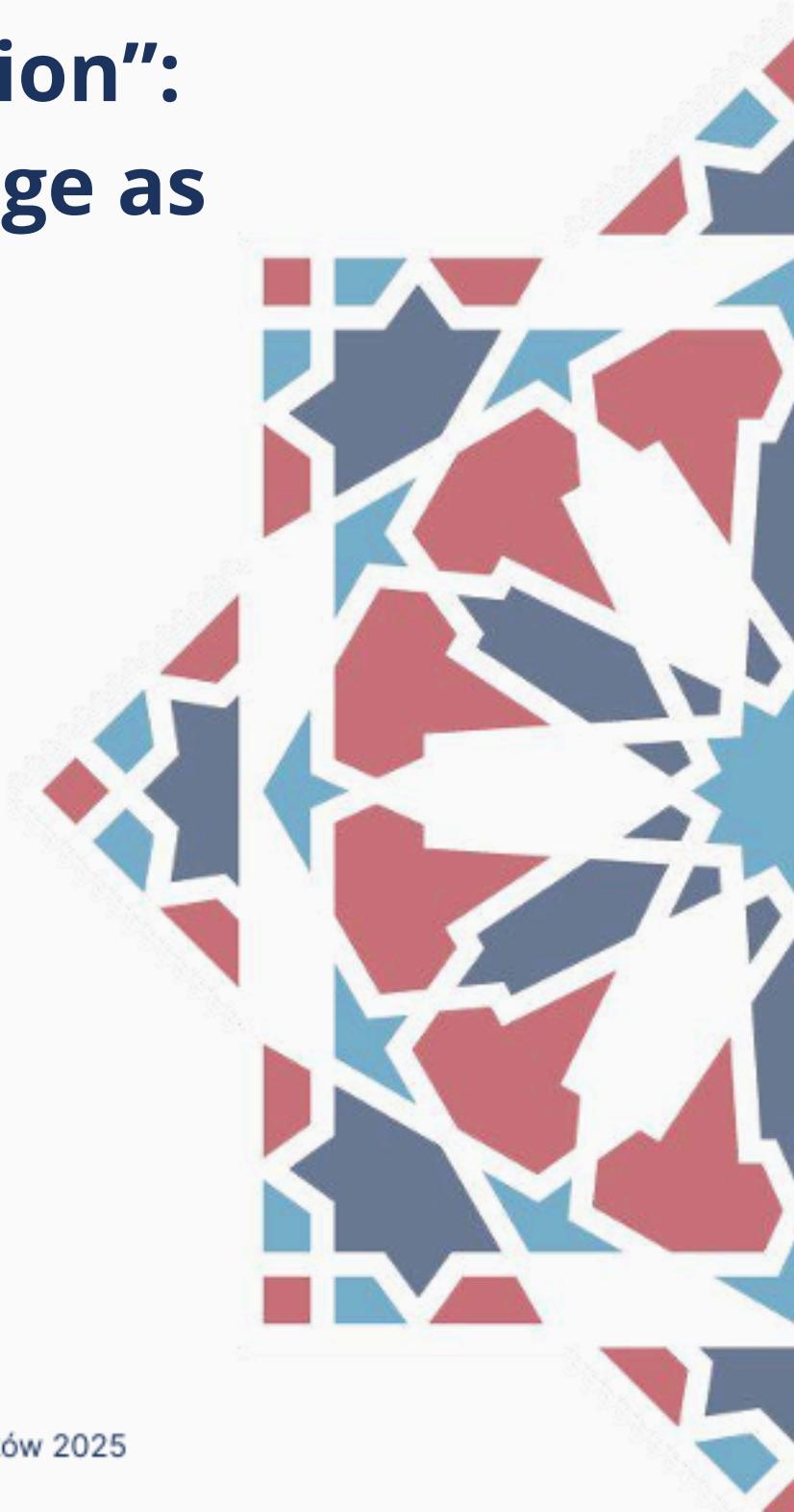




## Report

# Russia and the “Kurdish Question”: Political Leverage as a Prelude to Disinformation



# **Contents**

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<b>About the project.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Author.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chapter 1.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 2.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter 3.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Conclusions and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>17</b>

# About the project



Instytut Badań  
nad Turcją



Disinformation  
in MENAT



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# Introduction

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The “Kurdish question,” seen as the set of political, social, and cultural phenomena resulting from the Kurds’ desire for political emancipation in the countries where they live, has been a persistent feature of the Middle Eastern political landscape since the early 20th century. The Kurds, who inhabit compact and contiguous regions across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, have not succeeded in establishing their own nation-state. Nevertheless, they have cultivated a vibrant—albeit highly diverse—nationalism, varied both in expression and political goals. This combination of the inability to form a state and a well-developed (though internally diverse) identity that sets Kurds apart from neighbouring populations creates lasting tensions in relations with all the states where this minority resides[1]. For over a century, these tensions have been exploited by regional and global powers pursuing their own interests with often conflicting agendas.

This report aims to examine how one of these powers—the Russian Federation—exerts propagandistic influence over the Kurds. The starting point for this study was the question of the techniques and tools of Russian disinformation, which in recent years has been widely analysed in relation to the Kremlin’s policies in other parts of the world, particularly in the Euro-Atlantic sphere[2]. In the case of the Middle Eastern Kurds, however, the issue is considerably more complex and cannot be simplified to just the deliberate and coordinated spreading of false information intended to create informational and value-based chaos within a target community, thereby enabling the achievement of political goals set by the state conducting the operation. This does not mean that Russia does not engage in such activities among the Kurds—for example, via social media—nor that it will not conduct more organised campaigns in the future. What is crucial for understanding Russia’s information activities towards the Kurds is adopting a broader analytical perspective.

Russia views the various Kurdish communities of the Middle East as tools for political influence and employs a wide range of means to shape its preferred image among them. These efforts underpin both traditional propaganda and possible disinformation campaigns. Kurds—considered collectively—do not reside within a single nation-state (which they lack), and therefore do not share a unified information space or even a common language. They also do not form a cohesive political entity, and their relationships with the states they inhabit vary significantly, fluctuating between relative stability, fragile balances, and open conflict, often experiencing temporary phases of de-escalation or truces. Furthermore, the Russian Federation maintains complex relations with the governments of states that include Kurdish populations. These states, acting as autonomous political partners of Moscow, often serve as channels of Russian influence on individual Kurdish groups. This dynamic aligns with Russia’s interests, as the Middle East holds considerable strategic importance for Moscow.

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[1] Compare: K. Strachota, Turcja i węzeł kurdyjski. Przewartościowania w cieniu kryzysu na Bliskim Wschodzie, „Punkt Widzenia OSW”, Warsaw 2013, p. 7, (Accessed: 31.08.2025).

[2] The issue is addressed both in the academic field, see A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki (eds.), *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus*, Routledge, London & New York, 2022, and as a political challenge in the documents of the governmental institutions of the European Union member states (as well as of the European Commission itself) and the USA. See: Examples of Russian Disinformation and the Facts, Federal Ministry of Interior, n.d. <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/schwerpunkte/EN/disinformation/examples-of-russian-disinformation-and-the-facts.html>, (accessed: 31 August 2025); Russian Disinformation Must Be Counteracted, Website of the Republic of Poland, n.d., <https://www.gov.pl/web/special-services/russian-disinformation-must-be-counteracted> (accessed: 31 August 2025); Soviet and Russian Disinformation – Reading References, European Council – Council of the European Union, 10 July 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/library/library-blog/posts/soviet-and-russian-disinformation-reading-references> (accessed: 31 August 2025); GEC Special Report: Russia’s Pillars of Disinformation and Propaganda, US Department of State, August 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/russias-pillars-of-disinformation-and-propaganda-report/> (accessed: 31 August 2025).

Rich in energy resources and long engaged in great-power competition, the region plays a crucial role in shaping the multipolar international order that the Kremlin aims to promote. It acts as a testing ground for a model of world politics in which no single global hegemon dominates. From the perspective of traditional geopolitics—which strongly influences how Russian elites interpret the international environment and assumes that specific geographic spaces determine a state's global position—the Middle East is considered central to constraining U.S. power and maintaining Russia's status as a great power.

Middle Eastern instability creates an environment where Moscow performs more effectively than the West. This effectiveness arises from Russia's flexibility and its capacity to craft narratives that are often mutually contradictory yet still resonate with regional audiences. Conversely, the West—mainly the United States—relies on rhetoric rooted in liberal-democratic values that are not easily adaptable to the Middle Eastern context, where they frequently face justified accusations of hypocrisy. Consequently, Western actors often seem powerless amid ongoing tensions. In essence, the region's long-standing instability enables Russia to exploit anti-Western sentiments for its own advantage, portraying itself as a pragmatic actor willing to cooperate and attentive to the interests of local players. An unstable Middle East thus becomes a space where Moscow can offset its weaknesses and enhance its comparative strengths. A key factor maintaining instability in the region is the complex tensions surrounding the Kurdish issue. For this reason, the methods Moscow employs towards the Kurds are distinctive. Large-scale, organised disinformation campaigns—common in Western countries—appear to be less significant here, as they are secondary to a more fundamental reality: Russia possesses other resources, including long-standing historical ties, intelligence networks, conventional propaganda tools, and a deep understanding of regional (including Kurdish) specificities, nourished by the rich traditions of Russian Oriental studies, which for decades have supplied personnel to the state apparatus.

This report will therefore examine, in turn: the broad aspects of the Kurdish question, including its internal divisions and contradictions (as well as the information and media environment as a space of existing and potential Russian influence); the history of Russian–Kurdish relations; the tools of Russian influence on the Kurds along with potential avenues of Russian disinformation; and, finally, the main conclusions.

# Chapter 1

## The Kurdish Issue – Broader Perspective

The Kurds are an Iranian people living in southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and northwestern Iran. There are also Kurdish enclaves in eastern Iran and the South Caucasus. A significant and active Kurdish diaspora exists in Western Europe and Russia. The exact number of Kurds is uncertain; estimates vary from 30 to 45 million. The largest Kurdish population resides in Turkey (15–20 million), followed by Iran (8–12 million), Iraq (5.5–8.5 million), and Syria (1.5–3.5 million). The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-European family, specifically the Western Iranian branch, setting the Kurds apart from Turkic-speaking Turks and Semitic Arabs. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i school (in contrast to Sunni Turks, who mainly follow the Hanafi school). Minority religions among Kurds include Shia Islam and Yazidism, which further distinguish them from the Shia Persians, with whom they share linguistic connections[3].

The very existence of a unified Kurdish nation remains a subject of scholarly debate[4]. Kurds speak mutually unintelligible dialects, the largest being Kurmanji (mainly spoken in Turkey and Syria), Sorani (Iraq and Iran), Zaza (Turkey), and Gorani (Iran). Zaza is sometimes classified as a separate language, and its speakers are occasionally regarded as a distinct ethnic group; many Zaza speakers follow Alevism—an interpretation of Islam rooted in Shia tradition but significantly different from the Twelver Shia Islam dominant in Iran. The term “Kurdistan,” which refers to a geographical region and a potential future state, is also contested. In Iran, a province bearing this name exists, but it does not correspond to the historical areas of Kurdish settlement. In Iraq, the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region more closely reflects territories inhabited by Kurds. In Syria, the para-state that emerged during the civil war of 2011–2024 adopted the name the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, commonly known as Rojava (“West” in Kurdish), although it encompasses territory larger than the traditional Kurdish-inhabited zones. In Turkey, the term “Kurdistan” is absent from administrative structures and mainstream political discourse, and its use is widely perceived as an assault on the unitary character of the republic.

Kurdish national consciousness and political loyalties are equally intricate. In Turkey and Syria—and to some extent in Iran—modern Kurdish nationalism has emerged around the leftist ideology promoted by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). This movement, initially inspired by Marxism-Leninism, positioned Kurdish aspirations within a broader anti-colonial struggle aimed at freeing diverse populations (not solely Kurdish) from the oppression of the modern nation-state and capitalism. Over time, the movement—radically secular and opposed to traditional tribal and religious ties—shifted towards a model of autonomy inspired by anarchist and New Left thought, imagining a federation governed by principles of direct democracy and self-management, bypassing the nation-state stage altogether[5].

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[3] K. Strachota, *ibid.*, p. 10.

[4] For example, the Dutch anthropologist and one of the leading contemporary experts on Kurdish issues, Martin van Bruinessen, argues that the Kurds constitute a modern nation *sensu largo*. There is indeed a strong national identification among Kurdish nationalists, yet the degree of such self-awareness varies across different groups, and the differences between them, along with complex loyalties, mean that the Kurds are rather a conglomerate of closely related ethnic groups. M. van Bruinessen, *The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds*, in: *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, Peter A. Andrews (ed.), Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden 2002, pp. 613–621; *idem*, ‘Nationalisme kurde et ethnicités intra-kurdes’, *Peuples Méditerranéens*, no. 68–69 (1994), pp. 11–37.

[5] M. Chudziak, *Znak czasów. O samorozwiązańiu Partii Pracujących Kurdystanu, „NEW Onine – Magazyn”*, 1(5)/2025, <https://magazyn.new.org.pl/chaos> (accessed: 31 August 2025).

In Iraq, where independence-oriented nationalism has also grown strongly, political loyalties are centred around the authority of the most prominent families (more precisely, tribal lineages) involved in the Kurdish national liberation movement: the Barzanis and the Talabanis. The former dominate the Kurdistan Region and its northern regions, while the latter are dominant in the south, around the city of Sulaymaniyah. Members of the Talabani family have also held the Iraqi presidency, which, under the post-Saddam Hussein constitution, is reserved for a Kurd (within an ethno-confessional power-sharing system where the prime minister is Shia, the parliamentary speaker Sunni, and the president Kurdish). Both families are connected to influential Sufi brotherhoods—mystical Sunni Islamic orders—shaping the religious landscape of Iraqi Kurdistan: the Barzanis to the Naqshbandiyya and the Talabanis to the Qadiriyya. These divisions are reinforced by party structures: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is linked to the Barzanis, while the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) aligns with the Talabanis. Each party maintains its own armed forces (the Peshmerga).

In Iran, notable Kurdish political organisations include the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI, historically linked to the broader KDP tradition), the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), which is the Iranian branch of the PKK and similar to the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), as well as the communist Komala. These groups have long faced severe repression from the Iranian regime and have effectively been pushed into Iraqi Kurdistan, where local authorities tolerate their presence but do not interfere with Iranian cross-border operations targeting them—similar to Turkish operations against the PKK, which maintains permanent bases in the Kandil Mountains. As in Turkey, Iranian Kurds cannot expect any form of autonomy to be recognised by Tehran; the very idea is seen as contradicting the principles of the Islamic Revolution, which underpin the ideology of the Islamic Republic, and is viewed as divisive particularism and a threat to internal security.

Across all countries inhabited by Kurds, alongside diverse and competing forms of nationalism, there also exist intermediate identities and state-oriented loyalties. For instance, a Turkish Kurd may primarily identify as a Muslim or as a Turk of Kurdish origin. In contrast, a linguistically assimilated Kurd who speaks only Turkish might be a committed Kurdish nationalist. The situation in Syria is somewhat different: for decades, many Kurds were denied identity documents, later experienced a period of regime neutrality, and following the downfall of the central government in 2024, now find themselves in a state of uncertainty—caught between integration into the reconstituted state and preserving the autonomy achieved during the civil war. In all these cases, the non-linear nature of identity and the ambiguity of political loyalties persist alongside structural tensions between Kurds and central governments. The extent of these tensions varies as each state has developed its own model of managing its Kurdish minority (or, in the case of Iraq, had one imposed upon it). In principle, however, any prospect of Kurdish independence—whether encompassing a single region, broader areas within a state, or territories spanning borders—is regarded as a threat and a potential source of instability for the state and the wider regional order[6].

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[6] The most striking example of this was the strong reaction of the authorities in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey to the independence referendum held in 2017 in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. A. Yoshioka, *What Caused the KRG Miscalculation on the Independence Referendum?*, Washington Institute, 3 January 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-caused-krg-miscalculation-independence-referendum> (accessed: 31 August 2025).

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The highly intricate political landscape of the Kurdish question—the numerous internal linkages and divisions, the differing strategies adopted by various Kurdish political groups, and the extensive challenges faced by the states hosting Kurds—creates a fertile environment for external actors to operate. These include the United States, whose policies over the past thirty years have seen significant shifts; Israel, which has long sought to weaken neighbouring states; and Russia, which—as mentioned earlier—views regional instability as an ideal situation in which it can manoeuvre effectively. In such conditions, Moscow has access to a variety of actual or potential channels of political influence, including in the informational sphere.

# Chapter 2.

## History of Kurdish-Russian Relations

Russia's ties with the Kurds date back to the late eighteenth century and were initially closely linked to its imperial policy towards its southern neighbours. Throughout different phases of the Russian Empire's Middle Eastern strategy, the warlike Kurdish tribes were seen as a useful auxiliary force that could be employed against the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Support given to these pre-national Kurdish communities acted as a tool for destabilising, for example, the political scene in northern Iran—within St. Petersburg's sphere of influence in the nineteenth century—or in the Ottoman East, where the weakening empire struggled to control territories inhabited by competing and often mutually hostile ethnic groups. The Kurds themselves, who at that time did not yet display modern nationalist tendencies but were organised in tribal structures seeking to maintain local autonomy in opposition to modernising states (whose expanding bureaucratic systems threatened to dismantle traditional social hierarchies), increasingly saw Russia as a benefactor[7].

Even during the Tsarist period, Russian Kurdology emerged as a branch of the broader field of Russian Oriental studies. In 1787, Catherine the Great ordered the compilation of a Kurdish grammar[8]. Ten years later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a Department of Asian Affairs. At that time, parts of the Caucasus—including regions inhabited by Kurdish communities—were already integrated into the Russian Empire. From the early nineteenth century onward, systematic Kurdish studies were conducted in Russia in archaeology, linguistics, and ethnography. Throughout their development, these research initiatives remained closely linked to the political objectives of the Russian state in the Middle East. Kurdish leaders also acted as autonomous political actors in their dealings with the imperial government, which openly declared its intention to rely on Kurdish tribes to weaken its two southern imperial rivals[9]. Russian Kurdology, therefore, evolved in parallel with Russia's political history, reflecting major turning points such as the fall of the Tsarist regime, the establishment of the USSR, and the collapse of communism[10].

Following the fall of the Tsarist Empire, the authorities of Soviet Russia acknowledged the distinct identity of the Kurds as an ethnic group and established the Kurdish Autonomous Oblast within Soviet Azerbaijan, which existed from 1923 to 1929. In the USSR, the Kurds enjoyed a certain level of cultural autonomy, founding schools and publishing newspapers in their own language, although they were still periodically subjected to repression. Such measures included the abolition of formal autonomy and policies of Turkification in Soviet Azerbaijan and the Turkmen SSR (where Kurds had settled after resettlement campaigns initiated by the Shah of Iran), as well as Stalinist deportations from Georgia and Armenia to Central Asia between 1936 and 1937[11].

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[7] A. Borshchevskaya, 'Russia and the Kurds: A Soft-Power Tool for the Kremlin?', *Middle East Policy*, No. 30, 2023, p. 26-27.

[8] Ibid., p. 26.

[9] A. N. Biżan, *Kurdowiedenie w Rossii w naczale XX wieka*, „Wiestnik Tambowskogo Uniwersitieta. Sieria – Gumanitarnye Nauki”, T. 26, No. 190, 2021, p. 158-163.

[10] I. N. Wiedieniejew, *Izuzchenie Kurdon w Rossii: Istorickaja pierspektwa*, „Wostokowiedenie: Istorija i Mietodologija”, No. 1, 2020, p. 18-24.

[11] L. Dziegieł, *Węzeł Kurdyjski. Kultura, dzieje, walka o przetrwanie*, Universitas, Kraków 1992, p. 88-90.

Soviet policy towards the Middle East indirectly led to the creation of the first modern Kurdish state, the Republic of Mahabad, which existed from 22 January to 15 December 1946. Its formation was facilitated by the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran that began in 1941[12]. The short-lived republic was declared in territories controlled by Soviet forces, and Kurdish leaders engaged with Moscow even before the official declaration of independence. However, this project should not be viewed solely as a communist endeavour. The republic emerged through cooperation among diverse Kurdish groups, including tribal notables, segments of the urban intelligentsia, and a small number of communists. All saw in Soviet support an opportunity to establish a Kurdish polity. Although one of its inspirations was the contemporaneously established People's Republic of Azerbaijan (distinct from Soviet Azerbaijan), the Republic of Mahabad did not display comparable communist radicalism[13]. Its links to the USSR remained relatively diffuse, and revolutionary elements seeking to overthrow existing social structures or impose doctrinaire atheism were far from predominant. Soviet involvement soon waned: in June 1946, the Red Army withdrew from northern Iran, enabling Tehran to regain control over the region and violently suppress both separatist republics.

In the Republic of Mahabad, Mela Mustafa Barzani—a charismatic insurgent leader from Iraqi Kurdistan and founder of the Barzani dynasty, which today governs the Kurdistan Region—played a significant role. After Tehran regained control of Mahabad, Barzani fled with his fighters to the Soviet Union, where he spent the following eleven years. Although this period did not render Barzani pro-Soviet or pro-Russian—after returning to Iraq, he cooperated with the United States and ultimately died in the USA—it nonetheless shaped how Soviet elites perceived the Kurds: as a potential ally that could be utilised to influence Middle Eastern states. Even Barzani, who remained deeply mistrustful and aimed for Kurdish independence, became a tool in Moscow's hands. Through KGB operations, the USSR supported his struggle against the Iraqi government and facilitated the 1970 autonomy agreement[14]. During the final two decades of the USSR, however, the Kurds were not a priority in Soviet policy. This stemmed from friendly relations with the Ba'athist governments of Iraq and Syria—led by Saddam Hussein from 1979 onwards—as well as limited opportunities to infiltrate U.S.-aligned and explicitly anti-communist states such as Turkey and pre-revolutionary Iran[15].

A certain link between the Kurds and the USSR, and later Russia, was the PKK. As a Marxist-Leninist organisation in its early phase, it regarded Moscow as a protector and ideological reference point. Records of such cooperation are limited, and little is known about the actual extent of Soviet backing[16]. Concrete ties with Moscow were mostly indirect, as the PKK operated from socialist Syria, which utilised the group against Turkey. Revolutionary movements such as the PKK and Palestinian leftist organisations collaborated with one another, yet they were not “long arms” of Moscow and acted independently.

A modest “renaissance” in Russia's relations with the PKK occurred after the collapse of the USSR. In the late twentieth century, Russia hosted training camps for PKK supporters, treating the organisation as a potential tool of pressure on Turkey, which, in turn, threatened to support Chechen separatism. Even then, Russian support remained limited, as Moscow prioritised pragmatic cooperation with Ankara[17].

[12] D. McDowall, *The Modern History of the Kurds*, I. B. Tauris, London 2007, p. 231-236.

[13] L. Dzięgiel, *ibid.*, p. 79-83.

[14] A. Borshchevskaya, *ibid.*, p. 28.

[15] Who, moreover, after the revolution, displayed absolute hostility toward the USSR, which maintained friendly relations with Saddam Hussein – Iran's arch-enemy.

[16] M. Chudziak, *ibid.*

[17] J. Jegieriewa, *Solnechny Kurdistan bliz Yaroslavlya*, *Kommersant Vlast'*, no. 6, 24 February 1998, 44, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/14131> (accessed: 5 September 2025).

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The turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries created a significant gap in Kurdish–Russian relations. Periods of cooperation alternated with actions that sacrificed the “Kurdish issue” to pragmatic politics—such as Russia’s refusal to grant asylum to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was eventually captured by Turkish authorities in 1999—and with the Russian state’s overall inability during the political chaos of the Boris Yeltsin era. Even when foreign policy was managed by Yevgeny Primakov—a distinguished scholar of the Orient and architect of the doctrine supporting Russia’s multipolar-world project—the Russian elite lacked any clear policy towards the Kurds[18].

For the Kurds themselves, the over two-hundred-year history of relations with Russia has been highly non-linear. At different times, various Kurdish actors saw the powerful northern neighbour as a protector (which aligns with the “pacifist” historical narrative Russia promotes about itself). However, motivations and objectives varied considerably. Tribal communities, operating according to traditional tribal logic, viewed Russia as one among many powers and had no intention of submitting to it. This pattern persisted during Mustafa Barzani’s lifetime and continues to this day. Even the PKK resembled autonomous revolutionary movements in the Global South more than the communist parties of Eastern Bloc satellite states. Despite these complexities, Kurdish–Russian relations have left one lasting legacy: a tradition of pragmatic, ad hoc cooperation, devoid of strong anti-Russian sentiments on the Kurdish side. As a result, a degree of openness remains among Kurds towards the Russian perspective — even if accompanied by their characteristic caution towards Moscow.

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[18] A good summary of this period is the article by Yuriy Nabiev, who criticized the Russian elites for their inept approach to the Kurds, which resulted in leaving the field entirely to other states, led by the USA. Russian Kurdology was also neglected, which led to a lack of orientation in the current political situation. J. Nabiev, *Rossiya i Kurdy*, IA Regnum, 18 April 2005, <https://regnum.ru/article/440485> (accessed: 5 September 2025).

# Chapter 3.

## Russian Instruments of Influence over the Kurds

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The main tools of Russian influence among different Kurdish communities in the Middle East are based on long-standing soft power relations, traditional propaganda, official diplomatic channels, and the political involvement of members of the Kurdish diaspora in Russia. The first decade of the twenty-first century mostly continued the Kurdish policies of the 1990s; however, with the consolidation of the Putin regime, the revival of great-power ambitions, and the declared “return of Russia to the Middle East,” the Kurds once again became a significant instrument in Moscow’s regional strategy.

A renaissance in Kurdish–Russian political relations appeared in the late 2000s, when Moscow began actively developing political and economic cooperation with the authorities of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Around Masoud Barzani’s visit to Moscow in 2009, an atmosphere of renewed historical affinity—evoking the legacy of his father, Mustafa Barzani—was actively promoted. Shortly thereafter, a series of trade agreements was signed under which Russian corporations Gazprom and Rosneft received concessions for extracting and transiting crude oil and natural gas from the Kurdistan Region.

The civil war in Syria, which has persisted since March 2011, and notably the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—against which Kurdish armed forces (the People’s Protection Units, YPG, in Syria, and the Peshmerga in the Kurdistan Region) played a decisive role—supplied Russian propaganda with reasons to depict Moscow as a defender of persecuted minorities, including the Kurds.

This narrative is evident not only in the information sphere but also in expert analyses. A notable example is the work of French analyst Igor Delanoë, who does not significantly distance himself from Kremlin narratives regarding its relations with the Kurds. He contends that the primary goal of Russian policy in the region—dating back to the Tsarist era—is the protection of Christian minorities in the Middle East. These communities, ravaged by the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq, sought refuge in the Kurdish-majority north of the country. Their situation worsened further when the Islamic State seized large parts of northern Iraq and Syria in 2014. In this context, the Kurds were regarded as essential to Russian policy: as partners in the fight against militant Islam (which also posed a threat to Russia) and as a minority requiring protection[19]. This interpretation of Russian involvement, heavily reliant on Russian state media such as Sputnik, largely overlooks the performative nature of Russia’s claimed campaign against the Islamic State and—just as importantly—the role Russia itself played in supplying recruits from Russia and other post-Soviet states to radical Islamist groups, most notably the Islamic State[20]. This propagandistic inconsistency, spread not only through Sputnik and state television RT but also via more subtle expert discourses, recurred regularly.

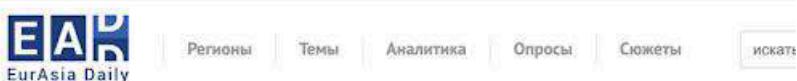
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[19] I. Delanoë, Kurdy: wektor rossyjskiego vliyaniya na Blizhnem Vostoke?, Centre Russie/IFRI-NNG, June 2015, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated\\_files/documents/atoms/files/ifri\\_rnv\\_85\\_ru-igor\\_delanoe\\_kurdy\\_vektor\\_rossyjskogo\\_vliyaniya\\_na\\_blizhnem\\_vostoke\\_iyun\\_2015.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/ifri_rnv_85_ru-igor_delanoe_kurdy_vektor_rossyjskogo_vliyaniya_na_blizhnem_vostoke_iyun_2015.pdf) (accessed: 5 September 2025).

[20] Russian-speaking fighters, who volunteered to join various groups in the Syrian civil war, constituted one of the largest groups of foreign jihadist combatants. Their motivations and the social context of their radicalization varied; nevertheless, their departures to Syria were actively supported by Russia itself, which sought to rid itself of the threat they posed—as participants in anti-Russian uprisings in the North Caucasus or in the war in Donbas, ongoing since 2014. See M. Falkowski, J. Lang, Homo Džihadicus: Islam in the Former USSR and the Phenomenon of Post-Soviet Fighters in Syria and Iraq, OSW Report, Warsaw, September 2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/raport-osw/2015-09-21/homo-dzhadicus> (accessed: 5 September 2025).

Over recent decades, Russia has carried out a unique balancing act in the realm of information and propaganda—aiming to win the “hearts and minds” of Kurdish authorities while simultaneously trying not to antagonise the governments of the states where Kurds live (or, when politically advantageous, acting in the opposite manner). An example is Moscow’s use of the “Kurdish card” against Turkey after the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian bomber in November 2015. In early 2016, Russian authorities permitted the opening of the first foreign representative office of the PYD in Moscow[21] (which had previously been visited several times by its co-chair Salih Muslim), and then heightened narratives about long-standing ties with the Kurds, indicating potential Russian support in achieving some form of autonomy or independence[22].

Even earlier, the Russian Federation had involved itself in Turkey’s domestic political affairs, particularly concerning the rising popularity of Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chair of the legally recognised pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). In 2014, he finished third in the Turkish presidential election, and in 2015 his party secured 80 seats in parliament, depriving the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of its parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002. During the summer of 2015, the two-year ceasefire with the PKK broke down, triggering one of the bloodiest and most violent military campaigns in the history of the Turkish–Kurdish conflict. At the height of tensions between Ankara and Moscow in December 2015, Demirtaş visited Moscow, meeting with Russian officials and Kurdish entrepreneurs. His visit tapped into pro-Russian sentiments among segments of the left-leaning Kurdish community, who saw Moscow as a potential protector. This perception of Russia resonated elsewhere in Kurdistan—for example, Rudaw, affiliated with the Iraqi KDP, summarized Demirtaş’s visit by noting that although Russia did not give him explicit support, it acknowledged the Syrian Kurds’ fight against the Islamic State[23]. At the same time, Russian state media launched a campaign framing the Turkish–Kurdish conflict not as an “internal matter” but as a “genocide against Kurds.”



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## Турецкие силовики жалуются на усталость и уповают на Аллаха: геноцид или зачистка курдов в Турции?

31 декабря 2015  
12:20

Анкара зачищает юго-восток Турции от курдских повстанцев уже вторую неделю. Вчера турецкий Генштаб заявил, что уничтожил 211 «боевиков» Рабочей партии Курдистана (РПК) и обнаружил десятки килограммов взрывчатки и сотни автоматов. Оппозиционные властям партии и правозащитники, в свою очередь, говорят о том, что «антитеррористическая» операция превратилась в геноцид целого народа. Гибнут дети и старики, десятки тысяч курдов вынуждены бежать.

[EADaily](#) попыталась выяснить масштабы «антитеррористической» операции, которые турецкие военные предпочитают не раскрывать. Как оказалось, на юге-востоке страны Турция использует всю мощь силовиков: от спецназа и танков до снайперов и даже дальнобойных гаубиц. По крайней мере, такие выводы можно сделать по фотографиям, которые выставляют в соцсетях десятки турецких силовиков, участвующих в операции. Изображений кровавых сцен нет, но и остальных фотографий достаточно, чтобы составить картину того, как Анкара собирается жестоко расправиться с курдским «сепаратизмом».

*A fragment of an article in EurAsia Daily: “Turkish security forces complain of fatigue and place their trust in Allah: genocide or purge of Kurds in Turkey?”*

[21] Efforts to open a PYD office in Moscow were undertaken even before the incident, in October 2015. Syrian Kurds Plan to Open Official Representative Office in Moscow, The Moscow Times, 20 October 2015, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/10/20/syrian-kurds-plan-to-open-official-representative-office-in-moscow-a50362> (accessed: 5 September 2025)

[22] These efforts were reflected in the Western press, where Vladimir Putin was at the time portrayed as the “Godfather of Kurdistan.” M. A. Reynolds, Vladimir Putin, Godfather of Kurdistan?, The National Interest, 1 March 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-godfather-kurdistan-15358> (accessed: 5 September 2025).

[23] Demirtaş in Moscow for Talks with Russian Officials, Rudaw, 23 December 2015, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/23122015> (accessed: 9 September 2025).

"For two weeks, Ankara has been conducting operations to clear southeastern Turkey of Kurdish rebels. Yesterday, the Turkish General Staff reported the killing of 211 'fighters' from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the discovery of dozens of kilograms of explosives and hundreds of automatic weapons. Opposition parties and human rights organisations argue, however, that the 'anti-terror operation' has turned into genocide against the entire Kurdish population. Civilians—including children and the elderly—are dying, and tens of thousands of Kurds have been forced to flee[24]."

## SPUTNIK Armenia

турецкую военную операцию.

Что касается остальных участников противостояния на широчайшем сирийском военном плацдарме, то в сложившейся ситуации следует еще упомянуть Дамаск, Москву и Тегеран. Изначально, еще в 2015 году Россия говорила, что сверхзадачей будет даже не уничтожение мирового терроризма в одной, отдельно взятой стране, а территориальная целостность Сирии.

Однозначно с ней соглашался Тегеран. И вот тогда острым сигналом для курдов должно было стать то обстоятельство, что Турция предпочла войти в астанинский формат равнозначным партнером. Курды предпочли проигнорировать и этот месседж.

Оценки и рассуждения политических экспертов и аналитиков о том, что Турция сейчас, когда XXI век на дворе, способна вновь устроить геноцид целого народа, казались досужими вымыслами. Но не для тех же курдов, верно? Уж им то следовало бы знать, во что, в какие жертвы может обернуться так называемая турецкая антитеррористическая операция.

[Накануне выборов война – дело хлопотное: Вашингтон оказался на распутье. Иран оправдывается>>](#)

И поскольку напали турки в тот период, когда курды делали все возможное, чтобы разрушить территориальную целостность Сирии, то помочь на военном поле они могут ждать лишь после того, как смогут договориться с самим Дамаском. Сейчас, кажется, именно такой оборот и принимают события на северо-востоке страны, в которой вот уже более восьми лет бушует настоящая война.

*LiSputnik Armenia: "The assessments and speculations of political experts and analysts that Turkey — today, in the 21st century — could once again commit genocide against an entire nation seemed pure fiction. But not in the case of the Kurds, right? They, more than anyone, knew how high the costs could be and how tragic the toll could be from the so-called Turkish 'anti-terror' operation." [25]*

Its "culmination" was the broadcast on the RT channel of the documentary film Erdoganistan. The film's description on the station's website states: "In contemporary Turkey, hundreds of Kurds in the southeast of the country are dying at the hands of government forces. Kurds have long demanded autonomy for their region. This issue rarely appears in the Turkish media because journalists reporting on it have been detained.[26]" Thus, in this propaganda material, Russia once again positioned itself as the historic defender of the Kurdish cause, calling for press freedom for journalists covering repression against the Kurdish minority and making the gravest accusation—genocide. Given Russia's traditional understanding of Middle Eastern societies, their political discourses, and anxieties, this accusation was clearly intended to carry a strongly anti-Turkish tone.

[24] <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2015/12/31/tureckie-siloviki-zhaluyutsya-na-ustalost-i-upovayut-na-allaha-genocid-ili-zachistka-kurdov-v-turcii>? (accessed: 9 September 2025).

[25] [beration of Warsaw from Nazi occupation, 14–17 January 1945. Sources: mil.ru, bigenc.ru](#)? (accessed: 9 September 2025).

[26] Erdoganistan, RT Documentary, 5 June 2015, <https://www.rt.com/shows/documentary/344950-erdogan-turkey-kurds-crackdown> (accessed: 12 September 2025). Compare: M. I. Muhammad, *Pozicija Rossiji po otnosheniju k kurdskoj problemie, Istorija i Međunarodnyje Otnoszenija*, No. 67, 2023, p. 132–133.

Moscow briefly changed course when political and economic ties with Turkey were restored in mid-2016. The following year marked the start of construction on the Turkish Stream pipeline and negotiations regarding Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 air-defence systems, which were finalised in 2019. Consequently, in 2020, the Kurdish-language service Sputnik Kurdi, operational since 2015, was shut down. The official reason cited staffing shortages—specifically a lack of employees fluent in Kurdish—yet media reports, citing anonymous platform staff, suggested that the closure was due to pressure from the Turkish government[27]. The official explanation is unconvincing, considering the substantial Kurdish diaspora in Russia, the country's longstanding tradition of Kurdishology, its ability to train personnel, and the broader political context: the service was created amid a deep crisis in Russian-Turkish relations and was closed once bilateral cooperation began to improve[28].

Russia, however, sustained propaganda channels targeting a broader Middle Eastern audience through the Arabic-language RT service, where Kurdish-related topics continued to appear regularly. Unable or unwilling to run outlets solely dedicated to Kurds, the Russian propaganda ecosystem instead emphasised Moscow's purported support for Kurdish interests in Arabic messaging—incidentally reaching Kurds in Syria and Iraq who understand Arabic.

During the Syrian conflict, RT Arabic primarily highlighted the suffering of civilians. However, the Kurdish YPG formations were also among the most frequently covered topics. The narratives promoted by the channel stressed crimes committed by the Turkish military and the Syrian opposition forces aligned with Ankara during operations designed to push the YPG—and the entire Kurdish quasi-state administration—away from Turkey's southern border. This framing dominated RT Arabic's coverage during Operations Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019).



RT: Commenting on the attacks faced by Syria, especially in the regions of Afrin, al-Shahba, and Aleppo, the "Democratic Self-Administration of the Northern and Eastern Syria Region" issued a statement from its headquarters in Raqqa: "At the outset, we condemn and categorically reject the attack carried out by the Turkish state along with its mercenaries on Syrian territory. We also pay tribute to the historic resistance shown by our people in Aleppo and al-Shahba. The attack executed by the Turkish state is a continuation of a plan that Turkey previously attempted to implement through ISIS. Its goal is the occupation of Syria and the realisation of the borders of the 'Misak-i Millî' (National Pact), which Turkey has repeatedly pursued. This aggression aims to occupy and partition Syria and turn it into a hub of international terrorism. The attack, which started in Aleppo and Hama, is not confined to one area but threatens the entirety of Syria.[29]

[27] Russia's Sputnik news agency closes Kurdish edition at Turkish gov't's request, Stockholm Center for Freedom, 1 July 2018, (accessed: 9 September 2025).

[28] See: K. W. Olszowska, K. Wasilewski, Russian Disinformation in Turkey, Institute for Research on Turkey, Kraków 2024, p. 16, <https://disinfoinmenat.com/raport/rosyjska-dezinformacja-w-turcji> (accessed: 9 September 2025).

[29] [https://www.rtarabic.com/middle\\_east/1624545-الإدارة-الذاتية-لشمال-وشرق-سوريا-تعلن-التعينة-العامة-وتدذر-من-تداعيات-خطيرة-بعد-هجوم-حلب-فيديو](https://www.rtarabic.com/middle_east/1624545-الإدارة-الذاتية-لشمال-وشرق-سوريا-تعلن-التعينة-العامة-وتدذر-من-تداعيات-خطيرة-بعد-هجوم-حلب-فيديو) (accessed: 9 September 2025).

The Arabic-language branch of RT detailed the hardships endured by the Kurdish civilian population at the hands of the Turkish military and the Syrian opposition. Beyond violating the sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic, the main threat posed by the Turkish Armed Forces, according to the Russian outlet, was the potential destruction of the indigenous Kurdish culture in northern Syria, which could result from ethnic cleansing. Thus, similar to the previously mentioned documentary Erdoganistan, Russian propaganda again evoked the threat of crimes against humanity allegedly committed by Turkey. No other minority group within Syria's ethnoreligious mosaic (e.g., Alawites, Christians, Druze, Turkmen) received comparable coverage[30]. As noted by Deena Dajani, Marie Gillespie, and Rhys Crilley, supporting Kurdish aspirations for independence is not a goal of Russian foreign policy. In propaganda aimed at Middle Eastern societies—where anti-Western sentiment often has genuine roots—Russia highlights Western hypocrisy[31]. However, the Russian information strategy cannot be reduced solely to pointing out Western inconsistencies. In the Syrian Kurdish context, Moscow repeatedly omitted aspects of its own policies that would provide equally strong grounds for similar accusations. For example, Russia's cynical and instrumental approach toward Syrian Kurdish autonomy suggests that keeping Bashar al-Assad in power remained the overriding aim. At times, Kurdish forces were portrayed as potential actors in a peace settlement; on other occasions, they were used as leverage against Turkey, which was unlikely to tolerate Kurdish autonomy along its southern border. Yet at other times, Moscow—no longer through propaganda channels but directly, via Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov—warned Syrian Kurds that their cooperation with the United States “would bring them no benefit.[32]” During Donald Trump’s first presidency, the United States markedly decreased its support for Syrian Kurds, which allowed Turkey to launch its largest military operation, Peace Spring. Nonetheless, earlier Turkish actions in Syria were most likely coordinated with Russia, which—together with Turkey and Iran—established the so-called Astana Process. Under this framework, all states backing the Syrian conflict’s warring parties negotiated ad hoc arrangements. In this context, Russian advocacy for the Syrian Kurds—both through state media and official statements—seems like a calculated political manoeuvre intended to leverage the Kurdish card in a broader Middle Eastern power struggle.

Russia’s instrumentalisation of the Kurdish issue becomes even clearer when examining how RT and Sputnik covered Turkey’s dispute with Sweden (and, to a lesser extent, Finland) over their NATO accession. Ankara long blocked their entry, demanding concrete steps against the PKK, recognised as a terrorist organisation by both the EU and the US. Here too, Russian state media attempted to appeal simultaneously to Turkish and Kurdish (especially PKK-affiliated or sympathetic) audiences, generating mutually contradictory narratives. For instance, a May 2022 article reported that Sweden and Finland were refusing to extradite “Kurdish terrorists”—thus echoing Turkish concerns—while also suggesting that Kurdish political representation in the Swedish Riksdag would be sacrificed to secure Sweden’s NATO membership[33]. Less than two months later, Sputnik International claimed that lifting Turkey’s veto would require the extradition of PKK-linked activists to Turkey, implying that the loyalty of Kurdish diasporas to their host states was at risk[34].

[30] D. Dajani, M. Gillespie, R. Crilley, Differentiated visibilities: RT Arabic’s narration of Russia’s role in the Syrian war, “Media, War & Conflict”, December 2019, DOI: 10.1177/175063521988907, p. 13-14.

[31] J. Nocettii, Dazed And Confused: Russian “Information Warfare” And The Middle East – The Syria Lessons, EuroMesco Policy Brief No. 93, February 2019, [https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Euromesco-Policy-Brief93\\_Dazed-and-confused.-Russian-information-warfare.pdf](https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Euromesco-Policy-Brief93_Dazed-and-confused.-Russian-information-warfare.pdf) (accessed: 11 September 2025).

[32] Russia warns Syrian Kurds against relying on U.S. support, PBS News, 26 November 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-warns-syrian-kurds-against-relying-on-u-s-support> (accessed: 15 September 2015).

[33] Sweden and Finland refuse to extradite terrorists – Turkish media, RT, 16 May 2022, <https://www.rt.com/news/555571-turkey-sweden-finland-terrorists> (accessed: 15 September 2025).

[34] ‘They Have to Comply’: Ankara Will Still Veto NATO Accession if Finland, Sweden Don’t Keep to Deal, Sputnik International, 5 July 2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20220705/they-have-to-comply-ankara-will-still-veto-nato-accession-if-finland-sweden-dont-keep-to-deal-1096994850.html> (accessed: 15.09.2025).

In subsequent months, RT published a series of pieces emphasising Ankara's anxieties over Sweden's alleged support for the PKK. The overall message portrayed Sweden as a country torn between its NATO aspirations and the preservation of internal social cohesion, of which the civil liberties of Kurds living in Sweden were an integral part. These freedoms—RT insinuated—would be sacrificed on the altar of “great politics. [35]” Ultimately, these efforts eroded the Kurdish diaspora's trust in the Swedish state to the point that Western media observed heightened anxiety among politically active Kurds, who expressed disappointment in a country they had previously regarded as a safe democratic space[36].

A notable example of Russian propaganda surrounding Sweden's NATO accession is that it did not solely target left-leaning Kurds close to the PKK but also aimed at religiously observant Kurds. To achieve this, Russian state media amplified incidents of public Quran burnings, portraying Sweden (and implicitly the entire West) as openly hostile to Islam and willing to tolerate sacrilegious acts under the guise of distorted free speech. A notable example of Russian propaganda surrounding Sweden's NATO accession is that it did not solely target left-leaning Kurds close to the PKK but also aimed at religiously observant Kurds. To achieve this, Russian state media amplified incidents of public Quran burnings, portraying Sweden (and implicitly the entire West) as openly hostile to Islam and willing to tolerate sacrilegious acts under the guise of distorted free speech. While Russian framing on “secular” issues—such as the PKK's activities on Swedish soil—could be viewed as exploiting existing controversies, especially considering Turkey's legitimate concerns and the PKK's terrorist status, the coverage of Quran-burning incidents seems coordinated. Swedish authorities came to similar conclusions: in July 2023, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson stated that actors supported by Russia were behind these incidents. He added that government findings indicated that the burning of the Muslim holy book and Russian disinformation campaigns were not coincidental. These events provoked reactions not only among Muslims in Sweden but also among communities in eastern Turkey to whom such messaging was directed. Protests occurred in Diyarbakır—the largest city in Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast—where crowds gathered, among other times, in January and June 2023. While Russian framing on “secular” issues—such as the PKK's activities on Swedish soil—could be viewed as exploiting existing controversies, especially considering Turkey's legitimate concerns and the PKK's terrorist status, the coverage of Quran-burning incidents seems coordinated. Swedish authorities came to similar conclusions: in July 2023, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson stated that actors supported by Russia were behind these incidents. He added that government findings indicated that the burning of the Muslim holy book and Russian disinformation campaigns were not coincidental. These events provoked reactions not only among Muslims in Sweden but also among communities in eastern Turkey to whom such messaging was directed. Protests occurred in Diyarbakır—the largest city in Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast—where crowds gathered, among other times, in January[37] and June 2023[38].

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[35] See: Sweden reveals complication in NATO talks, RT, 29 August 2022, <https://www.rt.com/news/561732-turkey-sweden-nato-kurds-flag> (accessed: 15 September 2025). Türkiye labels NATO applicant a ‘terrorist propaganda centre’, RT, 17 January 2023, <https://www.rt.com/news/569999-turkiye-sweden-erdogan-kurds> (accessed: 15 September 2025).

[36] See: M. Bryant, ‘Now we are not safe’: Sweden's Kurds fear Nato deal has sold them out, “The Guardian”, 7 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/07/now-we-are-not-safe-swedens-kurds-fear-nato-deal-has-sold-them-out> (accessed: 15 September 2025).

[37] İsveç'te Kur'an-ı Kerim yakılmasına Diyarbakır'dan tepki, “Hürriyet”, 22 January 2023, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/isvecte-kuran-i-kerim-yakilmasina-diyarbakirdan-tepki-42207961> (accessed: 15 September 2025).

[38] Kur'an-ı Kerim yakılması Diyarbakır'da protesto edildi, “Güneydoğu Ekspres”, 30 June 2023, <https://www.guneydoguekspres.com/kuran-i-kerim-yakilmasi-diyarbakirda-protesto-edildi> (accessed: 15 September 2025).

In summary, over the past fifteen years, as Russia has “returned to the Middle East,” it has skillfully used the Kurdish issue politically, employing a full range of influence tactics. These include appeals to long-standing ties between the Russian state and various Kurdish communities across the region, official statements by state officials, propaganda outlets, and expert networks. Through these methods, Moscow has managed to outflank other state actors in winning the “hearts and minds” of Kurds—targeting their aspirations for independence (as in Iraq), pro-democratic inclinations (especially within the leftist diaspora), or conservative and Islamic identities. Russia effectively exploits politically sensitive Kurdish issues while hiding the cynicism and strategic calculations informing its broader Middle East policy, along with its dealings with the Kurds themselves. However, the success of these efforts is inconsistent. Kurdish media affiliated with the left-wing faction of the Kurdish political movement in Syria, Turkey, and the diaspora show limited enthusiasm towards Russia. Their coverage of Kremlin policies tends to be reserved and measured, echoing the familiar saying that “the Kurds have no friends but the mountains. [39]” The situation is somewhat different in the media of Iraq’s Kurdistan Region, where reporting on Russia is generally positive or neutral. Authorities in Erbil maintain friendly relations with Moscow. The Russian ambassador in Baghdad, Elbrus Kutrashev, regularly meets with the leadership of the Kurdistan Region, and local media have on several occasions highlighted the activities of Zelimkhan Mucoev—a Russian Kurd, billionaire, member of the ruling United Russia party, and active figure in Kurdish affairs[40]. This multi-faceted Russian approach to the Kurds fosters fertile ground for propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which often resonate significantly even within communities that had reasons to mistrust Moscow.

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[39] Compare: A. Borshchevskaya, *ibid.*, p. 36.

[40] Russia supports Kurdistan politically and logistically, *Kurdistan24*, 17 September 2016, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/369524/Russia-supports-Kurdistan-politically-and-logistically> (accessed: 15 September 2025), Kurdish member of Russian Parliament backs Kurdistan referendum, *Kurdistan24*, 31 July 2017, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/372203/Kurdish-member-of-Russian-Parliament-backs-Kurdistan-referendum> (accessed: 15 September 2025), Rusya Dışişleri Bakanı Kürt asıllı milletvekilini ödüllendirdi, *Kurdistan24*, 12 November 2024, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/tr/story/810379/rusya-disisleri-bakanı-kurt-asilli-milletvekilini-odullendirdi> (accessed: 15 September 2025). Mucoev, a Yazidi (a religious minority among the Kurds), is portrayed as an advocate for Kurdish unity and, according to some reports, personally supervised humanitarian convoys sent from Baghdad to the northern provinces inhabited by Kurdish Yazidis, who were particularly affected by the Islamic State’s repression. According to Anna Borshchevskaya, he serves as a liaison between Moscow and the Iraqi Kurds and plays a key role in reinforcing Russia’s image as their patron. A. Borshchevskaya, *ibid.*, p. 31.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## Conclusions

The Russian Federation, through various influence tools, has over recent years succeeded in shaping the perception among certain Kurdish communities that it is a trustworthy partner. This has been facilitated by expertise developed over the past two centuries in building and maintaining ties with the Kurds and managing their regional relations. At different points in its Middle East policy, Moscow could count on a favourable view from the left-wing segment of the Kurdish political movement—such as the PKK and the legal HDP in the mid-2010s. This was partly based on the positive image of the Soviet Union still prevalent across many countries of the Global South and among parts of Middle Eastern societies. The USSR offered an alternative universalist model to that of the West and capitalism. Although this universalism collapsed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia remains widely seen as the USSR's successor. Among Kurds sympathetic to the PKK and its branches, however, this image was weakened by the war in Syria and Moscow's calculated stance towards Turkey.

Despite setbacks, Russia continues to expertly navigate the complexities of Middle Eastern—and especially Kurdish—politics, utilising a broad range of discourses. Its flexible approach towards the Kurds, coupled with the enduring traditions of Russian Kurdish studies (which have recently experienced a revival[41]), allows Moscow to effectively employ the “Kurdish card”—or at least to manipulate fears and resentments through disinformation campaigns, as seen within the European Kurdish diaspora and among religious Kurds in Turkey.

## Recommendations

\* The primary challenge for Western states is to gain a deeper understanding of Kurdish history and political intricacies. Russia utilises its long-standing scholarly traditions, effectively transforming its knowledge into practical political tools. To earn Kurdish trust, the West must close this knowledge gap.

\* A short-term goal—considering the difficulty of quickly resolving postcolonial and ongoing grievances within Middle Eastern societies, including among the Kurds—should be to demonstrate that Russian “pragmatism” is actually an anti-Kurdish stance. Moscow’s actions consistently serve its own interests over Kurdish aspirations.

\* In the context of disinformation, Russian narratives should be challenged by highlighting European and EU policies towards the Middle East that align with their declared values and principles. Showing consistency between rhetoric and actions can weaken the credibility of Russian claims.

[41] T. Odincowa, Rol' kurdołogii w bliżniewschodznoj strategii Rosji na sowremennom etapie, „Woprosy Politologii”, No. 7 (107), 2024, DOI 10.35775/PSI.2024.107.7.029 УДК 32.327, <https://kurdisch.ru/роль-курдоологии-в-ближневосточной-ст/143289> (accessed: 15 September 2025).