John Caves

BACKGROUNDER

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SYRIAN KURDS AND THE DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY (PYD)

The operational decision made by the Assad regime in mid-July 2012 to withdraw the majority of its forces from Syria's Kurdish areas effectively ceded control of those territories to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD dominates its Syrian Kurdish political rivals, such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC), by virtue of its control over most Syrian Kurdish militias, significant popular support, and its effective organization. It is also a close affiliate of the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which exacerbates Turkish concerns over Syrian border control. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), based in Iraq, is also invested in the political future of Syrian Kurds. Thus, the activities and decisions of the PYD with respect to the Syrian civil war will affect the region broadly. This backgrounder examines the PYD within the context of regional Kurdish politics in order to forecast their likely course as the Syrian civil war unfolds.

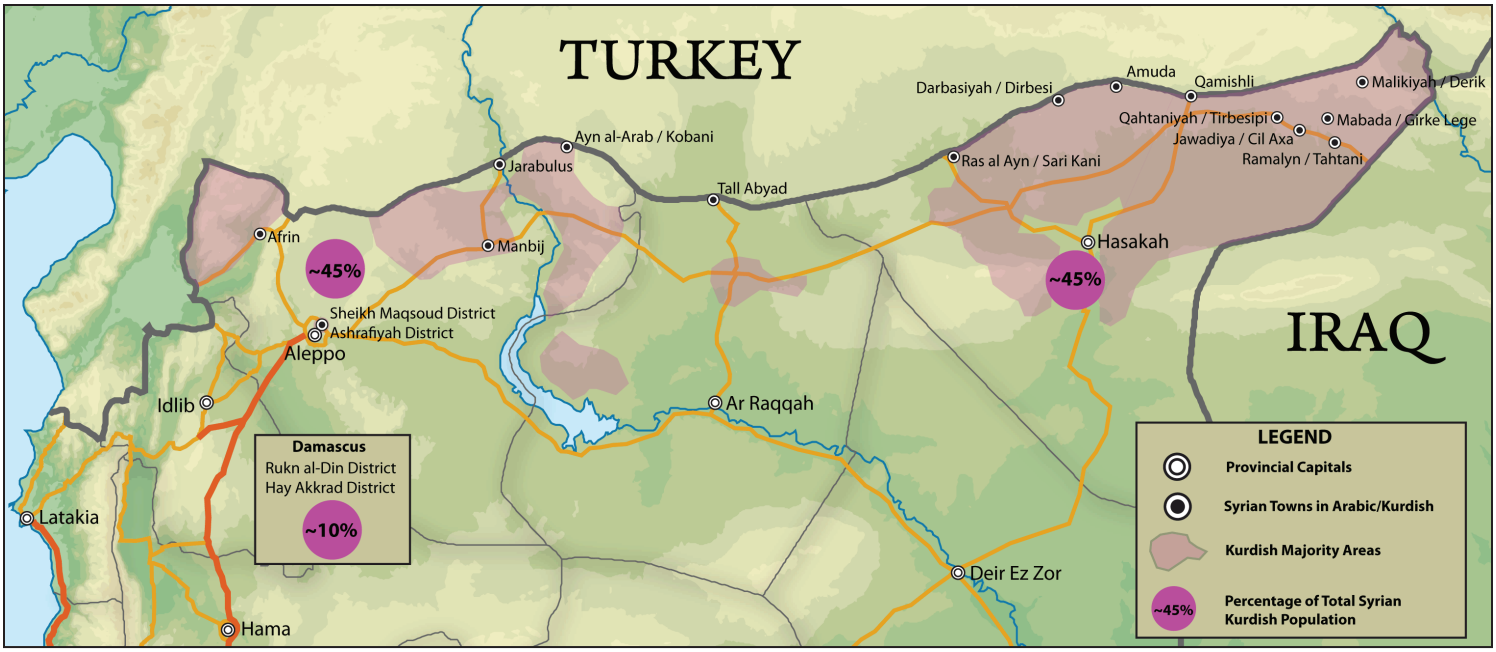
Syrian Kurds are divided politically into two main blocs: the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of 15 smaller parties. These two groups are linked to the regional Kurdish rivalry between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, with whom the PYD is affiliated, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which sponsored the creation of the KNC. Turkish and KRG interests converge with regard to the Syrian Kurdish divide, as both seek to limit the influence of the PKK in Syria. These outside forces influence events in Syria's Kurdish territories, and vice versa.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) regional terrorist campaign resulted in the U.S. State Department designating the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997.[1] Most of its key leaders, including Abdullah Ocalan, Murat Karayilan, and Cemil Bayik, are listed on the U.S. Treasury Department's Specially Designated Nationals list.[2] The PKK continues to advocate for armed struggle to achieve their political goals, and they hold a vested interest in the course taken by Syria's Kurdish population. The PKK especially fears losing influence among Syria's Kurds to the KRG, which reinforces the PKK's interest in the military strength of their Syrian ally, the PYD. Furthermore, on a tactical level the Syrian civil war offers a military advantage to the PKK in its principal campaign against the Turkish state. The PYD has enabled PKK activity in Syria and it will likely continue to do so unless Syrian Kurds perceive that the PKK is interfering with their welfare. The PYD presently faces internal pressure to exert its independence from the PKK and reconcile with the other Syrian Kurdish parties.

The PYD has been accused of close collaboration with both the PKK and the Syrian regime. There is substantial evidence to indicate the close relationship between the PKK and the PYD, especially at the leadership level. There is less to corroborate an established relationship with the Assad regime. As of November 2012, the PYD appears determined to establish itself as a powerful third force in Syria, willing to confront Turkey, the Arab opposition, and the Assad regime. This stance broadly aligns with the interests of the PKK in Syria. However, as a Syrian Kurdish party, the PYD must be sensitive to the expectations of Syrian Kurds or risk losing its widespread domestic support. This consideration differentiates the PYD from the PKK and influences PYD actions, particularly in regard to its relationship with the KNC and the KRG.

THE KURDISH REGIONS OF SYRIA

July 2012 marked a major pivot point in the Syrian civil war. The Arab opposition launched an offensive in Damascus, a bomb attack there killed four members of Bashar Assad's inner circle, and the Syrian civil war spread to the capital for the first time. The Syrian regime withdrew the majority



MAP 1 | KURDISH AREAS OF SYRIA

of its security forces from Syria's Kurdish regions and consolidated in response. Assad left a robust presence only in the largest Kurdish city—Qamishli—and yielded effective control over the other towns and countryside to the militias of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).[3]

International reactions to this move came swiftly. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the Assad regime of attempting to destabilize Turkey by turning over much of the border region of northern Syria to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgents, reputed to have close ties to the PYD. He threatened to intervene militarily in northern Syria if the PKK used that territory to launch attacks against Turkey.[4] The Kurdish National Council (KNC), the PYD's main Syrian Kurdish political rival, accused the PYD of collaboration with the regime on the grounds of the seamless security transfer.[5] The Arab anti-Assad opposition registered the smooth transfer as proof that the Kurds were not committed to the Syrian revolution, preferring to cut a deal with Assad than defeat him.[6] Some analysts interpreted regime withdrawal from Kurdish areas as a plot to break Syria into several warring parts in order to ensure the long-term survival of a coastal Alawite enclave.[7] Regardless of how these parties construed the move, it drew substantial world attention to Syrian Kurds and especially the PYD, which has become the dominant force on the ground in Syria's Kurdish areas.

Kurdish-Arab Relations within Syria

It is necessary to review the recent history of Syrian Kurds prior to the withdrawal of the Assad regime from the Kurdish-majority areas of the country in order to lend context to the current actions and disposition of the PYD.

Enmity has existed between Syria's Kurdish minority and its Arab majority since Syrian independence in 1946, similar to that observed between Kurds and the ethnic majorities in other states such as Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. The official name of the Syrian state since 1961 has been the Syrian Arab Republic, which is itself a provocation of Kurdish sentiment.

This latent ethnic tension was exacerbated by the policies of the Assad regime towards the Kurds. During the 1970's, the government of Hafez Assad resettled Arab tribes on Kurdish land that had been confiscated by the state as part of a nationwide socialist project. These Arab tribes, known as the *gumar*, remain today and are rumored to be armed by the regime.[8] Many Syrian Kurds were denied citizenship throughout the rule of both Hafez and Bashar Assad and were thereby relegated to permanent second-class status.

In 2004 security forces violently suppressed anti-regime riots in Qamishli, resulting in the death of several Kurdish

civilians.[9] In 2005, several of the parties that today comprise the KNC signed the Damascus Declaration, under which several Syrian opposition groups banded together to demand greater rights.[10] In effect, many Syrian Kurds view the Assad regime not in sectarian terms as an Alawite entity, but as an Arab regime with a long history of repressing Kurdish aspirations. As a result, unlike religious minorities such as Christians and Druze who see the Assad regime as a protector from the Sunni majority, the Kurds have never ingratiated themselves to the governments of either Hafez or Bashar Assad.

Nor are the Syrian Kurds friendly with the Arab opposition. The Damascus Declaration did not hold together; it was largely defunct by 2009, when several Kurdish parties withdrew to form the Kurdish Political Congress – a group of nine Syrian Kurdish parties that became a precursor to the KNC. In the first half of 2011, many of these parties took part in opposition meetings abroad that led to the creation of the Syrian National Council (SNC), but boycotted those gatherings that were hosted by Turkey in protest of Ankara's treatment of its own Kurds.

Despite this early involvement with the broader Syrian opposition, all but one of the Kurdish parties in the SNC left the organization between October 2011 and February 2012 in order to form the KNC. The rival PYD never associated with the SNC, considering it a Turkish proxy and thus hostile to the PYD and the PKK. Instead, the PYD engaged a separate organization, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, which was a loose association of nominal opposition parties and dissidents tolerated by the Assad regime. The PYD's membership in the National Coordination Body serves mainly for political cover so that it can claim to be acting as part of the Syrian revolution. The National Coordination Body has little clout either inside Syria or abroad.[11]

Kurdish participation in the Syrian opposition has been limited based on the recognition that the opposition is inherently nationalist, and thus opposes autonomy for Syrian Kurds. The unwillingness of the SNC to discuss federalism or autonomy for Kurds was a major factor in the decision of most of the Kurdish parties to leave the SNC in late 2011.[12] The election of a Kurd, Abdulbasset Sieda, as SNC President in early July 2012 failed to change their course, as Sieda has lived in exile for the past 18 years and is not affiliated with any of the Syrian Kurdish parties.[13]

The PYD has been explicitly hostile towards the SNC from its inception, and its rise to dominance in Syria's Kurdish areas in the summer of 2012 elevated that conflict to the fore. When the PYD assumed control of Kurdish territories, Sieda denounced the PYD as having "their own agenda which does not serve the Syrian national issue."[14] Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Riad al-Shaqfa was more blunt, stating in September, "We clearly oppose the ambitions of establishing a Kurdish entity in Syria."[15]

On the ground, Arab rebel groups have largely stayed away from Kurdish-majority areas. The Kurdish regions have by and large been peaceful throughout the uprising, and they have generally remained so since the regime withdrawal in mid-July. PYD leadership has repeatedly warned the Free Syrian Army (FSA) not to intrude onto Kurdish territory and has viewed warily the formation of new FSA battalions in Hasakah province.[16] The FSA, with more important battles to wage elsewhere in Syria, has generally heeded this warning in practice while at the same time refusing to concede to it in principle. Riad Asaad, the FSA's nominal head, rejected the possibility of federalism in an interview in August 2012, saying, "In Syria, there are no Kurdish or Sunni regions. It is all Syrian land. We find it necessary to be present in all regions of Syria."[17] Such statements indicate that relations between Syria's Kurds and the Arab opposition remain tenuous.

Intra-Kurdish Politics in Syria

Although Syrian Kurds have a common desire to resist Arab domination, political differences continue to divide them internally. The Kurdish National Council currently consists of 15 parties, many of which were formed decades ago; for example, the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria, a leading KNC member and the offshoot of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, was established in 1957.[18] Cleavages persist between various parties within the KNC, which have hampered its ability to organize effectively. However, these divisions fall outside the scope of this discussion.[19] The one factor uniting the KNC parties is their opposition to the PYD, which is why this paper refers to the KNC as a singular entity.


ABDULLAH OCALAN

The PYD is a relative newcomer, formed in 2003 by followers of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who was sheltered by the Syrian regime during the 1990's.[20] It has generally stood apart from other Syrian Kurdish parties, declining to join the Kurdish Political Congress in 2009. However, since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the PYD has ostensibly attempted to unify Syrian Kurds through cooperation with the other parties. In April 2011, it joined with the Kurdish Political Congress to form the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties, which tried to coordinate a Kurdish response to the general uprising in Syria. When the KNC formed in October 2011, gathering most of the non-PYD Syrian Kurdish parties, the National Movement was dissolved.[21] The result was the current division of Syrian Kurdish politics into two main groups, the KNC and PYD, along with a few relatively minor unaffiliated entities, such as the Future Movement.

The PYD and the KNC essentially espouse the same goal: to establish autonomy for Kurds in Syria in the wake of the Assad regime. In practice, the KNC appears more willing to work with the Arab opposition, whereas the PYD prefers to establish the Kurds as a neutral third force in Syria. The most important factor dividing the two blocs is their external affiliation: the PYD is linked to the PKK, whereas the KNC is linked to Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Both the KNC and PYD appear to have broad support within the Syrian Kurdish population, though it is difficult to gauge which group is more popular at this time.[22]

The KNC and PYD maintain an uneasy rivalry. Iraq's KRG, quietly encouraged by Turkey, made a concerted effort to reconcile the two blocs in the first half of 2012. In mid-July 2012, they appeared to have succeeded when representatives of the PYD and the KNC met with KRG President Massoud Barzani in Iraq and concluded the Erbil Agreement, in which the two groups agreed to administer jointly Syria's Kurdish areas and work together to evict the Assad regime from those territories.[23] The agreement established the Kurdish Supreme Council, a governing body containing equal representation from the KNC and PYD. The Supreme Council, however, has yet to wield effective control over affairs in the Kurdish territories.


MASSOUD BARZANI

Rather, the regime withdrawal in mid-July greatly increased the PYD's ability to make decisions unilaterally, as the vast majority of armed Syrian Kurdish militias are under PYD control.[24] These militias, known as the People's Defense Units (YPG), began to organize at the start of the Syrian uprising and are composed of local Kurds, some of whom claim to be independent of any political party.[25] However, the YPG flies the PYD flag at checkpoints and its arms are supplied by the PYD.[26] KNC leaders have emphatically claimed that the PYD has sole control over the YPG. Mustafa Juma, leader of the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria, stated bluntly in June 2012, "…they have weapons, and we don't."[27] In late October, Mohammed Ismail, leader of a smaller KNC-member party said, "They [the PYD] are controlling everything now with weapons."[28]

The PYD is also better organized than the KNC, a fact that works to its advantage in mobilizing supporters. The KNC must accommodate the interests of 15 different parties while making decisions; the PYD, as a single party, can execute tasks more quickly. PYD leader Saleh Muslim Mohammed has claimed that this is the reason why the PYD dominates the Syrian Kurdish areas, saying that, at checkpoints, "…there should be three of them and three of us, but some of them don't have people to send and then they say the PYD is not letting them share."[29]

It remains to be seen whether the Erbil Agreement established an effective framework for power-sharing among Syrian Kurds. Current evidence points to PYD domination through its significant local support, strong organization, and near-monopoly on armed force.

THE PYD: A FRONT, A PROXY, OR INDEPENDENT?

The PYD is the prevailing power in the Syrian Kurdish areas, and thus its actions significantly affect conditions

within Syria and the region. Yet it is unclear whether the PYD operates autonomously or at the behest of external entities. Evidence suggests that the PYD absorbs external influence only to a degree, and this degree of influence changes over time and as conditions shift. This is shown in the relationships of the PYD with three critical players: the Assad regime, the PKK, and the KNC.

The PYD and the Assad regime

The PYD has been routinely accused by both the SNC and KNC of being a proxy of the Assad regime, preventing the Kurds from joining the Syrian uprising in exchange for official favor. The Turkish government has also made this allegation, accusing the regime of using the PKK—via the PYD—to strike at Turkey in retaliation for Ankara's support of the Syrian opposition.[30] One basis of these accusations is the fact that the PYD gained control of Syria's Kurdish territories swiftly after the regime withdrawal, prompting SNC President Abdulbasset Sieda to say that "the Syrian regime has handed over the [Kurdish] area to the PKK or PYD. The areas where these Kurdish factions have raised their flags are those Bashar al-Assad gave them."[31]

After a car bombing in Gaziantep on August 20th, 2012, a Justice and Development Party (AKP) Member of Parliament fueled public speculation that the bombing was planned by Syrian intelligence and executed by the PKK.[32] There is, however, little solid evidence to suggest such close collaboration; in fact, Assad regime links to the Gaziantep bombing were played down by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.[33] Furthermore, there is no evidence that the PYD in any way sympathizes with the regime. More likely, the two are at times passive allies of convenience, joined by antipathy for the Arab opposition. By and large since the uprising began, the regime and the PYD have maintained a careful distance.

The historic relationship between the Assad regime and the PKK was more antagonistic. Although the regime sheltered Abdullah Ocalan in the 1990's, it also evicted him in 1998, leading to Ocalan's arrest the following year.

At the same time, Syria and Turkey signed the Adana Agreement, which reportedly contains a provision giving Turkey the right to carry out cross-border strikes against the PKK in northern Syria.[34] These actions did not endear the Syrian government to the PKK, nor to its PYD affiliate, which formed in 2003.

SALEH MUSLIM MOHAMMED

PYD figures, such as current leader Saleh Muslim Mohammed, spent considerable time inside Syrian prisons for anti-regime activities between 2003 and 2011.[35] The motivation and effective organization of the PYD posed a threat to the Assad regime, and prior to 2011, many PYD leaders had retreated to Iraq's Kurdistan Region with Syrian death sentences on their heads.[36]

In late 2011 and early 2012, some interests of the regime and the PYD appeared to converge on the ground. Syrian intelligence may have been involved in the assassinations of two Kurdish politicians who had been threatened by the PYD beforehand. In October 2011, Meshaal Tammo, leader of the pro-SNC Future Movement, was killed in Qamishli by Arabic-speaking men who had been parked outside in a vehicle resembling those often used by regime intelligence agents.[37] In February 2012, Nasruddin Birhik, a member of the Central Committee of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, was killed in a drive-by shooting from a vehicle bearing Latakia license plates, a common fixture of vehicles used by the intelligence services.[38] It is possible that regime intelligence carried out these assassinations to consolidate the PYD's influence in the Kurdish regions, considering the PYD to be a potential proxy. At the least, the assassinations rid both the regime and the PYD of mutual adversaries.

There have also been several reports prior to the regime withdrawal of PYD members harassing or attacking anti-regime protestors in Kurdish cities.[39] During their withdrawal, regime forces reportedly left stockpiles of arms and ammunition intact for PYD militias to claim, indirectly aiding the PYD in establishing control over the Kurdish areas.[40]

PYD leaders deny any ties with the regime however, and have declared their intent to resist any attempt by regime security forces to return to Syria's Kurdish areas. In an interview with a BBC reporter in mid-August 2012, PYD leader Saleh Mohammed said, "If they [regime forces]

try to reinforce here, of course we will resist them. Are we going to just wait for them to kill us?"[41] The PKK has echoed these statements. In early September, a Kurdish reporter with access to senior PKK figures in the Qandil Mountains was told during a visit there that, "If they [the Assad regime] attack our people, we will defend our people for sure. PYD and Kurds [in Syria] waited till the Assad regime became weaker, then they started the liberation of Kurdish territories."[42]

The PYD has thus far made good on its leader's pledge. In early September 2012, the PYD enforced a general strike of businesses in Qamishli, in protest of regime attempts to draft Kurdish youth into the Syrian Army.[43] Days later, regime artillery bombarded the PYD-controlled Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in Aleppo city, killing 21 Kurdish civilians and injuring many more.[44] The attack, whether deliberate or accidental, provoked a hostile response from the PYD. YPG militias attacked Syrian soldiers in Sheikh Maqsoud the next day, killing three, and forcibly evicted regime security forces from the Kurdish towns of Kobani, Derik, and Afrin within days.[45] The PYD also organized a mass anti-regime demonstration in Afrin the day after the bombardment, and it has since used the "Sheikh Maqsoud massacre" as a rallying cry for subsequent anti-regime protests in other Syrian Kurdish cities.[46]

PYD militias have also clashed with FSA forces; however, they have done so to protect their own turf, and not on behalf of the regime. At the end of September, the YPG clashed with one of the few Kurdish FSA battalions outside of Afrin after demanding the group's surrender. They also attacked both regime forces and rebels from the Tawhid Brigade in an attempt to drive both from the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood of Aleppo after the bombardment there.[47]

One Kurdish expatriate, with close ties to the PKK, voiced the idea that Kurds and Alawites in Syria could cooperate to resist domination by the Sunni Arab majority, which resonates with the theory that the Assad regime is trying to fragment the country as it consolidates to a coastal Alawite stronghold.[48] However, the Assad regime's withdrawal from Syria's Kurdish areas does not resemble such a regime contingency, but instead an operational decision forced by military necessity to consolidate forces in order to counter advances made by the Arab opposition.

Before its withdrawal in July 2012, the regime targeted Kurdish parties that were vociferously anti-Assad, such as the Future Movement, decapitating their leadership and damaging their structures.[49] It was therefore logical for the PYD to maintain a low profile and possibly to cooperate with Syrian intelligence until an opportunity arose to break with the weakened regime. The PYD's incentive to cooperate with the regime decreased substantially when the regime relinquished control over Syria's Kurdish areas. There is little reason to suppose that the PYD would cooperate with the Assad regime now that the military balance of power in the Kurdish areas has shifted in favor of Kurdish autonomy.

The fighting in September 2012 between the PYD and regime forces further indicates the two are not allied. The PYD is dominant in almost all of Syria's Kurdish areas and appears to be confident of its relative strength vis-à-vis the regime. Though regime forces remain in some locations outside Qamishli—notably the oil town of Tahtani and in the Al-Malikiyah Army Base outside of Derik—they do so at the mercy of the YPG. Near Tahtani, PYD members escorting an American journalist were able to breeze through a Syrian army checkpoint unchallenged.[50] Soldiers at the Malikiyah base are not able to move outside the post without PYD permission.[51] Only in Qamishli does the regime retain a substantial presence, though it is not able to prevent the protests that break out there on a weekly basis. It is doubtful that regime security forces would be able to hold the city if the PYD made a determined effort to wrest it from their control.

The PYD and the PKK

The nature of the relationship of the PYD to the PKK is disputed, in terms of the PYD's function as a PKK front, a PKK proxy, or an ideological ally. Evidence suggests that the PYD coordinates closely with the PKK at the leadership level, but that pressure from its rank-and-file membership is pushing the PYD towards becoming its own distinctly Syrian Kurdish party, a process which will accelerate if PKK actions become more clearly counterproductive to the interests of Syrian Kurds. The PKK itself remains primarily concerned with conducting attacks inside Turkey. Secondarily, it seeks to promote the PYD within Syria, both for its tactical and strategic advantage to the PKK.

KURDISH PARTIES & ORGANIZATIONS

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): Kurdish group founded in Turkey in the late 1970's by Abdullah Ocalan. Has been fighting a low-intensity insurgency and terror campaign against the Turkish state intermittently since 1984. Headquartered in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq.

Democratic Union Party (PYD): A Syrian Kurdish political party closely linked to the PKK. Founded in 2003 and currently led by Saleh Mohammed. Well-organized and well-armed. Effectively controls most of Syria's Kurdish areas. Claims to be opposed to the Assad regime but is also hostile to the Syrian National Council and Free Syrian Army.

People's Defense Units (YPG): A Kurdish militia that provides security in most of Syria's Kurdish areas. Controlled by the PYD, though some of its members claim to be independent of any political party.

The number of PKK attacks in Turkey sharply increased after a promising Turkey-PKK peace process broke down in July 2011, roughly the same time armed rebellion broke out in Syria.[52] Bahoz Erdal, a senior PKK commander and himself a Syrian Kurd, stated on October 15, 2012 that the PKK's escalation inside Turkey is not linked to events in Syria.[53] This claim, if true, would imply that the PKK decided to forego the opportunity to open a new Syrian front in its fight against the Turkish state.

The focus of PKK actions after the Assad regime's withdrawal from Syrian Kurdish territories has been in Turkey's south-easternmost provinces near the borders of Iraq and Iran, where most PKK attacks have historically taken place. In July 2012, Ankara launched a major offensive to retake the town of Semdinli, in Hakkari Province, Turkey, from the PKK.[54] Other PKK attacks, such as the kidnapping of a Turkish Member of Parliament in Tunceli province in August and the ambush of Turkish conscripts in Bingol province in September, took place deep inside Turkish territory.[55] A PKK presence in Syria's Kurdish areas would have had very little impact on the PKK's ability to carry out attacks in their traditional areas of operation.

However, the PKK could extend its operational reach into Turkey by expanding into Syrian Kurdish areas. Recently, two PKK attacks were carried out close to the Syrian border and outside the PKK's traditional area of operations. The first was an attack in early August 2012 on the district governor's residence in Erzin, a city in Hatay province along Syria's western border with Turkey and close to the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Afrin. Turkish authorities captured one of the perpetrators, who turned out to be a Syrian Kurd, albeit one who had joined the PKK in 2005.[56] A week later, a car bomb exploded in the city of Gaziantep, which is a major collection point for Syrian refugees. The PKK denied responsibility for the attack, but Turkish authorities claim to have collected sufficient evidence to implicate them; the PKK also has a history of denying responsibility for its more egregious attacks, only to claim them later.[57]

The PKK could gain substantial operational advantage by using Syrian territory to plan or stage attacks. The International Crisis Group has estimated that approximately one-third of the PKK's fighters are Syrian Kurds; therefore it would not be difficult for the PKK to operate among the Syrian Kurdish population.[58] There are also unconfirmed reports that Bahoz Erdal is currently based inside Syria.[59] Although the terrain of northern Syria is flat and thus vulnerable to Turkish attack, it could be used indirectly as a logistical route to support PKK operations or as a hideout for senior PKK leaders.

Officially, the PKK and PYD downplay their relationship. In early August 2012, acting PKK leader Murat Karayilan stated that his organization has no need for bases in Syria.[60] Senior PKK leaders in Qandil told a Kurdish reporter that, at the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the PKK "analyzed all the parties' policies," and decided to support the PYD because the PYD "put Kurdish national interests above everything."[61] PYD leader Saleh Mohammed said in an October 2012 interview that his party has only ideological

KURDISH PARTIES & ORGANIZATIONS

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG): The governing body of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region. Maintains its own armed forces, the peshmerga. Massoud Barzani is the current KRG President.

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP): Iraqi Kurdish political party formed in 1946. Currently led by Massoud Barzani. Governs Iraq's Kurdistan Region in conjunction with the Patriotic Union Party (PUK).

Kurdish National Council (KNC): An alliance of 15 Syrian Kurdish political parties formed in late 2011. Its constituent parties represent a variety of different ideologies and political positions, but are generally united in their support for the overthrow of the Assad regime and their demand for some degree of Syrian Kurdish autonomy. Maintains close ties to Barzani and the KRG.

Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC): A joint PYD-KNC council that nominally administers the Kurdish areas of Syria. Established in July 2012 by the Erbil Agreement between the KNC and PYD. Lacks real power to assert its authority.

ties to the PKK, and that "Turkey has nothing to do with Syrian Kurds."[62] These denials came soon after Prime Minister Erdogan's late-July threat to intervene militarily against the PKK in Syria.

The ideological ties between the PYD and PKK have been readily apparent in Syrian Kurdish areas. In mid-August 2012, the PYD organized demonstrations in several towns to commemorate the anniversary of the PKK's first armed attack on Turkish security forces on August 15, 1984, during which crowds chanted "The advancement of August 15th."[63] There have been several reports of PKK flags on display, as well as posters of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.[64] In a BBC video clip, graffiti spelling the acronym "PKK" can be clearly seen on the wall of an abandoned Syrian intelligence headquarters building.[65]

American journalist David Enders' relayed reports of as many as two thousand PKK fighters moving into northern Syria.[66] Enders received reports while travelling in Syria's Kurdish areas that Turkish Kurds had taken control of a border crossing to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[67] When Enders left Syria, crossing into Iraq near Faysh Khabur, he reported that PKK forces were present helping Syrian Kurdish refugees to cross the border.[68] This report suggests that the PKK enjoys unrestrained freedom of movement across Kurdish regions in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

This evidence would suggest that the relationship between the PYD and the PKK extends beyond ideological affinity, in that there is tactical cooperation within Syria that both parties are making only a half-hearted effort to disguise. The PYD nonetheless describes itself as a Syrian Kurdish party acting in the interests of Syrian Kurds, and it relies on a large local support base for control and legitimacy. Therefore, when the PKK appears to be prioritizing its own interests above those of Syrian Kurds, the PYD faces backlash from its own members, which will increase if PKK actions in Syria trigger Turkish military retaliation or squander the opportunity to secure long-term Kurdish rights in Syria by refusing to reach a genuine accommodation with the KNC. The PYD's official denial of operational links to the PKK thus serves a domestic purpose, as well as creating plausible deniability to make it difficult politically for Turkey to intervene in Syria's Kurdish areas.

The PYD and the KNC

The PYD exceeds the operational capacity of the KNC, as nearly all of the Kurdish militias in Syria fall under the control of the PYD. Despite this imbalance, the PYD

has made a number of attempts to include the KNC in the governance of Syria's Kurdish areas. So far these gestures have been more symbolic than substantial, and the PYD continues to wield and often abuse its security dominance. Yet internal pressure on the PYD could compel the party to continue these attempts at cooperation and perhaps eventually offer concrete concessions.

In mid-2011 the PYD joined with the other Syrian Kurdish parties under the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties. This group dissolved after the formation of the KNC in October 2011, however, and hostilities ensued between the KNC and the PYD. The PYD was possibly complicit in the regime assassination of Nasruddin Birhik, a ranking member of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria led by Abdulhakim Bashar, the first KNC president.[69] In late June 2012, a PYD contingent detained KNC vice president Mustafa Juma at a checkpoint outside Derik, held him for a day, and accused him of contacts with the Turkish government, which led Juma to fear that the PYD intended to assassinate him as well.[70] PYD intimidation and violent suppression of KNC protests were common in 2011 and early 2012 and likely encouraged by the Assad regime.


ABDULHAKIM BASHAR

After a series of unsuccessful attempts throughout early 2012, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani mediated a mid-July agreement between the KNC and PYD in Erbil. The Erbil Agreement obligates both parties to administer jointly Syria's Kurdish territories under a Kurdish Supreme Council, which contains equal representation from both KNC and PYD, to focus exclusively on the Syrian Kurdish areas, and to work to expel the Assad regime from those areas.[71]

The agreement was reached despite reported opposition from pro-PKK hardliners in the PYD, which suggests a willingness to compromise, at least in principle, in order to further the interests of Syrian Kurds, rather than those of the Turkish PKK or Iraqi KRG.

Much of the agreement has been implemented on the surface, but tensions persist while the PYD remains unquestionably dominant. PYD-controlled People's Councils currently administer Syria's Kurdish towns with YPG militias as their enforcers.[72] At the same time the KRG, which brokered the deal, called into question its own impartiality when it invited representatives from the SNC and KNC to meet Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu in Erbil in early August, failing to extend the invitation to the PYD.[73] Gestures such as this reveal a lack of interest on the part of the KRG and Turkey in genuine political partnership with the PYD.


BAHOZ ERDAL (FERMAN HUSSEIN)

Harassment and intimidation of KNC figures by the PYD continues regularly. Khairuddin Birhik, brother of the assassinated KNC politician, was stopped and detained for a day at a PYD checkpoint outside the town of Girke Lege in mid-September 2012.[74] In late August, the Amouda branch of the KNC formally suspended its cooperation with the local PYD, accusing the PYD of continually violating decisions made by the joint Kurdish Supreme Council.[75]

Despite these abuses, the PYD has not been able to act with complete impunity. In early September 2012, YPG militiamen raided the house of a teacher in Girke Lege and detained him, along with a local doctor, prompting a large protest organized by the Girke Lege Medical Committee. The PYD dispersed the protest, but released the detainees later that day.[76] Less than two weeks later, also in Girke Lege, the PYD attempted to commandeer a Yekiti Party member's car. Armed Yekiti members then stood guard around the man's home and faced down the PYD.[77] Later that month, Mahmoud Wali Babijani, a prominent politician of the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria, was assassinated in Sari Kani. The assassination provoked a mass demonstration in Dirbesi, where local youth swore that they "will not be intimidated," and that they would find the killers.[78] If the PYD is discovered to be behind the murder, it could face significant backlash in one of Syria's main Kurdish towns.

Abuses by the PYD have also been accompanied by displays of unity. In early August 2012, the KNC and PYD organized joint demonstrations in several towns under the slogan "Kurdish unity."[79] A few days later, they carried out a mass demonstration in Qamishli where local leaders marched arm-in-arm and supporters carried pictures of both Barzani and Ocalan.[80] These public events indicate that there is a strong expectation among Syrian Kurds, including PYD members, that the various factions work together to secure Syrian Kurdish rights. Despite its power and the backing of the PKK, the PYD leadership has been unable to completely ignore this expectation.

The PYD has been reluctant, however, to share its control of armed militias in the Syrian Kurdish areas. In late July 2012, Barzani announced that Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army had received further training in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and would be dispatched back to Syria to protect Kurds there from the Assad regime.[81] The PYD considered this move an attempt to provide an armed force for the KNC and thus blocked the entry of 650 of these defected soldiers at the Iraqi border.[82] While journalist David Enders was in Syria's Kurdish area in late August, he heard rumors of KNC-run militias around Afrin in northwestern Syria, but all of the armed Kurdish militias he encountered in Hasakah province were controlled by the PYD.[83] As of late November 2012 this status quo prevails, although a recent escalation of clashes with Arab rebels may have pressured the PYD into rethinking its stance on allowing the Kurdish defectors trained by the KRG back into Syria's Kurdish areas.[84]

In mid-September 2012, the Kurdish Supreme Council announced that it planned to establish a united military force for Syrian Kurds that would include supporters of both the PYD and KNC.[85] A week later, however, the YPG leadership announced that it was ending its cooperation with the Kurdish Supreme Council because the council had not publicly declared the YPG to be the legitimate defender of Syrian Kurds.[86] The next day, armed YPG members stormed the headquarters of three KNC parties in Girke Lege and warned those inside that only the YPG had the right to bear arms.[87] That crisis was defused when the YPG renewed cooperation at the end of September with the Kurdish Supreme Council in Sheikh Maqsoud and Kobani, despite its earlier declaration.[88] A new agreement for forming a joint military council for Syrian Kurds was in the works by late November 2012, mediated again by Barzani in Erbil.[89]

At the current juncture, the PYD has not proven willing to make the concrete concessions required to honor its agreements with the KNC. However, popular backlash against its more blatant abuses and a widespread desire for Syrian Kurdish unity has pressured the PYD enough for it to continue making conciliatory gestures towards its rival. It remains to be seen whether that pressure will affect a genuine rapprochement.

THE PYD, THE KURDS, AND THE REGION

The dominance of the PYD in Syria's Kurdish areas generates a tactical advantage to the PKK in its terrorist campaign against Turkey. The PKK may exploit its relationship with the PYD to launch attacks against the Turkish military from inside Syria. The PKK may also use Syrian terrain as a staging ground for terrorist attacks in southern or western Turkey, which would bring the fight closer to ethnic Turks in central Anatolia. Additionally, the PKK may exert control over the Kurdish parts of the Syria-Iraq border to smuggle arms to its main body in Qandil. This supply line could become key terrain if the Assad regime were to collapse and lose control of arms stockpiles, greatly increasing the likelihood that heavy weapons could make their way to the Kurds in northern Syria and thus over the border to the PKK.

The PKK has also cultivated relationships within Iran. Tehran had been fighting a low-intensity war against the Iranian wing of the PKK, known as the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), for years before the Syrian uprising began. In 2011 the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), launched a major offensive against PJAK.[90] In September 2011, after Iran and Turkey had decisively split over Syria, PJAK withdrew into Iraq's Kurdistan Region.[91] Iranian state TV announced that PJAK had surrendered to the Revolutionary Guard, but Turkish sources maintain that the PKK leadership recalled PJAK to its base in Qandil.[92] Either way, the conflict between Iran and PJAK dissipated as a result.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

1984 – PKK begins insurgency in Turkey.

1998 – Turkey threatens to invade Syria. Hafez Assad evicts Ocalan from Syria. Adana Agreement signed.

1999 – Ocalan arrested in Kenya, extradited to Turkey.

2003 – PYD founded by PKK sympathizers in Syria.

2004 – Riots in Qamishli forcibly suppressed by Assad regime.

2009 – Erdogan announces 'Democratic Opening' peace process for Turkish Kurds and the PKK.

March 2011 – Syrian uprising begins with peaceful protests.

June-July 2011 – Turkish elections. Ankara ends negotiations with PKK. Armed conflict breaks out in Syria.

September 2011 – PJAK (Iranian PKK offshoot) insurgents withdraw from Iran after IRGC offensive.

October 2011 – KNC formed. All Syrian Kurdish parties except for Future Movement withdraw from the Syrian National Council.

October 7, 2011 – Future Movement leader Meshaal Tammo assassinated by Assad regime after being threatened by the PYD.

July 2012 – Major Turkish offensive to reclaim the town of Semdinli, which was briefly seized by the PKK.

July 11, 2012 – PYD and KNC sign Erbil Agreement. Kurdish Supreme Council is formed.

July 18, 2012 – Bomb attack in Damascus kills several top Assad regime figures. Regime security forces begin withdrawal from Syrian Kurdish areas. PYD takes control of key installations.

July 22, 2012 – Barzani announces intent to train Kurdish Syrian Army defectors in Iraq's Kurdistan Region and dispatch them back to Syria's Kurdish areas. PYD opposes this move.

July 25, 2012 – Erdogan threatens to intervene militarily in Syria to clear out PKK.

August 12, 2012 – Turkish Deputy PM claims that PKK is using Iranian territory to launch attacks into Turkey.

In August 2012, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc claimed that the PKK had moved its own fighters into a camp in Iran vacated by PJAK, and had used that camp to launch an attempt to seize the southeastern Turkish town of Semdinli in July.[93] Iran denied the allegation; however, sources close to PKK leaders have alluded to an understanding between the organization and Tehran.[94] That claim has been echoed by captured PKK fighters in Turkey.[95] It is conceivable that Iran may attempt to use the PKK and its affiliates to counter Turkish interests in the region, which would put external pressure on the PYD to cooperate with the Assad regime.

Since the breakdown of PKK-Ankara peace talks in mid-2011, the PKK leadership appears resolved upon a violent course both within Turkey and elsewhere in the region. While the Syrian uprising has afforded a tactical advantage to the PKK, it also gives the PKK a symbolic opportunity to regain its relevance among regional Kurds. Presenting itself as the liberator of 'Western (Syrian) Kurdistan' gives the PKK a façade of Kurdish legitimacy as it pursues armed insurgency against Turkey. If the PKK stops fighting, it stands to lose its status as the Kurds' protector and the accompanying influence. At the same time, it also runs the danger of becoming a rebel without a cause. The PKK has already lost ground as a champion of the Kurdish cause since Abdullah Ocalan's capture to Massoud Barzani and the KRG, which has set an example of successful Kurdish autonomy.

The KRG is currently led by Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is a longtime rival of the PKK for influence over the wider Kurdish community. In the 1990's, the KDP unsuccessfully attempted to evict the PKK from northern Iraq by force of arms.[96] Under Barzani, the KRG has aligned with Turkey in order to box in its Kurdish rival and to gain diplomatic backing in its frequent disputes with Baghdad. The relationship appears solid. In the fall of 2012, Barzani personally attended the highly-publicized AKP congress while shunning that of the

Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), Turkey's main Kurdish party that often sympathizes with the PKK.[97] In August, Foreign Minister Davutoglu visited the disputed Iraqi city of Kirkuk to the fury of Baghdad.[98]

Syrian Kurds remain at the center of a greater Kurdish rivalry between the PKK and the KRG. The PKK is determined to take its struggle to Syria but the KRG is equally determined to counter it.

The KRG's vehicle for exerting influence in Syria's Kurdish areas is the KNC, and KRG strategy thus far has been to attempt to include the KNC in the administration of those territories through reconciliation with the PYD. This strategy is likely to continue, with Turkish encouragement and support. The KNC, despite internal divisions and the personal animosity of some of its leaders to the PYD, has little choice but to play along. Given the realities on the ground, where the PYD is armed and dominant, a strategy of reconciliation in the name of Syrian Kurdish unity has the best chance of succeeding, as it plays to the need of the PYD to maintain legitimacy among Syrian Kurds. The Erbil Agreement is the most important accomplishment of this approach to date, but much more remains to be done before the PYD accepts the KNC as an equal partner in governing Syria's Kurds.

The PYD will likely attempt to prolong its balancing act between Syrian Kurdish interests and those of the PKK. Despite their longstanding effort to develop secure bases to launch attacks into Turkey, prominent PKK leaders such as Ocalan and acting commander Murat Karayilan seem to recognize the need to maintain the PYD's Syrian Kurdish legitimacy and understand that Syrian Kurds will not be served by provoking Turkey into a military incursion into Syria's Kurdish areas.[99] Nonetheless, low-key PKK activity in Syria will likely continue to a degree that makes Turkey uncomfortable but does not justify the risk of unilateral Turkish intervention. To keep its own members happy, the PYD will likely continue to make symbolic concessions to the KNC in the spirit of unity but will try to ensure that it remains the dominant force on the ground, most likely by keeping the Kurdish Supreme Council ineffectual and KNC supporters unarmed.

CONCLUSION

The PYD is likely facilitating the PKK's interests in Syria, a role the PYD plays at the expense of its relationship with the KNC and the Syrian Kurdish population. The PYD is not clearly aligned with the Assad regime at this time, though its relationship with the PKK may draw the PYD into a fight against Turkey to the benefit of both the Assad regime and Iran. Syrian Kurdish public opinion may instead cause the PYD to act independently of the PKK and attempt to improve relations with the other Syrian Kurdish parties.

The PYD is unlikely to take any active role in the Syrian civil war at this time. Rather, the PYD will likely use force to defend the northern Kurdish areas and its enclaves in Aleppo and Damascus from all comers. It may also attempt to evict security forces from Qamishli. PYD supporters reportedly declared at a rally in Derik at the end of September that it is "time to liberate Qamishli."[100] If the PYD leadership decides to do so, it is unlikely that the regime will effectively resist.

On the other hand, if the PYD faces incursion by the Arab opposition, its interests could align more with those of the Assad regime. The rebel Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo threatened the YPG in Sheikh Maqsoud in early October 2012, telling the "PKK gangs to drop their weapons immediately."[101] Intermittent clashes between the YPG and FSA forces in Aleppo province have followed. In late November, activity by Nusrah Front jihadists in the mainly Kurdish town of Sari Kani (Ras al-Ayn) escalated sharply into a fight between the YPG and Arab rebels for control of the town, which was ended by a shaky truce.[102] If they sustain military pressure on the PYD, Arab rebel groups may incidentally also push the PYD further into alignment with the PKK by forcing the PYD to rely on PKK military strength for self-defense.

Turkey is unlikely to tolerate PYD dominance in the Syrian Kurdish areas so long as the PYD leadership remains aligned with the PKK. Should the Arab rebels prove unable or unwilling to take action against the PYD within a timeframe acceptable to Ankara, Turkey could invoke the Adana Agreement as a basis for establishing an

understanding with representatives of Syria's Sunni Arab majority that would allow Turkey to conduct cross-border strikes into Syrian Kurdish territory in a manner akin to what it currently does in the Qandil Mountains in Iraq.

The PYD may not be able to maintain its present balance if the PKK fails to exercise restraint in Syria. Hardliners within the PKK, such as Bahoz Erdal and Cemil Bayik, are reportedly gaining influence and may decide not to heed orders from Ocalan or Karayilan, instead sharply escalating PKK anti-Turkey activity within Syria.[103] Such an action could produce two reactions, which are not mutually exclusive: direct Turkish military action in the Kurdish areas of Syria, and a PYD break from the PKK. The first is self-evident: if faced with a spike in terrorist attacks like the Gaziantep bombing that appear to originate from Syria, Ankara could come under pressure to respond with force. The second would be caused by evident PKK disregard for Syrian Kurdish interests, which would be made clear if the former provoked Turkey into a reaction that harmed the life and property of Syrian Kurds.

If forced to choose between maintaining its loyalty to the PKK and keeping its Syrian Kurdish support, the PYD leadership is likely to prioritize Syrian Kurdish interests. In this case, reconciliation with the KNC and practical implementation of the Erbil Agreement would tangibly demonstrate their resolve. This would in turn positively affect the PYD's relations with the KRG and Turkey. By and large, the PKK is currently the master of its own destiny in Syria's Kurdish areas, but it will have to play its game carefully and intelligently to avoid a backlash that could sharply reverse its fortunes. The PYD may not prove to be as reliable of a proxy as the PKK would like. It has its own set of interests, which it will prioritize.

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