

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East

Public Affairs

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Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I would like to welcome you all here this morning.

It is a pleasure to welcome David Phillips to this Public Affairs breakfast program. As the author of *The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East*, David is here to provide a much-needed history of the Kurds and to also explain why this ethnic group is evolving into a political community that is having a major impact in the Middle East today.

Pick up any paper and somewhere in the news there is a story which includes the Kurds. But who are the Kurds, where do they come from, and what do they want? These questions have been raised frequently in past years, but as events in the Middle East have deteriorated, recently they have been asked more often.

The Kurds, often referred to as the Middle East's once-forgotten people, have gained full visibility in the international arena since the [overthrow](#) of [Saddam Hussein's](#) regime in Iraq. The discoveries of major gas and oil fields in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, their increasing involvement in the [Syrian Civil War](#), and their [fight](#) against [ISIS](#) [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] have raised the importance of their role as an indispensable political, social, and economic factor, especially in relation to U.S. foreign policy.

Yet, with as many as 30 million Kurds spread across the Middle East, living not only in Iraq, but Turkey, Iran, Syria, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, they claim to be the world's largest ethnic group without a country. Their historical narrative is one of tragedy—victims of genocide, routinely abandoned by allies, who are still fighting for a state of their own. But as recent history has shown, independence movements, wherever they are, face a complicated journey. And even if there is a moral obligation to grant statehood, the right to self-determination is a complex process.

Over the years, there has been plenty of research conducted on the Kurdish issue, but in David's hands and his approach, he has no peers. *The Kurdish Spring* draws on his experience as a practitioner and scholar of Kurdish issues for over 25 years. With characteristic tenacity and passion, David has dedicated himself to working on this issue at think tanks, institutes, and universities, as well as serving as an advisor to the State Department during the administrations of [Clinton](#), [Bush](#), and [Obama](#). Because of all this and more, David knows better than most and can tell us best what the Kurds want, what the Kurds need, and the importance of their role in the Middle East today.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our guest today, David Phillips. The floor is yours.

Remarks

DAVID PHILLIPS: Thank you very much, Joanne. [Joel](#), very good to be with you this morning. Mr. [Shaw](#), thank you for your welcome.

I'm very pleased to talk about Kurdish issues, which are front and center in the news almost every day. It was not always so. Discussion about Kurds was few and far between. But these days we're increasingly looking to the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, and even Turkey and Iran, as strategic partners. The events since [ISIS invaded](#) Iraq point to the importance of the Kurds as partners of the United States.

We are here on a rather solemn occasion. Twenty-seven years ago this week, an Iraqi gunship circled the village of Halabja near the Iranian border and [dropped](#) a toxic cocktail of mustard and sarin gas. On March 16 of 1988, 5,000 Kurds perished.

I was introduced to Kurdish issues soon after, when a Kurdish [doctor](#) based in Maryland—a neurosurgeon, who is now the governor of Kirkuk—came to my office and brought photos of the chemical weapons attacks in Halabja. The photos depicted old men in traditional Kurdish garb sprawled in piles. Kurdish women and girls in colorful clothes and headscarves lay dead in the streets, faces twisted in anguish, foam running from their mouths, pained expressions frozen in death.

Soon after that chemical weapons attack, I visited Halabja and I interviewed the survivors of that attack. That made a very deep and indelible impression on me and has motivated me to stay involved in Kurdish issues over more than 25 years.

What I have learned about Kurds is that they have a history of betrayal and of abuse. When [Mark Sykes](#) and [Georges-Picot](#) sat at the table in 1916 and established the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#), they carved up a map of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East without regard for Kurdish interests—practically without regard for Arab interests either.

President [Wilson](#) repudiated the role of great powers in arbitrarily establishing nation-states. He addressed the U.S. Congress in February of 1918: "Peoples and provinces must not be bartered from state to state as though they were chattels in some great game, forever discredited." Wilson championed the idea of self-determination. That principle was enshrined in the [Treaty of Sèvres](#) in 1920, which codified agreements at the [Paris Peace Conference](#). As far as the Kurds were concerned, Sèvres established a commission made up of British, French, and Italian representatives charged with developing a scheme for local autonomy and also establishing a process by which the Kurds could petition the League of Nations for independence.

[Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#) rejected Sèvres, launched a [war of independence](#), and Sèvres was rewritten in Lausanne. The [Treaty of Lausanne](#) was finalized in 1923. In Lausanne, there was not a mention of the word "Kurd" or "Kurdish." Weary from many years of war, the great powers decided that their interests lay in a peace agreement with Turkey, and the Kurds were divided among four countries. There are about 34 million Kurds in the world today. They are the largest stateless people. They are divided between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Lausanne launched a period of tragedy for the Kurds. In response to Lausanne, Sheikh [Said Piran](#) launched a [rebellion](#) in Turkey in 1925. He declared an independent Kurdistan on Turkish soil.

Turkey responded with an iron fist. It launched a "Turkification" program. Names, education in the Kurdish language, cultural festivals were all banned. The very existence of Kurds was prohibited. Rather than referring to them as Kurds, they were called "mountain Turks." A series of laws were implemented further constraining Kurdish expression and Kurdish rights. A resettlement law in 1934 allowed properties to be seized. The Tunceli law of 1936 set up military garrisons in Southeastern Turkey, where the Kurds predominate.

As a result of this harsh treatment, the Kurds established the [PKK](#), the Kurdistan Workers' Party. They launched the Siverek and Hilvan rebellions, which were really targeting feudal landlords who were in the pay and service of the government. In response, Ankara launched a major military operation in 1989. Up to 4,000 villages were destroyed and 3.5 million people were displaced. The [civil war](#) between the Turkish authorities and the PKK, which has been ongoing until just a couple of years ago, claimed up to 40,000 lives.

Likewise, the Kurds in Iraq suffered a similar fate. With the independence of Iraq in 1932, King [Faisal](#) committed himself to a pan-Arab approach. In response to that, Mullah [Mustafa Barzani](#) announced the creation of an independent Kurdistan, called the Republic of Mahabad, on Iranian soil adjoining Iraq. The Kurds were victims of the [Cold War](#). They were eventually thrown out of Iran. When they went back to Iraq, they were massacred by Iraqi forces. When [Baathists overthrew](#) Prime Minister [Qasim](#), they launched a [counterinsurgency campaign](#) against Iraqi Kurds, and between 1961 and 1970, about 100,000 Iraqi Kurds were killed.

This conflict ended with the creation of an [autonomy agreement](#) that promised self-government to the Kurds, but the agreement was never implemented, and the [armed struggle](#) resumed again in 1974.

The Kurds were pawns in a greater game with the [Iran-Iraq War](#). [Saddam Hussein](#) believed that the Kurds were aiding the Iranian forces. He launched something called the [Anfal Campaign](#). The chemical weapons attack in Halabja was not an isolated incident. It was part of a broader campaign that went on over more than a year. *Anfal* in Arabic literally means "the spoils." During this Anfal period, during which a security cordon was established between Iran and Iraq, it's estimated that 182,000 Kurds were killed and 4,500 villages were destroyed.

After Sheikh Said's rebellion in Turkey was suppressed, many Kurds left the southeastern part of what had then become Turkey and resettled in Syria. They created something called the [Xoybûn League](#) in 1927, which literally means in Kurdish "one who controls his own destiny." Their goal at the time was independence from France. Just as in Iraq, the Kurds in Syria became victims of pan-Arabism. After the [Suez War](#) of 1956, [Nasser](#) created the United Arab Republic, which joined Egypt and Syria. This was a failed experiment, but the Kurds paid a price nonetheless.

In 1962, there was a population census, and 120,000 Kurds in Jazira—which we hear about now because it's a major combat area in the [civil war in Syria](#)—were registered as aliens and stripped of their citizenship. Three hundred thousand Kurds were denied identification cards. Without a national ID, they couldn't own property, they couldn't marry, they couldn't be employed. So you essentially had hundreds of thousands of stateless people living within Syria. A 1963 emergency law formally denied any kind of Kurdish identity.

To make matters worse, in 1973 a security buffer was formally established along Syria's border that stretched 300 kilometers and was 15 kilometers deep. As part of the establishment of the security buffer, 140,000 Kurds were forcibly relocated.

Between 1980 and 2000, 7,000 Syrian Kurds disappeared.

The Adana Agreement of 1998 between Syria and Turkey required Syria to list the PKK as a terrorist organization and to evict [Abdullah Öcalan](#), who was the head of the PKK, living on Syrian soil at the time. Öcalan fled. He went from country to country in a rather dramatic odyssey, and he was ultimately apprehended in Nairobi. [İlter Türkmen](#), the former foreign minister of Turkey, told me that U.S. intelligence played a great role in delivering Öcalan. In his words, he said, "The U.S. delivered Öcalan to us as though he were a pizza."

Likewise in Iran, the Kurds suffered a similar fate and denial of their identity and rights. They supported Ayatollah [Khomeini's revolution](#) in exchange for promises of greater autonomy. But they were never really trusted by the Shiites in the Ayatollah's inner circle. Most Kurds are Sunni. They didn't participate in the drafting of a constitutional convention, not because they didn't wish for a role, but they were denied one. When there was a referendum to adopt the [constitution](#) that was passed with 98 percent support, the Kurds didn't participate.

So they launched a [rebellion](#). Within a couple of years, 10,000 were killed and 200,000 displaced. Thousands were executed by the Ayatollah's regime. Linked to the PKK, they launched something called the [Free Life Party](#), which is PJAK, which was instigated after Öcalan's arrest.

The adoption of the [transitional administrative law](#) in Iraq in 2004, which decentralized power from Baghdad to the regions, served as an inspiration to Kurds in all four countries. Kurds looked across the border at what their brethren in Iraqi Kurdistan had achieved and said they wanted the same.

When we look at this period of betrayal and abuse, we should also recognize that by the end of the 20th century, there started to be a shift in Kurdish fortunes. Oil was being developed in the Kurdistan region. It's estimated that there are 45 billion barrels of oil there. After the [Gulf War](#), when Saddam launched counterattacks using helicopter gunships, Kurds who remembered Halabja fled to the mountains. A million of them crossed the border into Turkey. The United States and the UK implemented, with Security Council authorization, [Operation Provide Comfort](#) to rescue the Kurds. That morphed into something called [Operation Northern Watch](#), which was a [no-fly zone](#) for Northern Iraq north of the 36th parallel.

The Kurds were able to establish a de facto independent state starting in the early 1990s. I remember visiting Sulaymaniyah in 1992 to address the [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's](#) annual convention. In my keynote, I called for *bouzhi* [phonetic], *azadi*, and *demokrasî*—democracy, freedom, and human rights. All the Kurdish tribal leaders were wild at my remarks. They thought I was an emissary of the president and that I was there to promise them something that they had always dreamed of.

The next year I visited Erbil for the conference of the [Kurdistan Democratic Party](#). I called for the establishment of a U.S. consulate in Erbil. At the time, everybody thought I was crazy, because that would imply some kind of de facto recognition. Of course, now we know there is a consulate in Erbil, and U.S. diplomats are there in large numbers.

The Kurds were able to make the most of this opportunity. We provided them security. They started to build institutions. They started to rebuild their economy. But they are still a part of Iraq. As Iraq became increasingly dysfunctional after the [Iraq War](#), Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government became more and more polarized. With the [election](#) of [Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa Party](#) in 2006, Iraqi society was deeply polarized, on sectarian as well as ethnic grounds. The Kurds essentially suspended their cooperation with the government in Baghdad. They would still show up

for meetings, but they really wouldn't participate in the business of governing.

Meanwhile, Iraq descended into a [civil war](#). We know about the [surge](#) in 2007. That created the appearance of greater stability. In fact, it was just window dressing. [David Petraeus](#) is lauded for his role. I'm deeply critical of his role in my book, because I feel that he was more about public relations than substantive improvement among Iraqis.

But the Kurds continued to make the most of this opportunity, and it seemed as though they were well on their way to independence. Then this past summer, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria suddenly emerged on the scene. They stormed across the border in Mosul on June 10. In fact, Kurdish intelligence knew that they were going to attack. They went to the [Obama administration](#), they went to the Iraqi government, they forewarned that this was about to happen, and their warnings were ignored.

ISIS seized Mosul. We all know that the Iraqi army turned tail and ran. They abandoned in Mosul state-of-the-art, made-in-USA military equipment. Between 2005 and 2013, the United States spent \$13 billion on a train-and-equip program for the Iraqi army. Suddenly ISIS, which turned out to be much more than bearded extremists, having been joined by former Baathist generals and commanders, found themselves well-equipped.

They also found themselves flush with cash. The first thing they did when they went to Mosul was they raided the bank. They took \$349 million out of the bank. The revenue for ISIS is substantial. They went around Western Iraq and Northern Iraq robbing banks, taking hostages, selling artifacts. We saw this horrendous event the other day in Mosul, when they went into the national museum and [destroyed](#) all these Assyrian artifacts. In fact, they only destroyed what they couldn't carry. Other artifacts have been sold on the international marketplace.

Their revenue also came from oil wells and oil refineries. It's estimated that the Islamic State has an annual budget of about \$2 billion. They use this to pay their fighters, to provide services in communities that they control. Now the territory that ISIS controls encompasses about a third of Iraq and half of Syria. There are 8 million to 10 million people under ISIS domination. They have displayed the most brutal tactics towards Christians in Mosul, to [Yazidis](#) in Sinjar, a Zoroastrian group, who are perceived as heretics by the Salafist fundamentalists that are a part of ISIS.

It seemed as though they would be content to own Mosul. There was an understanding reached between the ISIS commander and [Masoud Barzani](#), the president of the Kurdistan regional government, that they would not attack the Kurds. They swept south as far as Samarra, the site of the Golden Dome Mosque. They were within 25 kilometers of Baghdad. Then they were stopped there. Instead of stopping and consolidating their gains, they pivoted and they [attacked](#) Iraqi Kurdistan. The much-vaunted [Peshmerga](#), who are the Iraqi Kurdish fighters—a term that literally means "those who stand before death"—fled their [onslaught in Sinjar](#). In fact, they abandoned the Yazidis there to terrible atrocities.

ISIS came to within 28 miles of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region. They took a town called Mahmor. The road between Mahmor and Erbil, which I have traveled many times, has no obstacle. With all of the armor and the equipment, they could have made a mad dash into Erbil. There are a million people in Erbil. There are large U.S. corporate and energy interests there. We have a [consul general](#) in Erbil, and American diplomats who are there.

The Obama administration made a decision that it could not allow to happen in Erbil what had happened in [Benghazi](#). Up to that point, it had insisted that it would only intervene once Iraqis came

together and, after their election, removed Malaki and established a government of national unity.

Its position was quickly over taken by these events. The U.S. launched [airstrikes](#) that prevented ISIS from advancing into Erbil. The Peshmerga regrouped and stopped their advance.

So the initial response of the U.S. government when Erbil was threatened involved preventing ISIS from seizing more territory, but in a classic example of mission creep, the U.S. involvement expanded. We all remember, in August, stories of Yazidis on Mount Sinjar. It was estimated that up to 40,000 Yazidis were stranded on the mountain. We launched a humanitarian operation. We were dropping water and food supplies to the Yazidis. But we needed to get them off the mountain. It was, in fact, the PKK and the PYD, the Syrian Kurds, who opened the humanitarian corridor that allowed the Yazidis to escape. They did that with the close air support of U.S. warplanes.

So what initially was a mission to prevent the advance of ISIS turned into a military mission to prevent further genocide against the Yazidis. Then it morphed further into a campaign to regain territories. Supporting Kurdish Peshmerga, we launched airstrikes that allowed them to [retake](#) the Mosul Dam. Recently we have supported Kurdish Peshmerga in their efforts to retake villages around Mount Sinjar. They successfully did so. They also liberated Mount Sinjar. What they found there were stories and images of terrible atrocities that had been committed against the Yazidis.

Our approach to the Kurds and to Iraq and Syria was constantly evolving during this time. You remember, when asked by a press corps member about the U.S. policy towards ISIS, President [Obama](#) famously [announced](#), "We don't have a strategy for dealing with ISIS." That was not the kind of statement that inspired confidence among our allies or among those who were on the front line trying to defend against ISIS. So he [announced](#) on September 10 a strategy for dealing with ISIS. He declared that the United States would degrade and destroy ISIS, and he explained that we would do that using air power, which had been tested and proved to be effective, in conjunction with local fighters and that we would rely on a [multinational coalition](#) of countries, front-line states, and other NATO allies and friends to address the ISIS crisis.

There is a flaw in that approach. When we talk about local fighters, to whom are we referring? There is much conversation about the Iraqi army's capabilities and whether or not they have the commitment and capacity to retake territory. So far they haven't demonstrated that they are able and willing. When we look at operations in Amirli or the recent operation in [Tikrit](#), it's not the Iraqi army that's involved; it's Shiite militias identified with the Iraqi armed forces. In Diyala province, where villages were liberated by Shiite militias, there were terrible reprisals and atrocities committed against local Sunnis.

So if part of our vision for draining the swamp of support for ISIS involves getting the Sunni tribes back on board, supporting Shiite militias who go into villages and clean up is certainly not consistent with what we hope to accomplish in the long term.

There is also much talk about the moderate Syrian opposition. For all of our efforts to find them, I still don't know who they are. We're not supporting the [Syrian National Council](#). We had announced support for the [Free Syrian Army](#); now we have abandoned it. There is an effort to do a train-and-equip program in four countries, but that is going to take a year or two, and at the end of that, we will have maybe 3,000 to 5,000 fighters trained. So this idea of working with moderate Syrian opposition, to me, is a little bit of a stalking horse.

When you look at who the local fighters are, with whom we can work, the only ones who have proven commitment and capability are the Kurds. They were able to defeat ISIS's advance. They were able

to retake territory in the Mosul Dam and in Sinjar. It's not only the Peshmerga who have shown capability. What happened in the small city of [Kobani](#) is an extraordinary tale of heroism that deserves great commendation. This Kurdish city on the Turkish-Syrian border was besieged by ISIS. ISIS said that they would make a point of going into the city and killing all of its Kurdish defenders. By the way, 40 percent of the defenders of Kobani were women.

The people's protection units of the [PYD](#) [Democratic Union Party], the Syrian Kurdish party, fought valiantly, but they were no match for ISIS. ISIS had 80 percent of the city. Up to that point, the United States kept consistently saying Kobani has no strategic value. But we recognized that it may have had no strategic value militarily, but it had enormous symbolic value. So we launched [airstrikes](#) against ISIS positions. We did that after they had already entered the city. Had we done that before they came in, it would have been an entirely different field of battle.

We also airlifted weapons to the Syrian Kurds, over the objection of President [Erdoğan](#) in Turkey. In fact, in his response to the events in Kobani, Erdoğan likened the Syrian Kurds and ISIS, saying they are both terrorist groups and there's no difference between them.

In fact, what ISIS succeeded in doing is bringing Kurds together in a fashion that had never happened before. You had the people's protection units from Syria. They were joined by the PKK in large numbers, PJAK forces from Iran, and also the Peshmerga. One hundred and fifty-five came in with sophisticated weaponry to relieve the city. Ultimately, ISIS was defeated there. More than 1,000 ISIS fighters were killed in the Battle of Kobani. They had staked great reputation, and their recruitment was based largely on an ability to seize Kobani, make it their own. The liberation of Kobani was a huge strategic setback for ISIS. It demonstrated that the Kurds, not only in Iraqi Kurdistan, but in the region, would prove to be our best allies.

The other part of the strategy was to work through a multinational coalition. This too was a flawed approach. Our traditional allies in the region, especially in the Gulf states, perceived a tilt in the U.S. policy towards Shiites and Shiite-led countries, beginning in 2011 with the [Arab Spring](#). Our traditional allies in the Gulf were deeply concerned at how quickly we embraced the Arab Spring, how ready we were to throw [Hosni Mubarak under the bus](#). We announced that President [Assad](#) of Syria must go, but then we did nothing to force him from office. We drew a [red line](#) on the use of chemical weapons. When chemical weapons were [used](#) and it was time to enforce that red line, we subcontracted our foreign policy to Russia, and we allowed the UN to come in and launch a [disarmament program](#).

At the same time, we were launching [negotiations](#) with Iran over its nuclear program. Without prejudging the outcome of those negotiations, we know that, in some shape or form, Iran will be left with a nuclear program intact. This is of great concern to our Sunni allies in the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia are historical enemies. If Iran is left with a nuclear program, you will probably see Saudi Arabia wanting to develop the same. Other Sunni countries will similarly create nuclear programs, including Turkey.

Which brings me to reflect on Turkey's role. Turkey is a country that I love. I love Turks. I have visited Turkey maybe 40 times. I have to say that in all these events my greatest disappointment is the conduct of President Erdoğan and Turkey. Let's not mince words: The Turkish government denies it, but in fact they ran the "jihadi highway" through Turkey, in Urfa, into Syria. They provided logistics. They provided transport. They gave money and weapons. When ISIS and [al-Nusra](#) fighters were injured on the battlefield, they were taken by Turkish Ministry of Health officials to Turkish hospitals. They were never asked to identify themselves. They were given medical care.

Turkey was deeply committed to removing Assad. They felt deeply betrayed when the United States didn't take the steps they assumed we would, and they turned to support these groups. What they didn't realize was that these groups would, in fact, turn on them. In Reyhanli, in May of 2013, ISIS took responsibility for a double car [bombing](#). There were 54 people killed and 140 injured.

Hatay Province in Turkey has the same ethnic mix as we see in Syria. To Westerners, Turkey looks like a very Middle Eastern country; to the Middle East, Turkey looks decidedly Western. So it was always a fool's errand on Erdoğan's part to think that they could support ISIS and control them. That would never have been the case. But support them they did.

When the Kobani battle was underway, you saw images of Turkish tank battalions parked on the hill above Kobani literally just watching as the slaughter ensued. Erdoğan issued outrageous statements comparing ISIS to the freedom fighters in Kobani. President Obama made a decision to launch military activities without authorization from Turkey.

Within Turkey, there is also a systematic decline in the quality of democracy and human rights. Starting with the peaceful [protests](#) in Gezi Park over an environmental issue in the summer of 2013, you saw Turkish citizens across the country stand up in opposition to the government. There were 60 cities that joined the Gezi Park protests, which were brutally suppressed—widespread allegations of police brutality.

There has also been a systematic attack on freedom of expression and human rights in Turkey, using [Article 301](#) of the penal code, which makes it a crime to "denigrate Turkishness." This had always been used to suppress Kurdish expression. Now it's being used more widely to suppress any form of dissent. Likewise for Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Act.

If NATO were being constituted today and Turkey applied, it would not qualify. NATO is not merely a security alliance; NATO is a coalition of countries that share values. Turkey's unwillingness to make Incirlik Air Force Base in the southeast available, its reluctance to participate in a train-and-equip program, its continued support for ISIS over the denials of its government officials all raise serious questions about Turkey's suitability as a NATO member and its reliability in the event of a crisis. Turkey signed a recent [gas deal](#) with Russia. If there is a NATO response to a Russian offensive beyond Ukraine, can Turkey be counted on? I submit to you that, based on Turkey's recent behavior, they have proven themselves unsuitable as an ally.

So where does this leave us? It leaves us in a state of shifting alliances. We, in fact, have demonstrated a shift towards Shiite groups. By acknowledging on [Face the Nation](#) this Sunday a [statement](#) that [John Kerry](#) made, that we have to negotiate with Assad, we have essentially put ourselves on the same side of the tennis court as the Syrian regime. On that side of the court is [Hezbollah](#), other radical groups, including groups that are on our FTO [foreign terrorist organizations] list.

We're going to conclude a negotiation with Iran. We don't know if that is going to be successful or not. But clearly there is a rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.

There is serious question about the reliability of Turkey and other Sunni Arab states in the fight against ISIS. When we look around the region and the serious security challenges that are posed by ISIS, who are our reliable friends? Clearly the Kurds in Iraq, the Iraqi Peshmerga are. The Kurds in Syria have also proven to be reliable. As Turkey enters an election cycle, with national [elections](#) in June, it's facing a fork in the road. Will it do what was long-promised, to give the Kurds of Turkey more political and cultural rights, or will Erdoğan practice the politics of division?

I represent that the Kurds are our best and last friends in the region. We have been half-hearted in our support. The military equipment that we have provided Turkey is light and medium weapons. They are all defensive weapons. We should be providing them with heavy offensive weapons so they can regain territory. [Salih Muslim](#), who is the head of the PYD, the Syrian Kurds, applied two years ago for a visa to visit the United States. In fact, I invited him to come to Columbia for a seminar. He can't get a visa to come to Washington, even though our special envoy for Syria will meet him in Paris from time to time.

Likewise, the PKK, which was put on our FTO list as part of a deal with Turkey after [9/11](#) in exchange for its leading role in ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] for [Afghanistan](#)—now there needs to be a reevaluation of the PKK's FTO designation. The best way to catalyze a peace process in Turkey, in my view, would be to provide an honorable and dignified process forward for the 20 million Kurds who live there.

So our approach in the Middle East needs to be to work with our friends rather than to placate our adversaries. There is an adage that Kurds always quote: Kurds have no friend but the mountains. Today, in the post-ISIS period, the United States has no better friend in Iraq and Syria than the Kurds. We should reevaluate our alliances. We should reconsider our support. We should refocus our resources. We will find that the Kurds are not only pro-Western and secular; they are able and committed. On the battlefield and in the boardroom, Kurds are able partners of the United States.

I thank you for your attention. I'm happy to answer your questions.

Questions

QUESTION: Peter Russell. Thank you very much.

Could you talk to us a little bit about what the risks are for the Kurds with identifying with the U.S. to the extent you have described, when they remain vulnerable in all those countries where they are living?

DAVID PHILLIPS: There is a danger. They are and will remain vulnerable. The only country to call for independence for Kurdistan is Israel. Both Prime Minister [Netanyahu](#) and President [Peres](#) have done so.

The Kurds live on a razor's edge. They have few friends. They have been friendly towards the United States, although we have betrayed them repeatedly throughout history—with the [Algiers Accord](#) of 1975, when [Bush 41](#) urged them to stand up and [rebel](#) against Saddam and then left them alone to face reprisals. But they are still adamantly pro-American and pro-Western.

I must say that, much to my dismay, that special strategic relationship has diminished over this past year. The Kurds sought more from the United States than we provided them. They are deeply grateful that we came to their rescue, saving Erbil, but our reluctance to give them the weapons they need, to give them the training they require and the diplomatic support that they desire raise serious questions among the Kurdish leadership about Washington's reliability.

QUESTION: Don Simmons. Your talk wove together a great many threads. Thank you.

Just a question about Turkey. What would have been the influence on Erdoğan's policies, foreign and domestic, had the Europeans shown them more of an open door to the European Community?

DAVID PHILLIPS: Turkey has been involved in candidacy and accession talks for many, many years. There is a widely held view in Turkey that the goalposts are constantly shifting, that the 40,000 pages of rules and regulations are being tweaked to prevent Turkey's accession. I myself have sat in a room with European diplomats, mostly from Northern Europe, who have said things about Turks that are deeply racist and prejudicial.

Had Turkey been on a fast track to EU membership, that would have required democratic practices, the adherence to international human rights standards. It would have had a dramatic effect on domestic conditions within Turkey. We can look in the rearview mirror and speculate on what might have been. We need to now see Turkey as it is, not as it was or how we wish it to be. Turkey today is authoritarian, it is Islamist, and it's anti-democratic.

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

David, you are so knowledgeable, but you have left us hanging on the ultimate question. Would it be possible for Kurds in the different countries where they live ever to unite in a Kurdistan?

DAVID PHILLIPS: Like any pluralist people, there are factions and differences. They come from different tribes. They have different languages. They have different histories because of the way borders were constructed. They are united when under duress. When they are not under duress, Kurds tend to go their separate ways.

Kobani was an exception. I said before that ISIS succeeded in doing what no Kurdish leader had ever done, bringing all these Kurdish factions together.

Ultimately, I don't believe that Iraq and Syria are viable states. I think that Iraq will cease to function. It will implode. The Arabs in Iraq will continue their conflict.

Kurds will seek recognition, either from Baghdad or through some kind of coordinated declaration of independence. That's not likely in the near term. The Kurds are not going to announce a unilateral declaration. Unlike [Kosovo](#), the U.S. isn't going to lead a coordinated declaration. As long as Baghdad is dysfunctional and the government in Baghdad is a proxy and representative of Iran, which opposes Kurdish independence, we're not going to see a negotiated outcome between Erbil and Baghdad.

So my recommendation to the Kurds is that they need to start behaving more like a state rather than like a tribe or a militia. That means transparency over their oil revenues, fighting against corruption and nepotism, creating a banking sector, diversifying their economy, allowing democratic governance to flourish more than it has so far, so that when the opportunity arises for Kurds to negotiate, not fight, their way for independence, they have shown that they are committed and capable of managing their own affairs.

Writing this book was making the case for that moment. Now the Kurds have to work with friends internationally to make themselves ready for prime time. This will be the next phase of our endeavor.

QUESTION: Bob Perlman. Thank you for a most enlightening discussion.

What is the administration's rationale, if there is one, for letting the [Iranian Revolutionary Guard](#) do a lot of the heavy lifting? Correspondingly, why is there such tepid support for the Kurds, given what you just said?

DAVID PHILLIPS: There are two parts to that question. Both of those are big questions.

Let's be honest with ourselves. The operation in Tikrit is an operation not of the Iraqi army; it's an operation of Shiite militias. The command-and-control is being exercised by [Qasem Soleimani](#), the general of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the [Quds Force](#). He is on the front line, literally, running the show.

Why have we surrendered the battlefield to the Iraqi government and its cohorts in Tehran? Because we're simply not prepared to put boots on the ground. We are not providing air support in Tikrit because we don't want to appear as though we're actively collaborating with the Quds Force.

Why are we reluctant to go further with our military assistance program? There is a widely held view in Washington that the Kurds will take those weapons and ultimately use them to fight their way for independence—either they will turn those weapons against the Iraqi army or they will use those weapons against the Turkish armed forces that might intervene to prevent them from making moves towards independence. We are deeply anemic in Washington towards the emergence of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan. It's viewed as a destabilizing event.

My view is the exact opposite: The Kurds can have a positive democratic influence in Iraq, in Turkey, in Syria. Decentralizing power, giving them maximum autonomy and control over their governance, their resources, their economy, their culture is a way of preserving Kurdish interests without necessarily breaking up those states.

But unfortunately the Obama administration is committed to kicking the can down the road and leaving this problem to the next president. And it will be a problem for the next president.

QUESTION: Thank you, David. James Starkman.

Just related to the two prior questions, you mentioned that the Kurds are primarily Sunni. Roughly what is the split between Sunni and Shia? Since that split is such a lethal divisive force in Iraq and other places in the Middle East, would a future Kurdistan really be a canary in the coal mine as far as cooperation goes? Or is it really not a feasible idea for the future because of primarily the Sunni-Shia split, as well as tribal and cultural differences?

DAVID PHILLIPS: To my knowledge, about 80 to 90 percent of Kurds are Sunni. There are a very small number of radicalized Kurds, but I think they have either disappeared or been killed over the years.

The second part of your question is very important. Is Iraqi Kurdistan viable? Under current conditions, it's not. The measures of viability are providing for your own security and your own economic development. Kurdistan has difficulty transacting its oil. It started to develop its own oil resources. In response, Baghdad suspended the payout monthly of 17 percent of its national income, in January of 2014. Just this past December, they negotiated the [Baghdad agreement](#), which provided a billion-dollar balloon payment to the Kurdistan regional government and allowed new oil resources to be exported from the Kirkuk fields and transported to the terminal in Ceyhan, the eastern Mediterranean port of Turkey. So the immediate cash-flow requirement was addressed.

But that doesn't allow real nation-building. It's hard to foresee how nation-building can occur in such a chaotic and conflicted environment.

When you keep trying to do something and it doesn't work, eventually you recognize that it has failed

and you move on. We will reach the point where we will recognize that building a government of national unity in Iraq does not work, that the only thing Arabs in Iraq can agree on is how much they hate the United States. Then we will turn to our only and best friends in the region, who are the Kurds. We're not there yet, but I believe that we will get to that point. The Kurds need to be ready for that, and our politicians and diplomats also need to ready a response so that our interests are preserved, not only our ideological interests, but our commercial interests. There are large U.S. energy companies that have major positions in the oilfields of Iraqi Kurdistan. We want to preserve those interests in the future.

QUESTION: Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

The [king](#) of Jordan said, "We're going to destroy ISIS." But to what extent can he be genuinely concerned about ISIS when the Americans are supporting a fight against ISIS in conjunction with Iran, and so many of the other Arab states are, one way or another, not necessarily opposing ISIS? What is in it for all of these countries at this time, and why should America put, in any way, boots on the ground?

DAVID PHILLIPS: All your points are valid and well-taken. If there was any prevarication on King Abdullah's part, it was set aside when the Jordanian pilot was [immolated](#) in such a horrific fashion. There was a lot of dissent within Jordan prior to that about its participation in the multinational coalition. [Zarqawi](#), who headed the [Islamic State in Iraq](#), which was the earlier incarnation of ISIS, is originally from Zarqa in Jordan. There are large [Muslim Brotherhood](#) cells there.

It was not clear how Jordanians would respond to the taking of their pilot. When the father of the pilot stood up and dedicated his support to Abdullah's campaign, and the tribes of Jordan also showed undivided support for Jordan's participation in the multinational coalition, I think that was a defining moment in the multinational coalition's fight against ISIS. The tendency that countries would have to peel away over time was mitigated by the horrific treatment of the pilot. If countries like Jordan can hold the line, then other countries on whom we rely that are flying sorties, like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, can also hold the line, if we send them the right signals and we're fully committed.

I think there is a widely held view among members of the coalition that the United States is managing the conflict with ISIS rather than doing what is necessary to defeat it. If we are prepared to commit the resources and work with local fighters like the Kurds, we can have a battlefield victory without having boots on the ground, beyond the 3,600 who are already there. If we are not prepared to work with the Kurds and find local militias who are allies, ultimately we will be forced into a larger-scale deployment, which is not something that President Obama, who ran on a platform to withdraw from Iraq, is seeking, and it's not something that I or any of us wish for. We wish to see countries in the region stabilize. We wish to see the Kurds do well. After a war in Iraq that cost \$2 trillion, 4,500 deaths, 30,000 seriously wounded, and at least 140,000 Iraqis killed, we don't want to reengage in a full scale.

So we need to find a way of dealing with the problem. My recommendation is that the Kurds can be the point of the spear.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim.

You mentioned in passing that there is a widespread view in the Middle East that the United States is moving towards a greater balance of support, or whatever you want to call it, for the Shiites versus the Sunnis. But there is a certain sense, at least in my view, where this is in order, particularly given

our increasing energy independence and the fact that it's questionable just exactly what the Saudis bring to the table and their equal or even greater resistance to reform than the Iranians, which, after all, are a great civilization that would like some respect and one that is in the process of developing nuclear capabilities.

How would you balance American support of these two different forces and handle that? How would you calibrate it?

DAVID PHILLIPS: I would agree with you almost entirely. Having a balance is important. The only area where I would push back has to do with the way we achieve that balance. It seems as though it has been haphazard, ad hoc, that we have fallen into alliances with criminal regimes and terrorist organizations and historical enemies of the United States, without a coherent plan to do so.

If we are going to make a policy decision to tilt towards these Shiite partners, it should be made amongst the principals and it should be stated as U.S. policy. In my view, it's a slippery slope that we have found ourselves on, and we are now trying to explain a tilt toward Shiite states and partners without having made the policy decision to do so.

QUESTION: John Richardson.

When I look at the map of Turkey, the eastern end of it—it runs past Syria and Iraq and Iran—it seems to me that this is a huge mass of land and people. It's the biggest unit there of any lasting importance. Do you think there is any mileage in seeing an evolution in Turkey away from the Islamists? Mustafa Kemal was authoritarian, but he was secular. Now we have an authoritarian Islamist regime, and the Kurds sitting there. They are secular. They are Sunni. Is there any way in which Turkey will get back to being a secular country, with a possibility of bridges to the Kurds, or not? I don't see much happening in Iraq or Syria. Maybe Iran, but that's a different story.

DAVID PHILLIPS: Turkey's former president and four-time prime minister [Süleyman Demirel](#) said, "Most countries have one state. We have two." He was speaking about a secular elected state and then the deep state, which was a coalition of bureaucrats and security officials, with vested interests in holding onto power.

Today Turkey also has two states. One is democratically elected, the [Justice and Development Party](#) [AKP, AK PARTİ] of Prime Minister Erdoğan. The second state is Islamist. Those are Turks in the Anatolian heartland who have benefited from AKP's rule, that are providing money back towards the AK PARTİ. When there were direct [elections](#) for president in Turkey in August, Erdoğan won in the first round. He has widespread popular support, and he is democratically elected. For the most part, those elections were free and fair. There were no reports by OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] or others of electoral fraud.

The real litmus test is going to be the national elections in June. Turkey already has a *de facto* executive presidency. What Erdoğan wants to do is to amend the [constitution](#), consolidating powers under the presidency, and create a *de jure* executive presidency, with himself at the helm. In order to amend the constitution, he's going to need support of deputies who are not part of the AKP.

The Kurds are standing for office. In Turkey, there is a 10 percent barrier. You assume seats in the Parliament if you pass the 10 percent threshold. If the Kurds are able to do that, then they are going to be the dealmakers. They will be the swing vote. If they don't pass that 10 percent threshold, then the seats are divided according to the percentage of votes of parties who have. That will give Erdoğan greater authority.

I really believe that Turkey is at a critical moment. I'm not averse to an executive presidency as long as there are checks and balances. But the attack that he has made on the security services, the falling-out with [Fethullah Gülen](#), the accusations that the judiciary and the police are launching an operation to unseat him—those are all deeply worrisome.

You saw that President Erdoğan built himself a new house. It's called the *Ak Saray* (White Palace). He built it on public land, designated national forest. When that was pointed out to him, he [said](#), "Who's going to stop me from building my house?"

This is the attitude. It's deeply authoritarian. It is Islamist at its core. There is fundamentally, in terms of world view, no difference between the AKP and ISIS. When the [deputy prime minister](#) of Turkey [says](#) that women should not smile or laugh in public because it draws attention to them, this is something you would expect to hear out of the mouth of Mr. [Baghdadi](#), the head of ISIS.

Is there any prospect that Turkey is going to become a renewed secular state? Not as long as Mr. Erdoğan is in power. Without checks and balances, it will become more and more Islamist. It will drift further from the EU and NATO orbit, and the special relationship between the United States and Turkey will further degrade. That's why these elections in June are so critical.

JOANNE MYERS: David, at this critical juncture in the history of Kurds and all the Middle East, thank you so much for sharing your insights.

Audio

In this stirring, information-filled talk on the Kurdish people, David Phillips recounts centuries of abuse and repression against the world's "largest stateless people." But he also illuminates the vitality of today's Kurds, who are "pro-Western and secular" and have proven to be America's most capable regional partners in the fight against ISIS.

Video Clips

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