



## Lessons from Kobane

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The undoubtedly heroic opposition of the Kurds of Syria in Kobane who furiously have been fighting the Jihadists of the Islamic State is frequently compared to the stories of the women-amazons. It is the epitome of a timeless struggle for survival, human rights, and self-determination, albeit this struggle is spread from the Iran-Iraq borders to the east in Diyarbakir, Turkey. The outcome of a successful battle in Kobane has its own significance that extends beyond military benefits. The importance of the Kurdish resistance is political and it will have consequences as it will become an inseparable part of the civil war in Syria. The Kurdish resistance in Iraq and Syria against the stated threat of the Islamic State changed dramatically the perceptions of the American foreign policy in the region. Looking back at 1975 will help us understand why this is the case.

### Lesson one

The turn of the Baathists of Iraq towards Moscow during the 1970's had a tremendous impact on the West. The relations between Abdul Karim Qasim and Barzani, a few years later, had ended violently with the assassination of the first of Saddam Hussein's political ancestors. When the latter played the card of the Soviet Union VS Iran and Israel the developments led to the well-known Algiers Agreement (1975). The Iran Sheikh came to terms with Saddam Hussein, Tehran stopped the provision of Kurdish rebels and the former became prey for the Baathist regime. A diplomatic success with the cynical signature of Henry Kissinger. This series of events has buried for many years the idea of an Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan and was internalized in the memory of the Kurds all around the world as a feeling that such thing as the Kurdish state cannot be established. Until 2003.

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## Lesson two

A few decades later a bulldozer was demolishing the statue of Saddam Hussein – a representative work of totalitarian art – on live broadcasting in prime time hours in Western media. It was only a matter of a few years for the Iraqi Kurds to return to what they left unfinished in 1975 and in 1958 when the Iraqi Constitution, under Karim Qasim, delivered the idea of an ‘equal relationship between the Arabs and the Kurds in the Iraqi nation’. In Erbil, before the ISIS time, the situation felt like a ‘miracle’. ISIS’s blitzkrieg last summer, did not only (essentially) force the Iraqi president Ali al Sistani to go home, but also sent strong messages to the West: the 70’s are over. The new and ongoing situation in the Middle East builds the foundations for national integration, at least for the Kurds in Iraq and the neighbouring Iran. The current political formations in Iraq, including the constitutional reforms, ensure the upgrading of Iraqi Kurdistan with the silent consent and gratitude of the West. Suddenly, at that juncture, came Kobane. A small village on the Turkish-Syrian borders; a reminder of the Algiers Agreement. More importantly Kobane is a game changer. A historian who will record the diplomatic history of these events in the future will easily point out the resemblance between the 70’s and today’s images. This time there is no Israel and Iran involved directly. There is Syria and Turkey. And Turkey, in the case of Kobane, tried to block the flames before they turned into uncontrolled fire. A fire that could spark into the heart of the Turkish Kurdistan, in Diyarbakir, Turkey.

## A Turkish lesson

The ongoing negotiations between Erdogan and the Kurds are at a critical point. Abdullah Ocalan insists on working with Erdogan on a solution despite the fact that some months ago 39 Kurds were killed in clashes with the Turkish police. On the other hand, Assad’s ‘figurative’ autonomy for the Kurds was an effort to buy him time and reflects the traditional race of interests with Turkey, one that has a Kurdish buffer on its border with Syria. ISIS fighters have always been important for both Turkey and Syria. For Turkey they were fighting against Kurds and the PKK. For Syria, it was a reminder to the West that Assad’s regime is a ‘security guarantee’ for the area that fights against the Sunni/Salafi extremism. Turkey helped in the battle of Kobane by allowing the ‘Peshmergas’ from Iraq to join the YPG fighters through its territory. But Turkey’s help was a strategically/politically driven decision, not a

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tactical one, as it took place once the outcome of the battle was already victorious for the Kurds.

#### An Iranian lesson

What happened in Kobane a few months ago is now taking place in the outskirts of Mosul, in Iraq. YPG fighters are helping 'Peshmergas' despite their ideological differences. They also did it in last June, when Erbil was under threat. But the key role in retaking the Iraqi cities that fall into the hands of ISIS fighters is played by the Iranians. Suleimani's selfie pictures in Tikrit send the same message to the West. But before that they sent a message to the Iranian Kurds: we are back to 1975! Iranians officials, of course, are not feeling comfortable with the idea of an Iraqi Kurdistan. Because if the Kurds in Turkey or Syria gain any form of independence, Tehran would inevitably have to deal with the Kurds inside Iran.

#### The biggest lesson

The West sometimes sinks into the famous cynic words of Henry Kissinger about the Kurds: 'Promise them anything, give them what they get and f... them if they can't take the joke'. In the case of ISIS and its threat to the Middle East and globally, it is not as simple as the case of the Talibans or Al Qaeda. It is a more complicated and sophisticated threat. Those fighting ISIS, in Kobane or elsewhere, are not living in 1975 anymore. And this time the West must learn from the mistakes of the past.

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