



Will China support an independent Kurdistan?

Dr Christina Lin

May 2016

Abstract

With US supporting al Qaeda groups as the "moderate opposition" to overthrow the Syrian government, this is empowering both al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria. Given many jihadists are from China and other Asian countries, this would impel Asian powers to support the Kurds as a valuable counter-terrorism ally, and along with that prospects of an independent Kurdistan.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented, and impartial to party politics.

In an ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, that bring major opportunities but also risks, decision makers in enterprises and politics depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics relating to politics, economy, international relations, and security/defence. ISPSW network experts have operated in executive positions, in some cases for decades, and command wide-ranging experience in their respective areas of specialization.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr Christina Lin is a Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University where she specializes in China-Middle East/Mediterranean relations, and a research consultant for Jane's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Intelligence Centre at IHS Jane's. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.



Christina Lin



Analysis

Last week the *Jerusalem Post*¹ featured an article entitled, “This is our 1948: Kurds kindle a close relationship with Jews and Israel.”

Hussein Yazdanpana, the leader of an Iranian Kurdish party in exile in Iraqi Kurdistan that’s been fighting ISIS, spoke about the Holocaust and values that Kurds and Jews share for freedom and democracy.

Relaying the sentiment throughout Kurdistan that Kurds are today living as an independent people, Yazdanpana added they “look forward to good relations with Israel and the Jewish people in which we fight terrorism together in this region.”

Given fast-moving events in northern Iraq and Syria, the prospect of an independent Kurdistan looks increasingly likely as more countries express support. In a 2014 speech to the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu asserted that Kurdistan was “worthy of statehood.”

Russia has likewise championed Syria’s Kurds by allowing the Kurdish group PYD to open a diplomatic mission in Moscow in February. Other PYD representative offices later opened in Prague, Stockholm and Berlin, with more planned in Paris and elsewhere. In Asia, Beijing may be the next to allow PYD to open a representative office.

Conventional wisdom holds that that China will not stomach “separatism” as a popular movement. But since 2009, when the Chinese state oil company Sinopec acquired Addax Petroleum which had been developing the Taq Taq oil field in Kurdistan, China has boosted its investments in Kurdish oil fields and infrastructures. As such, commentator Ankit Panda surmised in *The Diplomat*, “Beijing might find that its national interest is best served by backing an independent Kurdistan” given China’s economic and energy stakes there.² Now that China’s security interests are expanding in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria, this further reinforces Kurdish prospects for gaining Beijing’s support.

US-led anti-ISIS front morphing into al-Qaeda coalition?

In Syria, China is increasingly alarmed that the US is backing al-Qaeda affiliates as part of the Syrian “opposition” thereby seriously undercutting Washington’s role and credibility as a leader for global anti-terrorism efforts. The fact that US leaders and pundits are calling for an increase in arms and support for al-Qaeda in Syria (aka Nusra) against al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISIS) underscores such worries.³

Amnesty International and *Human Rights Watch*⁴ have also reported on war crimes⁵ committed by these US-backed “moderate rebels.” Yet, a new bipartisan report⁶ released this week from the Center for a New Ameri-

¹ <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/This-is-our-1948-Kurds-kindle-a-close-relationship-with-Jews-and-Israel-453715>

² Ankit Panda, “Can China Stomach an Independent Kurdistan?”, *The Diplomat*, August 15, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/can-china-stomach-an-independent-kurdistan/>

³ Shane Harris, Nancy A. Youssef, “Petraeus: Use Al Qaeda Fighters to Beat ISIS”, *The Daily Beast*, August 31, 2015; Catherine Philip, “Petraeus: US must fund al-Qaeda”, *The Times*, September 3, 2015; Michael Doran, William McCants, and Clint Watts, “The Good and Bad of Ahrar al Sham: an Al Qaeda-Linked Group Worth Befriending”, *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2014.

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/20/syria-armed-opposition-groups-committing-abuses>

⁵ Amnesty International, “Syria: armed opposition group committing war crimes in Aleppo-new evidence”, May 13, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/syria-armed-opposition-groups-committing-war-crimes-in-aleppo-city/>; <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/alawite-civilians-killed-homes-opposition-attack-hama-village-616642129>; <https://pimedia.com/blog/syrian-rebel-group-ahrar-al-sham-executes-christians-in-liberated-idlib/>

⁶ <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/280038-bipartisan-report-recommends-scaled-up-military-support-for-isis-fight>



can Security (CNAS) recommended increasing arms deliveries and other US military support to support such al-Qaeda-laced “rebels.”

Moreover, the report called for a no-fly zone similar to the one established in Libya—now a failed state that is overrun by ISIS—“to create a safe space in which Syrians can relocate without fear of being killed by Assad’s forces and where moderate opposition militias can arm, train, and organize.”

Michèle Flournoy, an informal adviser to Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton, endorsed the report. Clinton was the architect of the Libyan no-fly zone and is now a staunch advocate for the Syrian no-fly zone.

The report, however, is emblematic of repeated American failures to learn from past mistakes in the Mideast. It also highlights Washington’s persistent blind spot and dismissal of other actors’ legitimate security interests in the region. All this is dangerous.

Aside from the fact that these rebels aren’t “moderates,” many are not even Arabs. They are Asians from China and Central Asia who pose a direct threat to Asian security.⁷ The most effective “rebel” coalition Jaish al Fath includes the anti-Chinese Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), to boot.⁸

This has raised concern in China. It has also reinforced sympathy for the Kurds that are fighting ISIS and anti-Assad/anti-Chinese militants, and in fact, there have been reports of Chinese volunteers joining Syrian Kurds in the fight.⁹ One Chinese national identified as Ba Si Pan was featured in a December 2015 *BBC* story. The volunteer said he had drawn inspiration from a British Chinese national named Huang Lei who had previously joined the YPG and was hailed as a hero in China’s social media.¹⁰



Chinese volunteer Huang Lei with YPG members

⁷ Juan Cole, “Why is Washington Supporting Fundamentalist Jihadis in Syria”, *The Nation*, May 16, 2016, <http://atimes.com/2016/02/asian-rebels-in-aleppo-western-blind-spot/>; Yasir Abbas, “How Al Qaeda is winning in Syria”, *War on the Rocks*, May 10, 2016; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “16 commanders in Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic Turkistan Party including Amir of “al-Badiyah Section” killed in bombing on Abu al-Duhur airbase <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2016/05/13/46439>; Caleb Weiss, “Caucasus Emirate in Syria fighting in Aleppo”, *Long War Journal*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/05/caucasus-emirate-in-syria-fighting-in-aleppo.php>
⁸ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/05/turkistan-islamic-party-advertises-spoils-from-battle-in-aleppo.php>; “Inside the Victory Army restructuring: Infighting led to ‘breakdown of our operational effectiveness’”, *Syria: direct*, May 3, 2016, <http://syriadirect.org/news/victory-army-commander-on-restructuring-infighting-led-to-breakdown-of-our-operational-effectiveness/>; <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/tag/31.html>
⁹ Vincent Ni, “The Chinese man fighting Islamic State with the YPG”, *BBC*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-35036879>
¹⁰ Angela Meng, “British Chinese volunteer fighting alongside Kurds against ISIS in Syria becomes weibo hero”, *South Morning China Post*, May 28, 2015; “Selfies from Syria: Chinese-born militia member sends social media missives from the front line”, *People’s Daily*, June 16, 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0616/c90777-8907540.html>; <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/927309.shtml>



The more the Kurds are brutalized, the more this stirs sympathy for their self-determination, whether they are in Turkey, Iraq or Syria. In May 2015, *BBC* reported that even Kurdish-owned animals were targeted when Turkish armed forces gunned down 25 mules in Sirnak and Uludere in southeast Turkey bordering Iraq. Mules are an indispensable means of transportation and livelihood in these poor and remote villages.¹¹ Similar reports have emerged from the nearby town of Silopi on the killing of livestock, horses and various animals simply because they belong to the Kurds.

This is atop existing international opprobrium for Turkey's war on Kurds in Syria and Iraq— where YPG and PKK gains against ISIS were abruptly halted by Turkish interference.¹²

Meanwhile, Ankara and Washington are shoring up support for Jaish al Fath. The support includes backing TIP as an asset against the Kurds and the Syrian army. Whether this is a US blind spot or willful blindness, Beijing views it as an effort by the US and Turkey to not only help TIP, but also to eventually destabilize China. This is because TIP has claimed responsibility and expressed support for attacks in China including the attacks at Tiananmen Square and Kunming train station. The fact that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared Xinjiang to be the home of the Turkic people and exclaimed that “the martyrs of East Turkestan are our martyrs” when he was mayor of Istanbul in 1995, is not lost on the Chinese.¹³

That the US is excluding the Kurds from the Syrian peace talks while including al-Qaeda affiliates, and turning the anti-ISIS coalition into a pro-al-Qaeda coalition, also is not lost on the Kurds.

Because of this, the Kurds will enjoy increasing support from China and Russia, as well as other non-western powers that now feel threatened by western-backed jihad in Syria.

Asian powers need Kurds in their counter-terror coalition

While Washington continues its near pathological obsession with removing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the cost of further destabilizing the Mideast and empowering al-Qaeda and ISIS, various Asian nations are reaping the unfortunate consequences of such reckless policies.

In April, *Terrorism Monitor* reported that ISIS is gaining ground in India by attempting to radicalize a portion of India's 170 million-strong Muslim populations via indigenous militant networks.¹⁴ In May, Jon Connars wrote in an *Asia Times* column¹⁵ that ISIS is growing in Southeast Asia. He added that as various al-Qaeda groups such as Abu Sayyaf and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid merge with ISIS, there is the risk of a global partnership between ISIS and al-Qaeda that could unite all ASEAN terror groups under one umbrella to conduct large-scale attacks.¹⁶

¹¹ Shahdi Alkashif, “The mules targeted by armed forces”, *BBC*, May 3, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32554496>; <https://twitter.com/FuriousKurd/status/703207744795500544>

¹² Sarah Almkhtar and Tim Wallace, “Why Turkey is Fighting the Kurds Who are Fighting ISIS”, *New York Times*, August 12, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-isis.html?_r=0

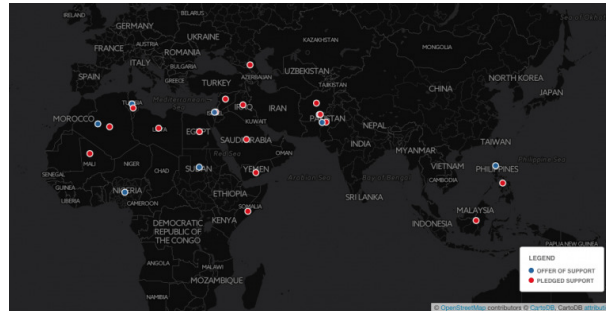
¹³ http://caccp.freedomsherald.org/et/etib/etib5_4.html#4

¹⁴ Animesh Roul, “How Islamic State Gained Ground in India Using Indigenous Militant Networks”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 14, Issue 9, April 29, 2016

¹⁵ <http://atimes.com/2016/05/isis-growing-presence-in-southeast-asia-must-be-crushed-before-its-too-late/>

¹⁶ Jon Connars, “ISIS' growing presence in Southeast Asia must be crushed before it's too late”, *Asia Times*, May 6, 2016; Jewel Topsfield, Lindsay Murdoch, Daniel Flitton, “Fears of terrorist merger from 'poison' in south-east Asia”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/fears-of-terrorist-merger-from-poison-in-southeast-asia-20160111-gm3ixi.html>

This threat is real—according to SITE Intelligence,¹⁷ various terrorist groups in Africa, Mideast, Central, South and Southeast Asia have already pledged support to ISIS.



Increasingly, the map overlaps with ISIS' aspirant caliphate map released in July 2014.



In light of this threat, Connars exhorted ASEAN countries to put aside their differences and seek a solution “to stop Southeast Asia from becoming one of violent jihad’s newest heartlands.” Likewise, China, India and other players in Central, South, and West Asia need to put aside their political squabbles, and unite to counter the looming threat emanating from the Wahhabi-jihadi cauldron in Syria that’s about to boil over on a catastrophic scale.

Part of the solution may involve taking the fight to its source in Syria and Iraq. Unlike the US and other western powers who have a history of colonialism and dominance in the region, Asian powers with large Sunni Muslim populations would be able to deny Salafi-Wahhabi extremists their narrative of waging jihad against “crusader” nations. Here, the Kurds also are the most lethal force and valuable asset against ISIS and al-Qaeda. Abandoned by the western powers, the Kurds are now finding new allies from the East. Along with this, perhaps, is their hope for their 1948 moment.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by *Asia Times* on May 19, 2016.

¹⁷ https://siteintel911.cartodb.com/viz/15c3a348-0afe-11e5-a7b4-0e018d66dc29/public_map