

# MERIA

## THE RESURRECTION OF SYRIAN KURDISH POLITICS

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*This article examines the current political landscape of the Kurdish region in Syria, the role the Kurds have played in the ongoing Syrian civil war, and intra-Kurdish relations.*

For many years, the Kurds in Syria were subjected to discrimination at the hands of the Ba'th regime and were stripped of their basic rights.<sup>1</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, some Syrian Kurds were deprived of citizenship, leaving them with no legal status in the country.<sup>2</sup> Although Syria was a key player in the modern Kurdish struggle against Turkey and Iraq, its policies toward the Kurds there were in many cases worse than those in the neighboring countries. On the one hand, the Asad regime provided safe haven for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Kurdish movements in Iraq fighting Saddam's regime. On the other hand, it cracked down on its own Kurds in the northern part of the country. Kurdish parties, Kurdish language, Kurdish culture and Kurdish names were illegal,<sup>3</sup> and those who dared to challenge this were prosecuted, jailed, tortured, or forced to leave the country.

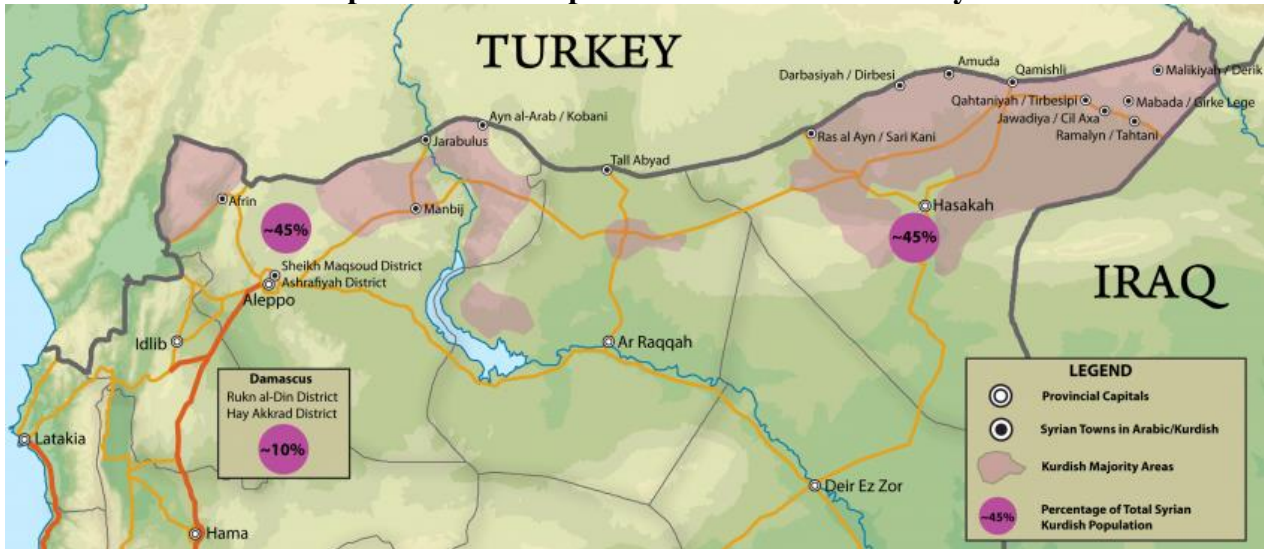
However, the ongoing civil war in the country between Alawites and Sunnis, which began in March 2011, has presented an opportunity to the Kurds. The unexpected war has led to a Kurdish-ruled enclave in northeast Syria. This has, in turn, led to the reorganization of Kurdish parties, which for many years operated clandestinely. Kurdish cultural centers and language schools have mushroomed across the region while forbidden Kurdish names are being used again from Derik in the northeast on the border with

Iraqi Kurdistan to Afrin in the northwest on the Turkish border. This article examines the current political landscape of the Kurdish region in Syria, the role the Kurds have played in the ongoing conflict, and intra-Kurdish relations.

### THE KURDS IN SYRIA

It is estimated that there are some 3 million Kurds in Syria, constituting 13 percent of Syria's 23 million inhabitants. They mostly occupy the northern part of the country, a region that borders with Iraqi Kurdistan to the east and Turkey to the north and west. There are also some major districts in Aleppo and Damascus that are populated by the Kurds. These include the Ashrafiya and Shaykh Maqsoud districts in Aleppo as well as the Hay Akrad and Rukn al-Din districts in Damascus.<sup>4</sup> The Kurds in Syria speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, which is the most widely-spoken dialect in Kurdistan. As a result of its Arabization policies during the 1960s and 1970s, the Ba'th regime created the so-called Arab-belt from the Jazira region in the northeast of Syria to the northern Kurdish city of Kobani in an attempt to break the contiguity of the Kurdish region. The regime succeeded, establishing a strip populated only by Arabs and forcing tens of thousands of Kurds to leave.<sup>5</sup>

### Map of Kurdish-Populated Areas in Northern Syria



*Credit: Institute for the Study of War*

## KURDISH POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

The history of the Kurdish movements in Syria dates back to the late 1950s, when the first Kurdish political party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria, was established by a group of prominent Kurds who had fled to Syria from Turkey after failed uprisings together with some leading Kurds in Syria.<sup>6</sup> The KDPS was founded as an arm of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq, then led by the legendary Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani, in an attempt to organize all parts of the Kurdish regions under one strong and influential movement.

However, in the years that followed, Barzani's goal to unite the Kurds under one political umbrella fell short. This was due to the Ba'th regime's brutality against and intolerance of the existence of the Kurds in Syria as well as internal disagreements among the party's leadership. From the time the Ba'th regime came into power and until the onset of the ongoing Syrian civil war, all Kurdish parties operated underground, with their leaders facing long prison sentences if caught.<sup>7</sup> The Ba'th regime's support for the PKK (the Kurdish militant group fighting Turkey) in the 1980s and 1990s was paradoxical; its support was not due to its love for the Kurds in Turkey, but rather was the result of its

adversarial policies with Turkey in light of the Alexandretta (Hatay) issue from 1939.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the Syria Ba'th regime's "enemy of my enemy is my friend" approach became a lifeline for the PKK, enabling it to operate for nearly two decades in Syria. However, in late 1998, due to mounting international pressure, the Syrian regime forced PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to leave the country. This led to Ocalan's capture, and he was soon handed over to and imprisoned by Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

## THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Kurdish politics in the Kurdish region of Syria is now dominated by two major blocs: the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC).<sup>10</sup> The PYD is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), whereas the KNC is comprised of 16 different Kurdish parties under the influence of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) in Iraq (led by Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan).<sup>11</sup> There are some additional minor parties, such as the Kurdish Future Movement founded by Kurdish activist Meshaal Tammo--who was later murdered--acting with the Syrian National Council.<sup>12</sup> The PKK-affiliated PYD is the strongest of the Syrian Kurdish

parties.<sup>13</sup> Although the KNC is a coalition of more than a dozen Kurdish parties, it wields no real power in the region. It lacks, above all, the military force and other necessary means in this regard to counter the well-organized PYD.<sup>14</sup>

### **THE KURDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL (KNC)**

The Kurdish National Council (KNC) was established in October 2011 in Iraqi Kurdistan by 11 different Kurdish parties,<sup>15</sup> as a replication of the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council (SNC). While most of the parties that make up the KNC are over a half a century old, at the operational level, they have been rather weak or ineffective.<sup>16</sup> The KNC is chaired by Abd al-Hakim Bashar, who is at the same time the leader of Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria, which is the strongest member party of the KNC. Almost all of the parties under the KNC umbrella are based in the Kurdish region of Iraq, making them unable to influence or change the course of developments on the ground in Syria.

According to the Carnegie Middle East Center, the KNC has 16 member parties; however, there also exist some deep cleavages among them. For example, the PUK-affiliated members of the KNC--like the Kurdistan Democratic Progressive Party led by Hamid Darwish as well as left-oriented parties such as the Kurdish Democratic Leftist Party headed by Muhammad Mousa and the Syrian Democratic Kurdish party led by Shaykh Jamal--are close to the PYD. According to some reports from the region, they also cooperate with the PYD on the ground and send their men to join the PYD's fighting force, the YPG.<sup>17</sup>

The KNC's main goal was to unite the Kurdish parties and to organize a struggle against the Syrian regime in the Kurdish region. Nevertheless, it faced challenges from the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD refused to join the KNC and acted independently from the beginning of the uprising in Syria. Although the KNC attempted to join the Syrian National Council

(SNC) and even attended some major meetings held in Istanbul, its demands for autonomy and national rights have not been met. Thus, it left the SNC shortly after its establishment.

On August 28, 2013, the Arabic language newspaper *al-Hayat* reported that the Syrian National Coalition, led by Ahmad al-Jarba, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), led by Abd al-Hakim Bashar, signed an agreement making Bashar vice president of the Syrian National Coalition.<sup>18</sup> However, Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) leader Salih Muslim told *al-Hayat* that he did not recognize any agreement that was not signed with the Kurdish Supreme Committee<sup>19</sup> (the highest decision-making body in Syrian Kurdistan, according to the July 2012 Erbil Agreement signed by the PYD-led People's Assembly of Western Kurdistan and the KDPS-led Kurdish National Council).<sup>20</sup>

According to the report, a 16-article agreement was signed between the Kurdish National Council and the Syrian National Council. The agreement included constitutional recognition of the Kurds as well as the name of the "Syrian Arab Republic" being changed to the "Syrian Republic." In addition, 11 KNC members would be included in the National Coalition's 114-member general commission while 3 KNC members would join the 19-member political commission.<sup>21</sup>

### **MEMBERS OF THE KURDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL (KNC)**

#### ***The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS)***

The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS) is among the many offshoots of the 1957 Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria. The party was established by Osman Sabri and Nuraddin Zaza--two prominent Kurds who escaped from Turkey to Syria following the failed rebellions of the 1920s and 1930s--as well as Hamid Darwish, Hamzah Diweran, and other important Kurds in Syria.<sup>22</sup>

The KDPS claims to be the successor of the

Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria of 1957, as do all other Kurdish parties in the region. Abd al-Hakim Bashar was elected party leader in 2008 and, as of the writing of this article, still holds this position. KDPS is essentially the sister party of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq (headed by Masoud Barzani).<sup>23</sup> In terms of public support, the party is considered the second largest political entity in Syrian Kurdistan after the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD). KDPS's attempts to establish its own Peshmerga forces have failed so far, due to the PYD's opposition to a second military force in the region.<sup>24</sup> Among its political objectives are the establishment of a secular Syrian state and a democratic government, political decentralization of the country, and the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights as well as "their right to self-rule in a united Syria."<sup>25</sup>

### ***The Kurdish Union Party (Yekiti)***

The Kurdish Union Party (Yekiti) was founded in 2009, by Fouad Aleko, Isma'il Hamo, and other Kurdish politicians. Hamo became secretary general in 2010 and, as of the writing of this article, continues to hold this post. The Yekiti movement was also among those political groups that founded the Kurdish National Council (KNC).<sup>26</sup> While Yekiti has no known military force, unlike the other KNC-member parties, it has been reported that some Yekiti members have infiltrated the Selahaddin Eyyubi Brigade (controlled by the Free Syrian Army) near Aleppo "in order to gain political leverage and military aid from Turkey."<sup>27</sup>

### ***The Kurdistan Freedom Party (Azadi)***

The Kurdistan Freedom Party or Azadi was founded in 2005 by members of Hayrettin Murat's Kurdish Left Party and Mustafa Juma'a's Kurdish People's Union Party. Murat also served as Azadi's first secretary general.<sup>28</sup> Juma'a, one of the leading figures of the movement was arrested in 2008 by the Ba'th regime. Following his release in 2011, Juma'a

was elected as the new secretary general of the party and Bashar Emin was made deputy secretary general. Juma'a's election as secretary general caused an internal dispute, causing a group of members, led by Hayrettin Murat, to leave the party.

This has resulted in two different Azadi parties in the Kurdish region--one under Juma'a and one led by Mustafa Hidir Oso. As one of the more successful Kurdish parties in Syria, prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Azadi has "enjoy[ed] considerable public support on the ground."<sup>29</sup> Azadi is a member of the Kurdish Supreme council, which is joined with other smaller Kurdish parties. It also signed the Erbil Agreement under Masoud Barzani's auspices. Nonetheless, the party has been accused of collaboration with Turkey and jihadi movements that have repeatedly attacked the Kurdish town of Serekaniye, located on the border with Turkey.

Known for his opposition to the PYD and its armed forces, the YPG, Juma'a asserted that "they would establish their own armed group and would fight the YPG the PYD's armed forces if necessary."<sup>30</sup> In addition, Juma'a's Azadi party supports (and does not deny this) the small Kurdish militia group, the Selahaddin Eyyubi Brigade, which is fighting the Assad regime in the Aleppo region under FSA control. Juma'a currently lives in Iraqi Kurdistan, as do other Kurdish leaders of the region. Relations between Azadi's leadership and the PYD are still very tense.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KDPP)***

The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (KDPP), established in 1965, is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria. KDPP leader Abd al-Hamid Darwish, who has served as secretary general of the party since its creation, is among the "most senior and experienced politicians among Syrian Kurds."<sup>32</sup> The KDPP of Syria is one of the sister parties of Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). It is also a member of the Kurdish National Council (KNC).<sup>33</sup>

The KDPP also maintains good relations with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the PKK's offshoot, as well as with other Kurdish leftist parties in the region. The KDPP's objectives include a decentralized Syria and an inclusive government that recognizes the political and cultural rights of the Kurds and other minorities in Syria.<sup>34</sup> It is also one of the few movements participating in the YPG to fight radical Islamist groups and the Assad regime.

#### ***Kurdish Equality Party (Partiya Wekhevi ya Demokrat a Kurdi)***

The Kurdish Equality Party is a minor KDPP breakaway group established in the 1990s. As of the writing of this article, it is led by Aziz Dawe,<sup>35</sup> a former senior member of the KDPP. Dawe left the KDPP party due to internal struggle<sup>36</sup> and problems with Hamid Darwish, KDPP veteran leader. The Kurdish Equality Party is represented in the Kurdish National Council (KNC).

#### ***Kurdish Patriotic Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Welatperez a Kurdi)***

Established in 1998, the KPP is also an offshoot of the Kurdistan Democratic Progressive Party (KDPP), one of the oldest parties in the Kurdish region. The party is chaired by Sadun Sfook<sup>37</sup> and has only minor support in the Kurdish region. It is a member of the Kurdish National Council the KNC.

#### ***Kurdistan Democratic Leftist Party in Syria (Partiya Cap a Kurdi li Suriye)***

The Kurdish Democratic Leftist Party in Syria was formed by a group that broke away from the Kurdish Yekiti Party in the late 1990s. However, as a result of the ongoing war in Syria, the party suffered another split in 2012. Both parties continue to use the same name claiming to be the real Leftist Party. One is headed by Mousa Muhammad and the new Left Party by Shelal Gedo.<sup>38</sup> Both parties are members of the KNC and signatories of the Erbil Agreement. However, Mousa's Leftist Party enjoys good relations with the Kurdish

Democratic Union Party (PYD), which controls most of the Kurdish land with its well-organized military force, the YPG.

#### ***The Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria***

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (KDUP) was founded by a group of senior Kurdish figures who left the Kurdish Yekiti party. KDUP was considered to have some public support among the Kurds inhabiting the northern parts of Aleppo and the Afrin region before its founding leader, Ismail Omar, passed away in 2010.<sup>39</sup> According to ORSAM, the KDUP lost its appeal following the death of its long-time leader. The party is now led by one Omar's close associates, Kamuran Bekes.<sup>40</sup>

#### ***The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria***

All Kurdish parties operating in Syria have their roots in the first Kurdish party, the KDPS of 1957.<sup>41</sup> The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria is a breakaway from the old KDPS and is led by Nasraddin Ibrahim. All splits among the Kurdish parties were mainly the result of internal fighting over leadership. This KDPS is also a member of the Kurdish National Council and is a signatory of the Erbil Agreement that brought together the PYD and the Kurdish National Council.

#### ***The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti)***

The new Kurdish Democratic Party was established by Abd al-Rahman Aluji.<sup>42</sup> A prominent member of the KDPS, Aluji left that party in 2004, allegedly over another leadership struggle. Since there are several Kurdish Democratic Parties in Syria, each new group is called by its leader's name such as Aluji's al-Parti or Ibrahim's al-Parti.<sup>43</sup>

#### ***The Kurdish Democratic Wifaq Party in Syria***

Founded in 2005, the Wifaq movement is a

breakaway group from the PKK-affiliated and most powerful party in the region the Democratic Union Party (PYD). It is led by Nazhat Muhammad. However, there have been reports that the group has split into two.<sup>44</sup>

### *Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party*

The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party, chaired by Shaykh Jamal Baqi, is one of the smallest Kurdish parties in the region.<sup>45</sup> The party is also known for its close relations with the PKK-affiliated PYD and its armed forces.

There is also another Kurdish Democratic Party in addition to those already mentioned, led by Faysal Yusuf. This party has good relations with the PYD as well.

### **THE KURDISTAN FUTURE MOVEMENT IN SYRIA**

The Kurdish Future Movement was formed in 2005 by Mashaal Tammo, a well-known Kurdish activist in the region. Tammo and his close friends were the first to join the new Syrian opposition formed in Turkey. Tammo remained a part of it until he was assassinated by masked men in his home in Qamishli in October 2011.<sup>46</sup> It is widely believed that the Asad regime was behind the assassination, as Tammo was the only Kurdish leader to become an executive in the Syrian National Council.<sup>47</sup> The movement suffered a split after his death, and a group led by Jangidar Muhammad and another headed by Rezan Shaykmus fought for leadership. As a result, Shaykmus' group left the party, considering Jangidar Muhammad's election illegitimate.<sup>48</sup> Tammo's movement was a staunch supporter of external military intervention in Syria and rejected any kind of dialogue with the Asad regime.

### **THE DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY (PYD)**

One of the founding members of the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC) along with the Kurdish National Council (KNC), the PYD was formed in 2003 as an offshoot of the

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PYD was established in accordance with Abdullah Ocalan's "Democratic Confederalism" model, a model he suggested for all parts of Kurdistan. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is one of the most prominent Kurdish opposition parties in Syria.<sup>49</sup> The PYD's objectives include "the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights," as well as 'democratic autonomy and self-rule' for the Kurdish region." Just after the start of the 2011 uprising in Syria, the PYD first joined the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, an amalgamation of mostly leftist and liberal movements in Syria, which--unlike the widely recognized opposition group led by radical Islamists--rejects violence and favors peaceful struggle. Then, in May 2011, the PYD became part of newly established Kurdish Patriotic Movement. It, however, declined to join the other Kurdish opposition parties that founded the Kurdish National Council (KNC).<sup>50</sup>

In 2010, Salih Muslim, one of the influential figures among the leading cadres, became chairman of the party. In order to avoid political persecution of the Kurds by the Ba'th regime, which once labeled him enemy number one, he stayed abroad in Iraqi Kurdistan and led his movement from there. However, shortly after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, he returned to the country's Kurdish region in order to participate. "He urged the Kurds to fight for their rights," adding "that the Kurds had fought for Arabs, Turks, and Iranians, but received nothing in return and that it was time for the Kurds to get rid of this shame and fight their own people."<sup>51</sup>

Muslim was reelected at the PYD's fifth party congress in June 2012. At the congress, the PYD Central Committee was expanded. In addition, Asiyah Abdullah was made co-chairwoman of the party, as part of the party's new dual leadership and policy of equal representation of the sexes.<sup>52</sup> The PYD denies accusations of any organic ties with the PKK, though it accepts imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's ideology and philosophy.<sup>53</sup>

The PYD is one of the largest parties in

Syria. It is also the most powerful and well-organized in the Kurdish region, dominating its rivals, including the Kurdish National Council. Its armed wing, the YPG (Popular Defense Committees), controls the majority of Kurdish towns and villages in the region, among them the oil-rich Rimland. It has an armed force of roughly 30,000, some 40 percent of which are women.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the YPG, the PYD also has its own regional police force, Asayish. The party also provides public services and has established many Kurdish schools throughout the region. Its political rivals, Azadi and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, have accused the PYD of having ties with the Assad regime, which it denies.

According to party's leader Salih Muslim, the allegations are pure propaganda of the Turkish government, which does not want the Kurds to obtain rights. In an April 15, 2013, interview with the Turkish daily *Radikal*, Muslim said:

The Turkish state cannot accept the idea that the Kurds can decide themselves to fight for their rights. Turks always think we are servants of someone or are being manipulated by someone. We are not like that. Didn't the Turkish state have good relations with Assad in the early 2000s? We were opposed to Assad then, and we are opposed now, because he has always been brutal to us. When Assad had good relations with Turkey, he became our executioner. They signed the Adana Agreement and Assad handed over 200 PKK militants to Turkey. We were tortured. I can you give a list of Kurds killed with the dates and their names. We can't be on Assad's side. But we also didn't play the role Turkey wanted.<sup>55</sup>

According to Salih Muslim, the jihadi groups attacking Kurdish towns and villages are backed by Turkey. He continued, "The regime came after us and we clashed with it. The FSA came after us and we clashed with them. Now the regime

is putting pressure on us and the FSA at the same time. Moreover, whether we again confront the FSA and clash with them depends on Turkey's attitude. In general, those who are attacking us are the FSA groups controlled by Turkey."<sup>56</sup>

In addition, throughout 2012 and 2013, Kurdish forces have continuously been battling the Syrian army around the Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo, and, at times, in the largest Kurdish city, Qamishli. The Kurdish YPG has also been fighting jihadi rebels in the Kurdish region since the latter half of 2012.<sup>57</sup> The fiercest fighting erupted on July 17, 2013, after members of Jabhat al-Nusra, a jihadi movement linked to al-Qa'ida, attacked the Kurdish town of Serekaniye on the border with Turkey, while jihadi groups were only in control of the border crossing that connects Turkey and the Kurdish region of Syria. After heavy clashes, the PYD-affiliated popular protection units from the YPG gained control of this important crossing and kicked them out of Serekaniye and the surrounding areas.<sup>58</sup> The clashes spread to other Kurdish-inhabited areas in the weeks and months that followed and have continued, with the seizure of the Yarubia (Til Kocer in Kurdish) border crossing with Iraq by the Kurdish forces on October 26, 2013. The border crossing, which had been held by al-Qai'da-linked groups from March 2011, fell under total Kurdish control,<sup>59</sup> and the war still continues on many fronts, as of the writing of this article.

On July 19, 2013, the PYD announced that it was preparing to declare autonomy for the Kurdish region in the coming weeks and that it would hold elections in six months' time. While addressing a crowd of tens of thousands of people who gathered to mark the September 1 world peace day in the unofficial Kurdish capital of Diyarbakir (Amed), Asiyah Abdullah announced, "We are committed to achiev[ing] this goal in the near future with the joint involvement of all Kurdish parties, minorities such as Armenians, Assyrians and Arabs and individuals in Rojava."<sup>60</sup> The declaration of autonomy came in November 2013. Reports from the region announced that a transitional assembly comprising all ethnic

minorities in the region had been formed until the elections would be held. According to the plan, the Kurdish region would be divided into three cantons, consisting of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira--each of them with their own local assemblies and representatives in the regional governing body. The interim autonomous administration is also expected to prepare local and general elections and would deal with defense as well as economic and social issues, spokesperson of People's Council of Western Kurdistan Shirzad Izidi said.<sup>61</sup>

### THE KURDISH SUPREME COUNCIL

On July 11, 2012 the PYD-led People's Assembly of Western Kurdistan and the Kurdish National Council signed the so-called Erbil Agreement sponsored by Masoud Barzani,<sup>62</sup> president of the de facto Kurdish region in northern Iraq. These two main political forces, which dominate the Kurdish political scene in the region, formed a new umbrella organization called the Kurdish Supreme Council. The Kurdish Supreme Council refers to itself as the highest decision-making body in Western Kurdistan (or Rojava in Kurdish). The council agreed to administer the Kurdish areas jointly, establish security committees to monitor the ongoing armed struggle, and to form Asayish forces responsible for internal security and law and order. However, the members of the Kurdish National Council, unlike the PYD, have been disorganized and have lacked popular support on the ground.<sup>63</sup> Although the PYD is the youngest party among them, having been established in 2003, it has surpassed all the others, becoming de facto ruler of the region.

Interestingly, however, on the same day reports alleged that the Kurdish National Council had joined the Syrian opposition in Istanbul, in other headlines across the Kurdish world and beyond, it was reported that the PYD and the Kurdish National Council had agreed to jointly administer the Kurdish areas until elections were held, as PYD co-chairwoman Asiyah Abdullah told the press.<sup>64</sup> In addition, a leading member of the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM)

told Diyarbakir's Kurdish daily that following a PYD-organized meeting in Qamishli, the sides approved an understanding to create a transnational Kurdish government in the liberated parts of western Kurdistan (Rojava) in order to prepare for general elections.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, on August 22, 2013, the leader of Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, Faysal Yusuf; head of the Kurdish Leftist Party, Mousa Muhammad; and Selman Hiso from the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party announced that they would support the PYD's proposal for a transitional government and that they would participate in it.<sup>66</sup> Turkey, on the other hand, reacted to this announcement by putting its forces across the Kurdish region on alert. It also invited Kurdish leader Salih Muslim, once a wanted man in Turkey, to discuss the issue. PYD leader Muslim said in an interview with *France24* that "they had no intention to proclaim autonomy in northern Syria," but that the Kurds needed to "be in charge of the region temporarily" while waiting "for a political solution in which everyone--Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians--finds their place."<sup>67</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The Kurdish political circles in Syria have not chosen the Asad regime nor have they chosen the opposition. Instead, they have taken a third route introduced by the PYD, the region's most powerful Kurdish movement. Though initially ignored and their demands falling on deaf ears, through their war against al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups in and around the Kurdish region of Syria, they succeeded to catch the attention of the international community.

Despite differences and rivalries among the Kurdish parties, they all have the same goals. These include autonomy for the "Kurdish region or the Kurdish right to self-determination, constitutional recognition of the Kurds as a distinct nation with their fundamental rights, and use of the Kurdish language in education."<sup>68</sup> Unlike the Sunni-Arab opposition dominated by dozens of radical Islamist groups, the Kurdish YPG is



the only armed force charged with the protection and the defense of the Kurdish population and the Kurdish areas. So far there has been no serious internal fight among the Kurds that could harm the YPG's monopoly that could be detrimental to their future.

The Kurdish dream to carve out a safe haven in the north of Syria continues while the civil war between Alawites and Sunnis rages on, with accusations of chemical warfare on both sides. All the while, the international community is attempting to find a settlement to this ongoing conflict. If the Kurds are successful in realizing their goal of establishing autonomy, which they declared on November 12, 2013, another de facto Kurdish region ruled by Kurds could emerge in war-torn Syria, alongside the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, "Can the Kurds Tip the Scales in Syria?" *Real Clear World*, June 9, 2011, <http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2011/06/09/can-the-kurds-tip-the-scales-in-syria-99547.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "The Kurds Are for the Kurds," *Weekly Standard*, Vol. 18, No. 26, March 18, 2013, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/kurds-are-kurds-706670.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Macleod and Flamand, "Can the Kurds Tip the Scales in Syria?"

<sup>4</sup> John Caves, "Backgrounder: Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)," ISW-Institute for the Study of War, December 6, 2012, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder\\_SyrianKurds.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_SyrianKurds.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Maxime Azadi, "Suriye'de petrolün yüzde 60'ı Kürtlerin denetiminde, Interview with

Salih Muslim," Firat News Agency, May 5, 2013, <http://www.firatnews.com/news/kurdistan/suriye-de-petrolun-yuzde-60-i-kurtlerin-denetiminde.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Sinclair and Sirwan Kajjo, "The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria," *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, August 31, 2011, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111>.

<sup>7</sup> J. Michael Kennedy, "The Kurds Remain on the Sidelines in Syria's Uprising," *New York Times*, April 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/18/world/middleeast/kurds-remain-on-sideline-in-syrias-uprising.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>8</sup> Hatay Province of modern Turkey was a French mandate (together with Syria and Lebanon) until 1938, when the province was granted independence by France. However, in 1939, its legislature voted to become part of Turkey, although the Turks were a minority there. Syria has always claimed rights over the province, once called Sanjak of Alexandretta, and official Syrian maps and documents have showed Hatay as part of Arab Republic of Syria. Since the annexation of the province by Turkey, the tensions between the two countries have been high and they have been considered to be in an undeclared war with each other.

<sup>9</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *From A to Z of the Kurds* (Lanham, MD; Toronto; Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Caves, "Backgrounder: Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)."

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