on behalf of collective security and stability? If not, are we prepared to step aside and watch some new order replace ours, even if it's much less aligned with our interests?

**OR:** Why does Turkey seem to largely get a pass from the international community on the issue of the Kurds?

**Hannah:** The most obvious one to compare it to is the Palestinian issue. The cynical answer is that the Kurds have the wrong enemy. They're not fighting the Jews. And therefore their cause doesn't garner the kind of attention and sympathy that the Palestinians have been able to get over the course of the last several decades.

I do think that when people look at the Kurdish problem it's not that they don't necessarily have sympathy, and a sense that there was a historical wrong done to these people. All other things being equal, I think a lot of people would agree that the Kurds are far more deserving than most other stateless people to a homeland that they control and can call their own. But among both the region's and the world's major powers, there remains great anxiety about any effort to rejigger international boundaries. Creating new states is messy business. It can trigger wars, population transfers, and instability. No one can ever be quite certain where it leads once you start. The uncertainties are great. The bias toward the status quo is enormous. Given the almost certain antagonism of Turkey, Iran, and Baghdad, the process of getting to an independent Kurdish state carries significant risks, at least in the short term, of making things in the region more unstable and violent, not less. From that standpoint, the deck is unfortunately stacked against the Kurds in terms of the international community acting affirmatively on their behalf.

It requires too much time, attention, resources, and energy to figure out how we midwife this in a way that the costs clearly come out in our favor. And that maybe is our failing, our inability to be creative enough, or to be sufficiently risk-acceptant to see that it can be done and in a way that is obviously advantages us. But given everything else happening in the region, and the headaches that exist, to ask people to make a relatively dramatic shift in the existing regional

order is, at this point too big an ask. Which is not to say that the logic of the situation isn't driving us in that direction anyway, and that, at some point, when you look at the situation objectively, you decide this train has left the station and our interest is clearly in shaping the course of this as successfully as we can. And you would need to do that for northern Iraq, obviously, but then also figure out the implications for the rest of the region, for Syria, for Turkey, for Iran. How do they respond and how do we influence that? It's a bit of a Rubik's cube, but events may force us to take it on, and perhaps much sooner than we currently anticipate. But for now, I still don't see the correlation of forces as such that it's likely to happen any time soon.

Nevertheless, I would note that whether we support an immediate Kurdish move to independence or whether we want simply to have maximum influence over the emergence of a stable, decentralized, but still unified Iraqi state that is an acceptable U.S. partner – in either of those scenarios, I think it serves our interests to be as engaged as we possibly can be in building a very deep and very strategic bilateral relationship with the KRG. We should aim to be their primary source of external support. We should guarantee that they will never again be subject to the genocidal depredations of Baghdad or any other government. At every level, politically, economically, militarily, and intelligence, America should be the KRG's main partner. The KRG should have full confidence that we have their backs. That way, they will have far greater flexibility and patience to defer to our wishes that they keep trying to work through their differences with Baghdad in a way that advances the goal of a unified Iraq. And should that effort nevertheless fail, and at some point we do decide that an independent Kurdistan is the optimal means for advancing U.S. interests, we will be best positioned to help the Kurds advance that agenda. The Kurds are far more likely to follow our lead if they're operating from a posture of trust and confidence in America than one of severe doubt.

**OR:** Thanks so much, John.

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