Kurds:
An Intersection of Unusual Alliances

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Abstract. *The war against the Islamic State has seen some unusual alliances: the United States and European forces currently support the Kurdish positions in Bashur (Iraq) and Rojava (Syria). What would have been considered unlikely two years ago has, triggered by the threat potential of ISIS, become the most plastic show of neorealist concepts such as balance of power, alliance formation on the basis of shared enemy conceptions, and the relevance of geopolitical spheres of influence.This paper aims to uncover the reasons, consequences, and nature of the alliance between the United States, Turkey, the Syrian-Kurdish revolutionary movement PYD (Democratic Union Party), and the Iraq-Kurdish parties of the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). The guiding hypothesis of the paper understands the "state"to be an outdated concept for understanding the conflict. At the same time, this absence of centralstates and the multiplication of forces and actors can be seen as one trigger for increased Turkish assertion of strong-state postures both internally against the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) and externally against the Kurds in Iraq and Syria.*

Keywords: *alliance formation, sub-state actors, PYD, PKK, KRG, United States, Turkey, Islamic State.*

Introduction

The war against the Islamic State (IS) has seen some unusual alliances: the United States of America and Iran found each other on the same side in Iraq, just as the US and European forces currently support the Kurdish opposition in Bashur (Iraq) and Rojava (Syria) despite their common Turkish ally's position of anti-Kurdish postures. What would have been considered an unlikely scenario two years ago has, triggered by the threat potential of the Islamic State or ISIS, become the most plastic show of neorealist concepts such as

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balance of power, alliance formation on the basis of shared enemy conceptions, and the predominant relevance of geopolitical spheres of influence. With the Kurdish entities constituting a central intersection in the middle of all the relevant state-actors – Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran –, their role in the conflict against the Islamic State can not be underestimated. Consequentially, it becomes all the more necessary to understand the Kurdish actor(s) in the region. Thereby, the first and most important step is the realization that the Kurdish entities do not constitute one actor. Despite related, both ethnically and culturally, the Kurdish entities are characterized by deep political divisions. As with other political divisions, it depends largely on the conflict development and international opportunity structure that influences on which scale along the poles of cooperation and outright confrontation the different entities interact with each other. Because of that, more than the different relations between those entities, their relations to other state-actors and their positioning and repositioning in the conflict becomes vital to the understanding of conflict dynamics. Drawing on a four month field work in the Kurdish north of Iraq, this paper is concerned with the reasons, consequences, and nature of the different alliance formations in the conflict: the alliance between the United States, the Syrian-Kurdish revolutionary movement Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the Iraqi-Kurdish parties of the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan); the connection between the KDP and Ankara; and the current involvement of Turkey in the conflict "against ISIS" and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The guiding research question thereby reads as follows: What are the reasons, consequences, and nature of the alliances between the United States, Turkey and the different Kurdish entities in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey in the current conflict against the Islamic State? In answering this question, the paper asserts two relevant issues: one, neorealist concepts such as balance of power, alliance formation on the basis of shared enemy conceptions as well as the importance of geopolitical spheres of influence are critical in understanding the conflict development. But, two, these concepts have to be taken out of their traditional field of use – analyzing the relationship between states – and instead be put on a meso-level of analysis: on sub- and non-state actors. Denying the relevance of sub- and non-state actors such as the Kurdish entities, particularly in Syria and Iraq, in the analysis of the current middle eastern instabilities caused by the Islamic State is both short sighted academically and dangerous political-militarily.

Therefore, this paper aims to show both the validity and the added insight that derives from applying international relations concepts – such as, in this case, concepts of neorealist thought – to the sub-state level. To do so, in a first step, the paper discusses the natures of alliances in more general terms by reflecting on prior scholarship and putting it in context with the actor formations visible in the addressed conflict. In a second section, the focus shifts towards the different reasons and natures of the alliances. The value of applying international relations' concepts becomes visible in this part when it becomes apparent that all visible formations can be explained by "clas-

sical" neorealist concepts; even those on a sub-state level. The deriving consequences of these sub- and non- state actor engagements and their alliance formation behavior will then be discussed in a final section by showing how the de-facto weakness of the state of Syria and Iraq and the multiplication of actors and forces in the conflict, triggers strong-state assertions by surrounding states – in particular, Turkey.

Alliance formation – in general and in the current conflict

Alliance formation has been a prominent field of international relations (IR) scholarship and thought from an early stage on. Given the primary assumption by Morgenthau (2006) and his followers on the wolf-like nature of humankind and the inherent security risks deriving from such an international environment, the question towards benevolent state-behavior was soon to arise. In a world where anarchy forces actors to mistrust each other, why are some cooperating? It is this thought that bore the fascination with alliance behavior and the resulting line of thought and analysis. Until today, little has changed about this original thought and fascination. Alliance behaviors have been contrastedbetween times before and after the Cold War; in situations of unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity; on international and regional levels; and in historic analyses of pre-world-war state behavior. In all of these phases, international scholarship was concerned with identifying patterns of behavior and the underlying thoughts, interests, and intentions of states showing this behavior. Resulting concepts such as thebalance of power (Waltz) and of threat (Walt), bandwagoning (Schweller), and buck-passing (e.g. Mearshimer) are only the most prominent ones in the field. Also matters of similar-actor- (symmetry) and asymmetric-actors- alliances (Morrow, 1991) and the duration of alliances have been at the focal point of attention. The idea that common values or structures (such as democracy) benefit the stability and durability of alliances, for example, has grown to be a dominant thought that, despite its effects being disproven (Brian & Reiter, 2000), it seems to establish a self-fulfilling prophency more often than not.But with all these different studies, analyses, and approaches, the underlying thought has remained quite stable: groups (most often analyzed in the form of states, but also non-state actors) cooperate on the basis of some interest. Be those interests common values, threat perception, or anything from short- to long-term interests on a regional or international level, the idea that cooperation does not happen out of mere benevolence has been proven by scholarship over and over again. Observing international relations and current conflicts such as the one with the Islamic State, it also becomes obvious that cooperation does not just happen between two 'equals'; two states. Instead, sometimes reality presents states with actors at a sub-state level. And when interests between states and sub-state actors align, cooperations and even alliances can develop. These connections can take any shape, form, and duration from short term cooperations, to interest alliances, to proxy warfare, and to long-term affiliations.

In the context of the current conflict with the Islamic State, several of those connections between states and non-state actors, but also between two or more sub-state actors have become visible. Thereby, each and every one of the present formations has its own variables and characteristics. In this paper, I differentiate between three different forms of association: 1) *Alliance* is the most stable form of common effort. It assumes a cooperation that extends above the current conflict and entails at least a certain level of institutionalization of the relationship. 2) *Cooperation* in contrast refers to a more ad-hoc appearance of two actors finding themselves on the same side in a conflict. It is, however, still more than 3) mere *affection,* as cooperation includes an active statement of working together – at least for the moment. Affection, instead, is simply a referral to mutual interests which have not yet developed into either cooperation or alliance formation. I shall now address those differences by looking at one cooperation at a time.

The United States and the non-state actor Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). The difference between sub-state actors and non-state actors in this paper is defined in their contrasting levels of establishment and internal solidification: while sub-state actors are characterized by ad-hoc appearance (in the course of the conflict) and a mostly decentralized, modifiable forms of organization, non-state actors are constituted by more institutionalized structures all the way to the status of „de-facto statehood" as is the case for the KRG (Stansfield, 2003; Bengio, 2009; Chapman, 2011; Stansfield, 2013; Gruber, 2013). With this differentiation in mind, the cooperation between the United States and the KRG can be seen as the most "classical" form of alliance in this conflict. Despite the relationship being between a state and a non-state entity, when compared to the US-PYD alliance, the relationship and level of cooperation between the US and the KRG can be seen as a "standard" asymmetric alliance in Morrow's (1991) sense. The assertion that their relationship is more an alliance than it is an ad-hoc cooperation can be underlined both by the institutionalization of their relations (US representation in Erbil, Kurdish representation in Washington, etc.) and the duration of their alliance which extends beyond the current conflict. Already in 1991, the United States found themselves partnered up with the Kurds of Iraq when the Kurdish Peshmerga were part of the US defence of Kuwait (Lortz, 2005; McDowall, 2007; Chapman, 2011; Ahmed, 2012). The relationship between the two was then cemented in the following twenty years when the US enforced the United Nations sanctioned no-fly zone above the 36th parallel to shield Kurds from Saddam Hussein's retaliation. And it was in this safe haven that the Kurds were then able to organize and institutionalize themselves for the first time since the Kurdish state of Mahabad in 1946 (Stansfield, 2003; Chapman, 2011; Gruber, 2015). With this autonomy enabled by the US, the Kurds were also readily available to lend their support to their ally in the 2003 invasion and the US in turn showed gratitude in allowing Kurdish interest to be represented in Baghdad for the first time as well (McDowall, 2007; Chapman, 2011; Gruber, 2015). It is with these many dimensions and mutual benefits in a, compared to the others in question, "long-term"

alliance that constitutes the basis for the assessment that this form of cooperation is indeed an alliance based on mutual interests. For the , these interests can be assumed to be the geostrategic location of the KRG as well as the oil-rich resource-potential and the interest in cooperating with democratic and relatively stable hubs in a chaotic region (Gunter, 2015). At the same time, a clear interest of the US to hold on to the territorial integrity of Iraq stands in tension to at least one of the benefits the Kurds hope for in the alliance: eventual statehood recognition (Voller, 2012; Gruber, 2015). It is this 'elephant in the room'that puts pressure on all alliances, but on the triangle of US, Turkey, and the KRG in particular. Especially Turkey, despite cooperating closely with the KRG, and the KDP specifically, seems unlikely to accept Kurdish independence due to the assumed consequences such a move could have on other Kurdish populations, in particular the PKK in Turkey. Other than the potential for benevolence towards the wish of independence, however, the Kurds gain a both militarily and politically strong partner in teaming up with the US; a card they will not easily dismiss again either. This Kurdish commitment to the US ally can be asserted in Chapman's (2010) analysis of US foreign policy towards the KRG, who identifies the former to be prone to betray the latter – yet despite many felt betrayals (ibid.; De Luce, 2015), the KRG has not yet shown any intention of weakening their US-KRG connection.

A crucial matter, however, that can not be forgotten when reflecting on the US-KRG alliance and the potential of stability of the same, is the fact that the KRG itself is little more than another alliance.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is the institutionalization of an alliance between the two dominant Kurdish parties in the north of Iraq: KDP and PUK. Despite this alliance having institutionalized forms, there is still a division between them (Gruber, 2015). In a four-monthresearch project, the author identified the nature of this split in a system that I termed *"centralized localism"*. *Centralized localism*is defined as a form of personalized politics that is inextricably linked to a geographical locality, and subsumed to the existence and influence of an overarching party-center (Gruber, 2015). This system is based on personal networks and the notion of loyalty that are glued together by clientelism, patronage, cronyism and corruption (King, 2013; Gruber, 2015). Two of these systems exist parallel to the official institutions and to each other, due to the ongoing division of the parties. Historic reasons are the basis for deep mistrust between the two sides and foreign interference, corruption, and nepotism further enhance this tension. Particularly the aspect of foreign interference is a vital aspect to this analysis of alliance behavior: despite the KRG being the official representation of the Kurds in Iraq, the parties maintain a large level of independence; up to the point where they maintain their own, independent alliances. The most prominent one is the surprisingly close relationship between the KDP and Turkey. But also the PUK is in an reciprocal

exchange with Iran to both secure itsown influence in the region but also to balance the KDP-Ankara alliance.

In the current conflict, KDP and PUK have mostly acted in 'official unity'despite unofficial disagreement on many issues remains. Their focus on portraying unity is said to stem from the interest in increasing the potential of statehood recognition by incorporating international values such as democracy, human rights, but also territorial integrity and unity (Voller, 2012). At the same time, one can not forget that the KRG is in itself nothing more but an alliance between two symmetric partners – a factor, which, at least when referring to Morrow (1991), is considered a sign of inherently unstable alliances.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (of the KRG) and Turkey. The KDP and Turkey can truly be called an 'unusual alliance'; yet they are an alliance nonetheless. First starting with a level of affection in the 1990s, the common interaction has increased ever since 2008 and has seen many different forms of cooperation since (Olson, 2005; Hussein, 2015; Dicle 2015). One of the most prominent ones, as it caused a huge uproar in Baghdad, was the completion of a direct pipeline from the Kurdish region to Ceyhan. Thereby, the Kurds are bypassing the need to sell oil from Kurdish territories through Iraqi pipelines and gain another factor of independence (Holland, 2012), at least when referring to the Montevideo Convention of 1933 where it states that one factor of statehood is the direct or indirect recognition of established states. And economic relations have long been regarded an indirect recognition in international affairs (Arnauld, 2012). It is this economic cooperation that leads some to say that Turkey might eventually come around to accept a KDP-led Kurdish state at its border.

Disregarding the 'elephant in the room' of Kurdish interest of statehood and any other speculations of future alliance formations or their stability against certain requests, the KDP-Turkey alliance can be seen as an actual alliance more than a cooperation due to its durability, at least since the increase in contactpoints during 2008. This KDP-Turkey relation also positively influences the relation of Turkey to the KRG. Despite the relations of Turkey towards the necessary alliance partner of the KDP, the PUK, being more distant, the economic benefits Turkey has in the north of Iraq are attractive enough to upkeep a certain level of cooperation, if not even an alliance, to the KRG. Most recently, criticism was raised against Turkey's bombing of the Quandil mountains in the northeast of the Kurdish region. Despite the Quandil area being known to be a PKK stronghold, Kurdish parties, including the KDP, denounced Turkey's engagement in what they still consider their sovereign territory (Rudaw, 2015). Regardless, however, the connection between the KDP and Ankara was not yet been truly damaged by Turkey's actions.

The United States, Democratic Union Party (PYD) (in Syria) and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) (in Turkey). The United States' foreign policy and alliance behavior towards the Kurds in Iraq and in Syria is not comparable. Starting with the insecure stance of US policy on Syria in general ever since the Arab Spring hit the nation and broke off

into a civil war, the cooperative behavior of the US with several groups on the ground can at first not be termed an "alliance"behavior but an affection or cooperation at best. In doing so, the US led a strategy of proxy warfare by constantly considering and reconsidering its assistance to both anti-Assad and pro-Assad forces. In addition, to complicate the situation further, these lines of pro- and anti-whoever are fluctuating in Syria. Groups are formed and dissolved on a regular basis – which makes a clear alliance all the more complicated. At one point in time during the war, however, the Kurds in Syria appeared on the stage of international awareness. And with the fight about Kobane catching fire and the bravery of female soldiers (YPJ) circulating around the world, a first US friendliness towards the Syrian Kurds was cemented in the form of cooperation (Gunter, 2015) – at least for now. Also here, however, it is advisable to consult Chapman's (2010) assessment ofUS policy towards Kurds; despite referring to the Kurds in Iraq, Chapman identifies the US to behave like an unfaithful lover. A similar thought can be said as a word of caution fort he PYD as well. For starters, the US position on Assad has still taken a rather negative turn so far, while the PYD, despite not supporting Assad directly, finds itself in affection with the Assad regime due to the logic of hoping to gain more autonomy and cultural rights in an eventual post-war Syria. More than that, the PYD is starkly positioned against the US-ally Turkey. Despite not being the same as the PKK, the PYD follows similar ideological guidelines as the PKK: the writings of Abdullah Öcalan (Paasche, 2015; Gunter, 2015). It is this low level of connection between the PYD and PKK that already concerns Turkey. But even regardless of a potential PYD-PKK affection or cooperation, the outlook of another Kurdish autonomous entity at its border is enough for Turkey to be suspicious of Syrian Kurdish power assertions – after all, if the Kurds in Iraq and in Syria have autonomy, what else can Turkey argue to deny the same to the PKK? Hence, due to mutual suspicion, the connection between the PYD and Turkey can be called unfriendly at best. With the US being a long standing and even institutionalized ally (in the form of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)) of Turkey, the current cooperation between the US and PYD can be suggested to be temporary at best. It is these elements of PYD-PKK- and US-ally-Turkey triangulation that makes this not so much an unusual alliance but instead an interesting balancing act on the side of the US.

*Turkey and the Kurds.*The Turkish position towards an ethnic group called "the Kurds" has been subject to many analyses and both scholar and media attention. Looking as Turkey at one actor and "the Kurds" as the other, the relationship between the two can be described as "difficult" at best. However, as has been promoted in the introduction of this paper already, a differentiation between Kurds and Kurds has to be taken. Despite being related both ethnically and culturally, there are deep divisions between the Kurdish parties representing "the Kurds" in their respective countries today. The most prominent parties in Iraq are the KDP and the PUK, which have already been discussed. In Syria, the PYD stands in the tradition of the Turkish PKK but it can nonetheless

not be confused with being PKK themselves. For Turkey at least, the PKK presents the most troublesome fraction of the Kurdish interest representations. Their relationship, despite having changed in tone and intensity over the years, has been a troublesome all the way. Starting with the Kurdish wish for secession, the violent protest of military wings of the PKK and the turning point of Öcelan's incarceration which made the PKK turn from secession towards requests for autonomy (Olson, 2005; Paasche, 2015). Many stories and analyses have been written on the relationship between Ankara and the PKK, but these are not the focal point of this analysis. Instead, it is the interesting position Turkey takes in cooperating with the KDP in something that is worth to be considered an alliance at least from 2008 on forward, while at the same time remaining everything from "neutral" towards the PUK to outright hostile against the PYD and the PKK. Just the most recent equalization of the PKK and ISIS by Turkey has shown how deep the animosities between the two actors actually are.

Reflecting on all these different alliances, cooperations, and affections, it becomes obvious that there are several state-non/sub-state-actor-relations happening in the current conflict against the Islamic State. The US-Turkey alliance is a strong and stable one. Despite being haunted by several misunderstandings or different priorities, the connection between the two can be regarded as more solid than any other alliances of the region. But regardless of their owninterlinking, both show independent alliance behavior. The US-PYD cooperation can be seento the dislike of Turkey's interests. The US alliance with the KRG, however, aligns with Turkey's own foot in the door, at least through the KDP. It is within these basic settings that the natures and reasons for the observable alliance behavior need to be analyzed.

The nature and reasons for the alliances

The guiding hypothesis of the paper understands the "state" to be an outdated concept for understanding the conflict with the Islamic States (and, as I would argue, of many others). As we have seen in the discussion of the different actors, there are actual alliances between states and non- or sub-state actors happening. These alliances do not yet indicate the duration of the cooperation or the consequences to them, but, I assert, the fact that these connections exist have to be reckoned with either way. Therefore, a more in-depth understanding of non- and sub-state actor behavior, particularly in the aspect of alliance formation, becomes obviously necessary. In this paper, I want to show that in order to understand non- and sub-state actors' alliance behaviors, however, one does not need to reinvent the wheel. Instead, already existing theories of international relations provide a useful guidance towards analyzing mesolevel actor behavior. The crux of the matter and the twist of my paper lies in me asserting that the state perspective of international relations theories and theorists is short sighted as it oversees relevant actors to a conflict scenario. Thereby, I connect my research to other scholars who have had a similar insight in the value of applying state-based theories on

sub-state levels. Kühn (2011) for example employs the security dilemma concept of IR theory on a sub-state level and asserts that sub-state groups assume tasks resembling those of the state propper during or after conflict situations. With these assumptions, he shows the value of treating sub-state actors as "states" at least in so far as IR theories are able tobe applied to sub-state levels. Gruber (2015) does a similar thing in realizing the value of the prisoner's dilemma concept to explain the KDP-PUK relationship in the KRG. And Zuckerman-Daly (2012), to quote just another example, identifies an inherent value in the meso-level perspective in the context of post-conflict scenarios. She notes: "*The post- civil war landscape resembles the international system [as] there exists no overarching government able to enforce agreements*" (Zukerman-Daly, 2012: 2). So, despite there already being some thoughts into the direction of breaking open the state-perspective, I argue that it is still too little and is an idea worth to be pursued further. In this paper, I will therefore assert again that IR theories can be useful in explaining sub- and non-state actor behavior as well. Furthermore, I will show that the appearance of these sub- and non-state actors have consequences on the sovereign states in turn; a matter which will be shown in the strong-state posture of Turkey – a factor, which makes the understanding of non/sub-state – state connection all the more relevant.

Alliance formation on the basis of shared enemy perceptions. A first question to be asked when trying to understand alliance behaviors is simply 'Who is the enemy?'. The many criticisms of realist and neorealist thoughts and concepts notwithstanding, the perception of enemies has been a central factor in the formation of alliances. Both balance of power and bandwagoning, but also other concepts and behaviors, can be explained by starting with the question of who they are reacting against. That these threatsare identified on the basis of a certain perception, vision, and construction of reality is thereby not even in question. Looking at the different enemy perceptions of the analyzed actors involved offers a first insight into the nature and reasons for the cooperation and alliance formation during the conflict. Starting with the Islamic State – probably the most obvious "enemy" in the conflict, a declared opposition istaken by the United States, the PYD, the PKK, the KDP, and the PUK. But more than ISIS, also the PKK is perceived as an "enemy" by some. Particularly Turkey and the US, but also the KDP have acted in a clearly antagonistic manner to the militaristic movement of Kurds in Turkey. A last, "enemy" or at least a "potential threat" can be identified in Turkey itself. The Kurdish parties PKK, PYD, and PUK are most renown to suspiciously observing their northern neighbor. With these differing enemy conceptions, the results of alliance potentials become obvious: The most likely alliances are those between PYD, PUK and PKK because of the shared threat perception of both ISIS and Turkey. KDP and the US are also likely allies as they share both anti-ISIS and anti-PKK sentiments. Another alliance based on shared enemy conceptions, however, that needs to be mentioned, is the one between the KDP and the PUK. The parties, despite their many disagreements, have had a history of cooperation and division, but it is visible in their history that a strong enemy – from

Saddam Hussein to ISIS – has managed to forge even the most disrupted relations back into a form of common cause and unity.

All of these constellations can actuallybe seen in the current conflict. It is this ability of 'asking for the enemy (perceptions)' to explain several of the visible alliance and cooperation behaviors between sub/non-state actors and recognized states that underlines the viability of applying IR concepts at a sub-state level. A question, of course, remains – shared enemy perceptions explain some alliances, but not all of them, so what are other IR concepts that can help explain other forms of alliances?

Balance of Power. Another "classic" apart from 'shared enemy perceptions' in IR theories is the concept "balance of power". Balance of power assumes that the increase in relative power and/or advantage from one state will trigger a balancing behavior of neighboring states who feel threatened by the change in international power balance. This balancing behavior is expressed in an alliance on the basis of common interests to contain the rising power. Thereby, one could argue that the behavior is similar to the idea of "shared enemy perceptions"; however, I argue that there is, in fact, a difference: while enemy perceptions are mostly ad-hoc, potentially short term, and fast-changing, the idea of balance reaches further than mere identifications of rivals. The assumption is that this rivaling force is there to stay and hence has to be contained or stabilized in its efforts by balancing against it. This notion of expected duration of the threat is still absent in the idea of shared enemy perceptions. Instead, the idea remains that the "enemy" can eventually be defeated. Therefore, actions will be much more assertive and less directed towards the notion of containment as it is captured in the balance of power. From this perspective, the KDP alliance with Turkey is such a balance-of-power-based alliance. The balancing action in this caseis directed towards another balance-of-power-based alliance: the PUK in its connection with Iran. Based on the historical mistrusts of the former civil-war rivals, the two parties have been both cooperating and balancing each other at the same time. For Turkey and Iran, these alliances offer an expansion of their geostrategic spheres of influence – a matter which will be discussed in the next section – but for the Kurdish parties, these alliances have provided them with both a factor of stability by putting each other on an equally strong footing, each having a strong partner behind them, and a new source of mistrust which stands in the way of actual unification and socio-political post-civil-war reconciliation.

The relevance of geostrategic spheres of influence. As already addressed above, geostrategic spheres of influence also play a role in the formation of alliances. The interests of Turkey and Iran in the Kurdish region of Iraq have both several sources: for one, the Kurdish region offers economic potentials due to ist oil-richness. More than that, however, both Turkey and Iran are concerned with the other one taking full control of the region, which leads to a reinforcing effect towards the interest in being involved in Kurdish-balancing-behaviors (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004; Olson, 2005). And at this

stage, I argue, neither Turkey nor Iran can afford to pull back altogether because their withdrawal would upset a balance whose disruption is likely to spill over into their own territory. But consequences aside, another interest of both Turkey and Iran in the region is the access to a neighboring country which demands close observation due to its strongstate posture before and its instability in recent years.

Another relation based on geostrategic interest is the alliance between the US and the KRG. After all, the Kurdish region of Iraq is a relatively safe zone in an unstable region, which grants easy access into Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. There could not be a more perfectly located safe haven for US interests in the heart of ancient civilizations. Even the Kurds know of both the blessing and the curse of their location – the oil-rich mountains offer both resources and shelter. But it is exactly the same factors that have always attracted international players to their region and led to the common Kurdish perception of being a "cursed population" (Anderson & Stansfield, 2014).

It is in the analysis of these constellations that the value of applying IR theories and concepts on sub-state actors becomes visible. More than an academic exercise, however, I argue that the sub- and non-state alliance behavior also has consequences on state postures. This hypothesis will be asserted in the next section in the prime example of Turkey.

The consequences of sub-state actor alliance behavior

The absence of the central state, power vacuums, and civil wars, as has been discussed above, often lead to a compensation of state responsibilities by other actors (Kühn, 2011). Be those actors "warlords", "terrorist networks", religious establishments, or tribal based communities – someone will take over basic matters such as providing security and political guidance. I argue that even in the lowest degree of organizational ability these actors can already be said to be "sub-state actors". But after a certain durability or institutionalization of the respective group, the relevance of these actors can no longer be afforded to be overlooked by academic and political decision-makers.

Given that these multiplications of actors usually happen during times of instability, one of the most central tasks of sub- and non- state actors is the provision of security. Therefore, a multiplication of actors tends to go hand in hand with a multiplication of forces. And it is this element that finally puts into question the central state as its sovereigntyis ultimately put on a test. With this observable absence of central statehood and a multiplication of forces in Syria and Iraq, I argue that effects can be seen on surrounding neighboring states, and in particular in Turkey.

As the power and ability to act of sub- and non-state actors increased over the last years, Turkish postures took an interesting turn. Having always been a state that was rather assertive in its postures (Hussein, 2015), Turkey has taken another step towards

strong-state-assertions in the context of increased instabilities in their surrounding region. This strongstate posture by Turkey has had both internal and external consequences. Internally, the communication between Turkey and PKK have reached another dead-end. Their increased opposition even took external dimensions when Turkey started bombing "PKK-positions" in both Syria and Iraq. And their demand for a NATO Article 4 meeting can be seen as both an assertion of military and political support – militarily, to get access to NATO technology, and politically to assure the Turkish actions will be accepted by its transatlantic allies.The immediately following equalization of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) with the Islamic State and the little reaction towards the comparison from the international sphere stands as an sign for Turkey having received at least the promise of a blind eye and at maximum even a blank check of its transatlantic partners towards its interpretation of what constitutes "the true enemy".

Personally, I believe it is yet too soon to tell Turkish long-term interests – after all, they, more than international observers, know that the outcome of the conflict will depend on the future development of alliance formations and reformations rather than on one clear strategy towards the end. Yet, still, observing the recent strong-state postures of Turkey one can point at minimum towards the effect state weakness of neighbors and the multiplication of forces and actors can have on a state.

Conclusion

Conflicts are interesting scenarios – they blur the lines between categories and concepts; even the established ideas of "state boundaries" on a map are drawn into question. Multiple actors appear on the scene and as much as international relations theory intends to hold on to the perception of the "state" being the primary actor, reality forces a rethinking of such preliminary assumptions. The analysis of the current confrontation with the Islamic State is a prime example of those conflict scenarios that forces the realization of sub- and non-state actors being just as relevant to the outcome of the war as states are. Particularly the Kurdish entities find themselves at an intersection of unusual alliances. Analyzing these cooperations is the main goal of this paper. In doing so, the author aims to show that one does not need to reinvent the wheel when asking for sub- and non-state alliance behavior – neorealist concepts such as the balance of power, alliance formation on the basis of shared enemy conceptions, and the relevance of geostrategic spheres of influence can be taken out of the stateperspective of international relations (IR) and be applied at the sub-state level.

Thereby, the paper asserts both the validity of applying IR concepts onto a sub-state level and critically reviews the concept of "state" by looking at the relevance of sub- and non-state actors onto the conflict, in their alliance formations, and the consequences these behaviors have on established states such as Turkey. As has been shown in the examples of the analysis of the actors involved in the current conflict with the Islamic State – with a particular focus on the United States, Turkey, and the Kurdish entities of

the PYD, PKK, KRG, KDP and PUK –, concepts of IR theory are helpful in explaining not just state but also non- and sub-state actor behaviors in alliance formations. Non- and sub-state actors, despite not being recognized by the international community as valid members and actual actors (not as "states"), are sometimes actual realities on the ground that need to be reckoned with. These actors can be ad-hoc or with a long history of struggle, they can be organized and institutionalized in different forms and manners, they can use different tactics from violent to non-violent, and they can be based on different cleavages such as ethnicity, religion, but also many others that western scholarship at times likes to overlook. These groups are characterized by having an agenda different from that of the stategovernment and the ability to enforce their will at least to some extent and in some part of the territory within the state they reside in. And just like any other actor, they require a certain opportunity structure to arise or develop their full potential. State failure, in the expression of lacking legitimacy, executive force or civil war, is one scenario that offers an optimal opportunity for sub- and non-state actors. It is the vacuum of statepower – because the state is forced to focus its capabilities somewhere else or because it simply does not have the capability to hold other elements down – that creates the opportunity for other groups to arise and take over. With this, usually a multiplication of forces within a state can be witnessed – most recently and clearly seen in Syria, Iraq and Libya. And despite the international community having a tendency to hold on to the status-quo in terms of state territories, the arising small actors have to be included into any effort of understanding the conflict development.

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