

# ” Der Krieg der IS in Kurdistan” von Prof. Dr. Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder



Über die aktuelle Lage in Kurdistan und den Krieg der IS-Terroristen schreibt Prof. Ferhad Seyder von der Universität Erfurt.

## **Der Krieg der IS in Kurdistan**

In seinem aktuellen Text „The IS War in Kurdistan“ analysiert Seyder den Krieg der IS-Terroristen und die Situation in Kurdistan und in den angrenzenden Gebieten. Neben einer scharfen Analyse der jüngsten, dramatischen Entwicklungen stellt er diese auch in einen historischen Kontext. Er analysiert die Konsequenzen der Gebietseroberungen durch den IS, die Situation im Irak und die Rolle von Al-Maliki. Seyder beschreibt die Rolle der USA und des Westens und zeigt ihre jeweiligen Verstickungen in eigene strategische Interessen, die zur Folge hatten, dass sich zunächst einmal niemand für den Konflikt verantwortlich fühlte.

Dieses Zögern und Nichteingreifen des Westens war laut Seyder ausschlaggebend für die zunehmenden Attacken der IS-Terroristen gegen die Kurden. Die Kurden sind jedoch auf westliche Unterstützung angewiesen, auf sich allein gestellt können sie den Kampf gegen den IS nicht aufnehmen geschweige denn gewinnen.

Der Westen habe die vom IS ausgehende Gefahr zunächst gründlich unterschätzt, so lautet Seyders These. Hätten die westlichen Staaten und die USA die moderate syrische Opposition unterstützt, wäre der IS möglicherweise keine grenzüberschreitende Organisation geworden.

„It is a regional war against a power that neither accepts the state system nor the political order, and who has declared a holy war against it” – um dieser Gefahr zu begegnen braucht es ein entschlossenes, internationales Eingreifen jenseits jeweils eigener Interessen.

Eine internationale Koalition sollte nicht nur die IS-Terroristen bekämpfen, sondern auch eine neue Ordnung herstellen, die der Region langfristig Frieden bringen kann.

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### **Prof. Dr. Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder**

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Er studierte Politikwissenschaft, Geschichte und Soziologie an der Freien Universität Berlin (FU) und in Stockholm. Er promovierte 1983 über die kurdische Nationalbewegung im Irak; seine Habilitationsschrift folgte im Jahr 1994 zum Thema Konfessionalismus und Politik. Seyder verfasste zahlreiche Bücher und unzählige Beiträge und Artikel für Fachzeitschriften, Sammelbände und Lexika. Er veröffentlicht unter anderen die wissenschaftlichen Reihen „Nahost Studien“ und „Studien zu Politik und Gesellschaft des Vorderen Orients.“

Ab 1987 war er als Assistent an der Arbeitsstelle Politikwissenschaft der FU Berlin. An der Universität Erfurt war er Professor für die Geschichte Westasiens. Von 2004 bis 2010 lehrte er als Professor für Zeitgeschichte an der University of Jordan.

2011 war er im Auftrag der DAAD am Aufbau des Faches Politikwissenschaft an der Universität Duhok in Irakisch-Kurdistan beteiligt. Er hatte Gastdozenturen an den Universitäten Konstanz, Potsdam, Bremen, an der FU Berlin und der Ruhr-Universität Bochum inne und forschte an der Universität in Kairo.

Seyder veröffentlicht regelmäßig Kommentare und gibt Interviews zu politischen und sozialen Fragen des Nahen Ostens, insbesondere zum Irak, zu Syrien und zur Türkei.

### **Professor Dr. Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder :**

## **The IS War in Kurdistan**

### ***I. Introduction***

*It was an unforeseen development when IS (Islamic State) troops attacked areas controlled by the Kurdish Peshmerga on 2nd August this year. All observers were sure that the IS would march towards Baghdad – since it was only 25km between the areas controlled by the IS and the Iraqi capital.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, activities of the IS troops were spotted in the southern Baghdad region. But why did the IS change its mind? Did al-Bagdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the IS, plan the attack on the Kurdish districts after the conquest of the city of Mosul? Did he want to gain a strategic advantage by conquering the Kurdish mountainous areas for an easier spread towards the south?*

*The strategists of the IS possibly thought that the conditions were favorable for an attack on the Kurds, in political and military aspects. The attacks addressed the Kurdish areas, which can be considered as military weak spots. The areas in the valley of Nineveh, reaching from the south of Mosul to the Kurdish capital of Erbil, only came under Kurdish control in June 2014.*

*The connection between the Kurdish main settlement areas in Iraq with the region of Sinjar was along a 100km small corridor at the Syrian-Iraqi border, surrounded by hostile Arab-Sunni groups who oppose the new political order established after 2003. The relations between the Iraqi government of Nuri al-Maliki and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) deteriorated after autumn 2013. Maliki blocked the budget of the Kurdish region, tried to stop the export of Kurdish petroleum and the politicians of Maliki's Shiite*

*coalition (constitutional state) polemized against the KRG. The Kurds had no other option but to boycott the Maliki government politically. The Kurdish party coalition pulled their ministers from the Iraqi cabinet.*

*IS also seemed to have pinpointed the structural weakness of the Peshmerga: light weapons, almost no combat experience and a 1,000km front with the IS.*

*An intervention by the West and quick military help for the Kurds was something the IS did not expect. The only threat to the IS during an offensive against the Kurds would be an intervention of the West. The US and the West rejected an intervention in Syria. A return of the US to Iraq seemed unimaginable for the IS. The experience in Syria formed the IS strategy. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his jihadists not only gained military experience in Syria, they observed that the outside world wasn't interested in intervening in a civil war. Furthermore, a direct intervention against the IS was not an option for the West. However, what al-Baghdadi got wrong was the fact that the enlargement of the jihadist's power sphere and the creation of a terror regime called IS was bound to draw the attention of the West and provoke a reaction.*

*Nevertheless, due to the experiences of the past decade in the region, the West was hesitant to intervene directly. That the attacks on the Kurds increased had its starting point in the fact that no other anti-jihadist power existed to resist the IS. Even though the West remained skeptical, no power was able to hinder that "light Western weapons"<sup>2</sup> were exported.*

*That statement describes the strategy of the West right now. Different than the war in 1991 for the freedom of Kuwait, and also different than the 2003 war in Iraq, Obama and his Western allies are searching for partners in the Middle East to fight a war for Western interests. The US and the West will be "leading from behind" in this war. For local groups, like the Kurds or Shiites, the international coalition against the IS is extremely important from a military and political perspective. The Kurds would not have been able to fight such a war without Western help. But this is not just taking place in Iraq, and the local groups do not share a common strategy nor do they have common goals for the*

outcome. The same holds true for the Kurds.

## **II. Consequences of the IS conquests in Niniveh Province (Mosul) and other Sunni-Arab provinces of Iraq**

*The IS conquest of five Iraqi-Sunni provinces, and the fact that the well-equipped Iraqi army surrendered without a struggle, is comparable, in a military way, to the defeat of the Arab armies during the Six-Day War in 1967.*

*An important result of the advance was the loss of Nuri al-Maliki's power, who was supposed to build a new coalition after the June 2014 elections, making a third term possible. Al-Maliki, who was shocked by the defeat of his army in Mosul and other Sunni provinces, tried to recruit a Shi'ite volunteer army (al-Hashd al-Shaabi) to protect Baghdad and the holy Shi'ite shrine of Najaf and Karbala from the dangers of the IS. Even with these new circumstances, al-Maliki was not ready to step down in favor of another candidate for a Shi'ite coalition. In this tense atmosphere of mistrust and mutual allegations by the Sunni and Shi'ite politi-*

*cians, it seemed as if the Kurdish region was the only remaining political oasis of stability. As the president of the Kurdish region, Masud Barzani correctly stated: "Iraq is falling apart, that is the truth, but some do not seem to realize it."<sup>3</sup> The cause for the dissolution of Iraq and the failing of the democratic process, Barzani pointed out, is the radicalization of Sunni and Shi'ite groups, as well as the failure to create a collective Iraqi identity. In that context, Barzani broke a taboo by pointing out that an independent Kurdish state is indeed an option. The president announced in front of the Kurdish regional parliament that a commission would be formed to prepare a referendum for Kurdish political independence. Barzani's decision should not just be seen in the context of the June 2014 events and the occupation of the city of Mosul, but mainly that Iraqi federalism had failed and was not accepted by Iraqi Arabs. After the announcement and adoption of the 2005 constitution by the majority of the Iraqi people, no federal Arab region was created, as stated in the constitution. The Kurdish region remains unique in that context the federation discredits it as separation (taqsim). This refusal correlates with conflicts because the Kurds insist on their constitutional rights, like implementation of Article 140 in the 2005 constitution, which ensures the settlement of territorial conflicts. The Kurds were sure that Iran, the Arab states and Arab Iraqis would reject an independent Kurdish state. They hoped, however, that the US and the West would reward the Kurdish model created in Iraq. The US realized the significance of the Kurdish region in supporting a regional coalition against the IS, yet tried to ignore the question of Kurdish independence. The US Vice President Joe Biden, on a visit to Baghdad and Erbil, pointed out that the US was looking forward to see a new Iraqi government being formed in Baghdad. The Kurds are supposed to agree with al-Maliki on forming a national coalition. In that perspective, it seems as if the US put equal pressure on al-Maliki and the Kurds. The message to the Kurds was obvious: The Kurds are not supposed to articulate their hopes for autonomy. But al-Maliki should also be pushed to a more*

moderate attitude towards the Kurds and Sunnis. The Obama administration showed no reaction to al-Maliki's plea for the US Airforce to intervene against the IS. An intervention by the US depended on the formation of a new Iraqi government.<sup>4</sup>

### **III. The sudden strike by the IS**

The strike against Kurdish Peshmerga positions – from al-Rabiaa the Syrian border to Makhmur, not far from the Kurdish capital Erbil – was a political and military surprise. The Kurdish government tried several times to point out that, because of the occupation of Mosul by the IS and the resulting 1,000km front that they had to protect against the IS, they would need support, but that dilemma did not come into the public domain. Probably, the leaders of the PKK were not wrong with their estimation of the political situation. The disruption between Baghdad and Erbil did not even stop after troops of the central government surrendered without a struggle to the advancing IS jihadists. The Kurds could not profit from the weapons of the Iraqi armed forces. Also, the strategy of the US administration could have assured the IS leaders in their beliefs that the USA will not intervene after the attacks on the KRG territory. Also, Obama seemed undecided and unwilling to intervene against the IS. The Western media reported about the Peshmerga, after the Iraqi troops deserted, as the only military power that could stop the expansion of the IS. However, the US and the West did

not think about arming the Kurds, due to legal and political reasons. The efforts made by the Kurdish president and his delegation while visiting the US and Western Europe in July 2014 did not reach the expected outcome. It is possible that the expansive dangers of the IS were not recognized in the West. But even if the West had realized the dangers, the will to intervene directly was not present. Obama stated in his speech at West Point that the US had just emerged from the worst economic crisis since 1930. Even though, an intervention in the Middle Eastern conflict seems right, the political frontlines on-site are not distinguishable. During an interview with the *New York Times*' Thomas L. Friedman, Obama, as the first Western politician, pointed out the central issue accountable for the crisis in the Middle Eastern region: "What we're seeing in the Middle East and parts of North Africa is an order that dates back to World War I starting to buckle."<sup>5</sup> This view should be considered. For far too long, the collapsing state system in the Middle East has been ignored. It was the IS, a product of war and crisis, that declared the death of the Sykes-Picot state system, as soon as the bulldozers had flattened the borders between Syria and Iraq.

Post-2003 US policy under the Bush administration should be held accountable for the rise of the IS in the region. The early discharge of the US armed forces caused a vacuum in Iraq. Iran, as well as al-Qaida, used this new situation to gain power in Iraq. However, the current Obama administration, despite its hesitation, cannot be held accountable for the Bush policies in Iraq. The new situation encouraged al-Maliki to marginalize the Sunnis and paved the way for the return of al-Qaida. Although, since 2009, the US has used a strategy to mobilize the Sunni tribes against al-

*Qaida. At the same time, the Obama administration failed in Syria. Had the US and the West supported the moderate opposition powers in Syria, the IS would not have had such an environment to become a cross-border organization. Another barrier to push back the IS is the fragile regional system. The 'Arab Spring' destabilized the old, not very functional regional system. Even before the emergence of the 'Arab Spring', the three leading nations, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, drifted further apart. The non-Arab powers, such as Iran and Turkey, competed to become the hegemonial powers in the region. But civil wars and many crises weakened both of these states as well. A regional coalition, like the one Bush sen. and his foreign minister, James A. Baker, mobilized against Saddam Hussein in 1990, would not be not possible nowadays. The regional powers are not able to support an efficient coalition against the IS. The US and the West would have to be the leading powers during such a task. The Arab states, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, potential members of a regional anti-IS-coalition, were alienated by the expansion of the IS.*

#### ***IV. The Kurds and the events on the eve of the IS strikes***

*A few months before the attacks, the winner of the Kurdish elections, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), was able to build a coalition with the Patriotic Party of Kurdistan (PPK) and the newly established Goran Group. This national coalition, was unable to pacify the differences of the involved parties over the correct evaluation of the situation in the Middle East and regional polarization. Regional polarization caused the formation of coalitions, which also echoed in the Kurdish region. Especially the two big players, Iran and*

*Turkey, were searching for allies among the Kurds. Economic and political reasons made the decision easy for the KDP, who turned to Turkey as a regional partner. Ankara was not just the most important trade partner of the Kurdish region, but allowed Kurds to build an oil pipeline which transported Kurdish oil to Turkish harbors on the Mediterranean Sea.*

*As with the normalization of the economic relations, political relations also normalized between the Kurdish region in Iraq and Turkey. Visits of top-ranking Turkish politicians, including the prime minister, deepened the relations. Bilateral talks with the Kurdish prime minister Nechriavn Barzani, as well as the Kurdish president Masud Barzani have been commonplace since 2011. Turkey is very realistic on its relations to the Kurdish region. Leaders of the Kurdish region meanwhile support the peace process in Turkey. These 'peace talks' – as they are called in the political-diplomatic language of Turkey – could show positive outcomes, so that even the Kurds in Iraq could benefit further from their relations with Turkey. Consequently, Turkey did not categorically refuse the independence of the Kurdish region when the IS conquered parts of Iraq; it showed a positive attitude. Referring to the intervention of the US in an interview with al-Jazeera, Erdogan answered a question about Turkey's reaction if Iraq were to fall apart: "There's nothing we could do."<sup>6</sup> With this statement Erdogan calmed the parts of the West that were afraid that a Kurdish state could harm Turkey. But Turkey did not intervene against the IS, not even after attacks on the Kurds, and did not support the*

Kurds in Iraq with weapons or material. It seems as if the AKP government is rethinking its regional policies. The idea of the Neo-Ottomanism 7, which was supposed to put Turkey in political and economic key position, is no longer the main position.<sup>8</sup> The 'Arab Spring', the civil wars and the rise of Islamism has forced Turkey to return to a more conservative foreign policy. Maybe Turkey will take measures to neutralize the negative consequences of the failed transformation of the Middle East. With this in mind, Turkey's restrained reaction against the IS is understandable. Ankara is trying to prevent the PKK, which has been getting stronger since 2nd August, from getting even more power. An empowerment of the PKK would also harm the peace talks in Turkey. Only a militarily weak PKK can continue peace talks. The Turkish government also seems to believe that an empowerment of the Iraqi armed forces would marginalize the Sunnis even more, as the current Iraqi army is a mostly Shiite army. In summary, a more active role in the Middle East became unlikely, which also explains why Turkey did not intervene in the Iraq conflict.

## **V. KDP, PKK and PUK**

Before the IS strikes on 2nd August 2014 began, differences between the two counterparts in the Kurdish region arose; the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Three factors complicated the work between those two parties. First, the regional alliances, second, the position during a conflict between the national government and the Kurdish region, and third, the position towards the non-Iraqi Kurdish forces outside the Kurdish region. While the PUK has strong relations with Iran for geopolitical reasons, the KDP is trying to deepen its relations with Turkey, also because Iran supports the Shiite government in Bagdad. Conflicts between the two major parties arose when the president of the Kurdish region, Masud Barzani, announced the option of an

independent Kurdish state and for the parliament in Erbil to prepare a referendum. He announced it at a time when an IS occupation of Bagdad seemed possible. This would leave Iraq fragmented. The PUK leaked information to the media that the conditions for an independent Kurdish state had not yet been met. Shortly afterwards, Iran threatened the Kurds that an independent Kurdish state would not be accepted by Iran, and that Iran would support any coalition against it. Furthermore, Iran would build a blockade against the Kurdish-Iraqi region. It was logical that the PUK tried to distance itself from Barzani's idea.

The PKK, who had controlled the mountains of Qandil and the Turkish border for many years, and had been trying to build a state within a state, appeared. The leaders of the PKK in Kandil, especially the unofficial proxies of Abdullah Öcalan and Cemil Bayek, pointed out that the PKK is against an independent Kurdish state. The worldwide network of PKK media, as well as the press in Turkey and the diaspora started a campaign against Masud Barzani's idea. The differences were and are still manifold. On the one hand, Abdullah Öcalan clearly refuses an independent Kurdish state in his new statements. His dictum contains a proposal to change Turkey and the Middle East into a democratic, federal civil society. The nation state will fall apart, and the political institutions

*will be reduced to a minimum.*

*Since 2011 his party has tried to implement this model in the Syrian Kurdish regions. Three districts were created, governed by a type of people's committee. The basis for this model is a social contract, which is used as a constitution for the districts. Actual power, however, stays with the PYD (Party of the Kurdish Unity), which should be open to all ethn-*

*cities and religions, even though it is a Kurdish party. The KDP, which has some influence on the Syrian Kurdish parties, tries to make cohabitation between the PYD and other parties possible. The PYD, militarily and politically supported by the PKK, denies any approaches made by the KDP. The leaders of other Syrian Kurdish parties were forced to move to the Iraqi Kurdish region. Although the PKK and KDP tried to calm their tensions, mutual provocation determined their relations. One example is the blockade of the borders between districts and the Kurdish region in Iraq, as well as arrests of KDP members by PYD armed forces, called People's Defense Units (YPG). The worse these relations became, the better they got between the PUK and the PKK. They forgot about the last attempt to force the PKK out of PUK territory in the year 2000. Both parties want to hinder the dominance of the KDP and maintain good relations with Iran. The discord among the different Kurdish parties in forming a common strategy for all Kurdish regions in the changing Middle East became more obvious with the attacks of the IS.*

## **VI. The Islamic State and its war against the Kurds**

*The successful attack by the IS on Peshmerga positions, and their retreat from the city of Sinjar – as well as the mountains of Sinjar – modified, or even destroyed, the myth of the Peshmerga as a well-trained military group. The tragedy of the flight of the Yazidis from the IS jihadists will be seen as the fault of the Peshmerga for a long time. Kenneth Pollack, expert at the US think-tank Brookings Institution, explains the events of the 2nd and 3rd August and the quick advances of the IS towards the Kurdish capital Erbil as follows<sup>9</sup>: a) the surprise effect, b) attacks against Kurdish regions that the Kurds had only gained control over in June 2014, c) the Kurds had a long front after the events in June 2014 and had to defend those new areas with light weapons. The IS troops on the other hand, had heavy weapons and were highly mobile.*

*The IS took the arsenal of the Iraqi military and police in Mosul. Furthermore, the Peshmerga of the third generation<sup>10</sup> had never fought a war and their commanders were trained to fight battles in mountainous regions. A front-war in open landscapes and deserts was not the ideal ground for a battle. On top of this, the IS doesn't only consist of the ca. 15,000 jihadists, as often stated, but also includes at least seven other Islamist groups.<sup>11</sup> The fast strikes, the mobility and the flexibility of the IS troops suggest that the IS commanders had gained experience in the Iraqi army under Ba'athist rule. They are also supported by the armed forces of the Sunni tribes. The Kurdish leaders made a huge mistake concerning the tragedy of the Yazidis. The Peshmerga pulled their troops out of the Sinjar region without any known reasons. The IS massacred the Yazidis, raped their women, took*

some of them as a loot back to Mosul and probably Syria. One has to question the fact, if the ca. 1,000 Peshmerga would even have been able to protect such a huge endangered region with a non-Islamic population.<sup>12</sup> Why did no one take measures to protect the population from the IS conquerors? Those measures could also have included the arming of the Yazidis.

The Kurdish leaders, as many other observers, probably thought that the IS would continue their march towards Baghdad. Indeed, the IS fought against Shi'ite troops, which made it even more possible for observers to expect this. Until today, there is no proof that the IS contacted the Kurds, nor that the IS ensured the Kurds that they would not attack the Kurdish region. But the Kurdish leaders do speak about Arab spies who lived on the border to the Kurdish region and supported the IS with their attacks.<sup>13</sup>

Also, no one is able to tell if the Kurdish al-Qaida terrorists played a part in the 2nd August 2014 attack. Actually, al-Qaida chose the Iraqi Kurdish region as a hide-out and a base for their activities in Iraq after their 2001 return from Afghanistan, and in 2003, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, moved into the Arab-Sunni region west of Baghdad. The border region to Iran had been controlled by Kurdish Islamists since the 1990s, who gained experience in Afghanistan. But the Kurdish parties managed to get rid of them with military pressure or by coopting them into the political system. Some Kurdish fighters in Afghanistan joined al-Qaida or later the IS. Abdullah al-Shafi, a Kurdish jihadist, is probably part of the IS leadership.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the military successes of the IS in its war against the Kurds, it had to assume that the Kurdish region cannot be controlled as easy as the Arab-Sunni regions. On the one hand, the Kurds have a strong secular nationalism in all segments of their society, and on the other they had to overcome the shock of the 2nd and 3rd August and reorganize their troops.

In the IS declaration on the war against the Kurds, they declare that Kurds are apostates; therefore it is the duty of the IS to declare war on them.<sup>15</sup> Following their own explanation, the IS should conquer Baghdad and bring the Shi'ite regions under their control. 700 years ago, Ibn Taimiya (1263-1328), declared Shi'ites as infidels and therefore as apostates. But Ibn Taimiya does not declare all Shi'ites en bloc as apostates. The accusation of being an apostate is based on the political institutions and the constitution that he claims is not Islamic. The IS probably had more practical targets and reasons. Apart from the attack on Mosul, the IS mostly attacks military weak positions. Concurrently, the targets are mainly of high economic relevance, like oil-fields or water resources. The areas brought under the Kurdish control in June 2014 contained these economic factors. Also, as seen in August, they were easy to conquer.

Even though the Kurds were able to reorganize and repel the IS attack until the US air strikes, cities like the Kurdish capital Erbil were endangered. Because of the special kind of warfare used by the IS, they instilled panic in the civil population, who fled into the cities. The Kurdish officials responded quickly and effectively, unlike the Iraqi police in Mosul. Arms transfers from the West and Iran

stabilized the military situation. Although on 10th August, Obama said: “we are not a Kurdish airforce”, the US had no choice. The drama about the displacement of the Christians, Yazidis and the firmness of the Kurds in resisting the IS, provoked the US president to agree to the intervention. But Obama was never categorically against an intervention. It depended on the firmness of local players to fight against the IS, and their will to commit to Western values. Obama revised his laissez-faire mindset in favor of another strategy that he announced in his popular Cairo speech after taking over the Oval Office. In his interview with the New York Times, Obama said:

“They used that time well, and the Kurdish region is functional the way we would like to see. It is tolerant of other sects and other religions in that way that we would like to see elsewhere.”

The IS offensive against the Kurdish federal region led to a new inner-Kurdish political constellation. The PYG troops were able to make a corridor to rescue the trapped Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountains from certain death. The mother organization, the PKK, believed that they had gained the right to participate in the Kurdish region in Iraq. Their media announced that the PKK and the PYG in Syria should receive the Western arms transfers. Even though the PKK were supposed to put down their weapons during the peace talks with the Turkish AKP government, not just in Turkey but also in Iraq, the PKK tried to get themselves back into military talks. When the arms transfers were only delivered to the KRG Peshmergas, the PKK and its media started a campaign against these arms transfers to the KRG troops. They claimed that the Peshmerga would not fight against the IS and that the weapons would end up in the hands of the IS instead. These were the same reasons that prevented any arms' transfers for the secular opposition in Syria. The voice of the PKK also found listeners in Western parliaments, for example when the chairman of the Linke parliamentary group in Germany refused to support the arms transfers to the Peshmerga. The PKK and the German party Die Linke do have an ongoing political al-

liance. Anyhow, the PKK secured themselves a position of power in the Sinjar region. Should this superiority be permanent, it would be the second base since the one established in the Qandil Mountains region 20 years ago. To legitimize their role in the Iraqi Kurdish region, the PKK and their media (Roj-TV, Ronahi, etc.) published a speculative analysis. That analysis implied, that the KDP leaders ordered the Peshmerga troops to abandon the Sinjar region. Therefore they implied that the KDP had caused the Yazidi tragedy to force the West into delivering new modern weapons to the Peshmerga. The Yazidi exile organizations then adopted those accusations as an unshakeable fact. The KDP admittedly did not lay all the background information open. The only plausible explanation that the KRG gave, was that the Sinjar region could not be defended.

## **VII. The importance of the Kurdish factor in the international coalition against the IS**

The war against the IS as a cross-border organization needed a regional coalition against the IS. The regional system has shown its dysfunctionality in the past three years. The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran led to direct and indirect interventions of both powers, who are leading the Sunni

or Shiite groups.<sup>16</sup> But even the Sunni groups did not show a common position. That is why both Sunni states, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were unable to find a common ground on the developments in Egypt. Also, in the case of IS, the positions of both Sunni states are ambivalent. Saudi Arabia took measures after the IS attack on Mosul and secured their borders with the Iraq with around 30,000 soldiers, but they also refrained from forming a local coalition against the IS. Only after the conference in September 2014 did Saudi Arabia accept to take part in an anti-IS coalition. Turkey, on the other hand, continued their discreet connection with the Islamists. While Turkey did not deliver weapons to the Kurds, Iran did. The senior advisor of the president of the Kurdish region, Fuad Hussein, commented: "we are very disappointed by the Turkish government".<sup>17</sup>

An international coalition first emerged as President Obama decided to bomb the front-line between the trapped Kurds and the IS troops. This not just smoothed the way for the arms transfers to the Kurds and the national Iraqi army, but also to build up an international coalition to weaken and to disarm IS, like Obama said. The German newspaper *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, called it "the coalition of the unwilling", because it had structural weaknesses. The local forces in Iraq and Syria were supposed to fight IS militarily. Meanwhile the US and the West would help via airstrikes and arms transfers. Obama did not want to include the government of Bashar al-Assad and also does not want to coordinate attacks with Damascus. China and Russia, advocates of Syrian sovereignty, have already condemned the US strategy and the West to intervene in Syria. Even if the US had justified an intervention with international law and the threat that emanates from Syrian territory, the justification would still be too weak. An UN mandate would not be possible without Syria. But the US cannot include Bashar al-Assad as a partner. His regime would be rehabilitated.

The role of the paramilitary and the regional armies in this war cannot be neglected. The force that rescued Baghdad in June 2014 was a Shiite paramilitary army, founded with the help of Nuri al-Maliki.

The Sunni opponents of the IS want to create their own militia. The new prime minister of Iraq, Haidar al-Abadi, agreed with the local armies that they will get some kind of "homeland security". The Peshmerga could be an example in this context. The Peshmerga has, besides the Shiite militia and the Iraqi army, which is en gros a Shiite army, an important function. Supported by the US Airforce, the Kurdish troops fight against the fanatic IS troops along a 1,000 km front line.

It is a regional war against a power that neither accepts the state system nor the political order, and who has declared a holy war against it. Therefore, it is consequential to continue airstrikes against IS activities in Syria. A modus operandi with the Syrian regime will take place. The Syrian army had to take on some hard defeats against the IS, and lost Tagba Airport at the Euphrat to the jihadists. Many prisoners of war were killed by the IS. Most of them were Alaouite. The problem in Syria is that most of the opposition groups consist of jihadists. The spectrum reaches from the Nusra

*Front to the autonomous Islamist groups in Damascus and Aleppo.*

*In the mostly Kurdish occupied areas, the PYD, associated with the PKK, took power and established some kind of autonomy. The PYD withdrew from the Syrian national coalition, which works closely with Turkey, and has its base in Turkey. The PYD and its military arm, the YPG, have been in an open war against Islamic groups for over two years. The jihadists first tried to legitimize their war through the Syrian opposition. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood supported those groups and maybe took active part in the fights. The IS tried to conquer and occupy the Kurdish areas. The role of Turkey, again is very ambivalent. On the one hand Turkey continues to seek talks with the PYD, on the other hand information was leaked that Turkey still has connections to radical Islamic extremists, such as IS. Some claim that Turkey wants to hinder the PKK to get control over the Syrian border.*

*If one looks at the warzone, one has to recognize that the Kurds (Peshmerga and YPG) are fighting against the IS along a front of over 1,600km, from the Syrian city Afrin in the north to the Iraqi city of Jalula in the south. No one can deny the YPG plea for western help. The YPG is using old and insufficient weapons against aggressive and well-armed IS troops.*

*The PYD/YPG will probably not receive any weapons. Especially when they combine delicate issues with their claims for new weapons. One issue is the release of Abdullah Öcalan and the legalization of the PKK in the West, as well as the arming of the PKK in Iraq. These claims are normally “anti-cyclical”, because the PKK has been in negotiations with the AKP government for four years. After peace is found, the PKK is ready to lay down their arms and abandon their bases abroad. The PKK is following some kind of hidden agenda, to gain more power in Iraq to fulfil their goal of an autonomic and de-*

*mocratic community. Öcalan’s utopia, which he developed during his imprisonment, is supposed to be a counter-concept to the nation state; obviously the antithesis of the caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The PKK is trying to establish itself against the KDP. Presumably, the PKK will fail to establish itself, as the KDP is a stable power that is calculable for the West, due to its secular political character and the approval of religious and political pluralism in the Kurdish region.*

*The Kurds are becoming an important factor in the double crisis in Iraq and Syria. The empowerment process will probably bring an arrangement for the Kurdish question in Iraq and Syria, but probably also in Turkey. How those arrangements will look highly depends on the outcome on the new organization of the Middle East. The dictum of the Sykes-Picot division of the Middle East is falling apart. An international coalition should not just reject the extremists, but should also build up a new order. The disparity and the nonrecognition of others provoked civil wars in Iraq and Syria. This means that bigger as well as smaller units could emerge, and thus overcome the former Sykes-Picot order.*

- 1 Interview with Shiite Iraqi politician Ahmad Tschlabi, Der Spiegel, Nr. 28 / 15. September 2014, pp. 90-91.
- 2 FAZ-Online 21. August 2014.
- 3 Die Welt 6. July 2014.
- 4 Friedman, Thomas: Interview with Obama, The New York Times, August 8, 2014.
- 5 Friedman, Thomas: Interview with Obama, The New York Times, August 8, 2014.
- 6 Khadija bin Qina, al-Jazeera Interview with Erdogan, August 28, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tu-GRjTDH-pU>.
- 7 Neo-Ottomanism means the return to a more active Turkish politic in the Middle East.
- 8 Soner Cagaptay: Turkey's Middle East Dream becomes a Nightmare. In: Wall Street Journal, September 3, 2014.
- 9 Kenneth Pollack: Iraq: Understanding the ISIS offensive against the Kurds. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2014/08/11-pollack-isis-offensive-against-iraq-kurds>.
- 10 The Peshmerga army was founded in 1961. After the defeat of the Kurds during the War of Kurds in 1974-1975 emerged the Peshmerga units of the KDP and of the PUK. After 2003 a regular Kurdish army emerged, called Peshmerga-e Kurdistan.
- 11 Compare Jasim Muhammad: (Beirut Center for Middle East Studies): al-tanzimat al-mutahalifa ma al-dawla al-islamiya fi al-Iraq wa masadar quwataha: <http://www.beirutme.com/?p=2171>.
- 12 In their English media Dabiq the IS declares all Yazidis as infidels and devil worshipper, who can only decide to become muslim or to get killed. Compare Dabiq, August 3, 2014.
- 13 As Fuad Hussein, Chief of the Kurdish presidential agency, in an interview with the Saudi newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 24, 2014.
- 14 Compare for Kurdish jihadists: International Crisis Group: Radical Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Mouse that Roared? Amman/Brussels, 2003.
- 15 Dabiq August 3, 2014.
- 16 Compare F. Gregory Gause, III: ISIS and the Middle East Cold War. Brookings Institution, <http://www.brookings.edu/experts/gauseg>.
- 17 Compare Rudaw, 15. September 2014.

