

KURDWATCH ● Report 9

What does the Syrian-Kurdish opposition want?

Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus and Qandil



KurdWatch is a project of the
European Center for Kurdish Studies
Emser Straße 26
12051 Berlin
Germany

Phone: +49 – 30 – 67 96 85 27
info@kurdwatch.org

© KurdWatch, September 2013

What does the Syrian-Kurdish opposition want?

Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus and Qandil

When the protests in Syria began in spring 2011, many observers assumed that the Kurds would play a key role in the overthrow of the regime. Although the Kurdish opposition was fragmented into more than a dozen political parties, it was the best-organized part of the Syrian opposition as a whole. Moreover, many recalled the images of mass protests in 2004, when rioting after a soccer game in al-Qamishli led to days of dissident protests in the Kurdish regions, as well as in Damascus, Aleppo, and other cities with a significant Kurdish population. In June 2011, when dissident protests were already putting considerable pressure on the Syrian regime, the chairmen of the Kurdish political parties were invited to official talks in the capital for the first time.¹ This invitation—which the parties ultimately rejected—was part of a »package of pro-Kurdish measures« that the Syrian government had been pursuing since the beginning of the protests. The measures included a decree to naturalize the registered stateless (*ajanib*), which was issued on April 7, 2011,² and the revocation on March 26, 2011 of Decree 49, which had impeded the transfer of lands in border regions.³ The fulfillment of two of the main demands of both the Kurdish parties and the population was not the result of successful negotiation, but rather must be understood as an attempt by the government to avert or at least minimize Kurdish participation in the protests. In fact, the Kurds have played only a minor part in the uprisings thus far. The following report analyzes the reasons for this. In addition, this report follows up on our previous report »Who is the

1 KurdWatch, June 11, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Parties refuse dialogue with Bashar al-Assad«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=1651&z=en>>.

2 KurdWatch, April 8, 2011, »Damascus: Registered stateless Kurds to be naturalized«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=1401&z=en>>.

3 KurdWatch, May 2, 2011, »Damascus: Decree 43 makes it easier to transfer land in border regions«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=1475&z=en>>.

Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish Parties, 1956–2011«⁴ published in December 2011, and sketches the developments since October 2011. As new oppositional actors have entered the political arena with the youth groups and the Kurdish units within the Free Syrian Army (FSA), this report employs a broader definition of the term »opposition«.

The youth groups: From initiators of the revolution to marginalized fringe group

As in 2004, it was not the political parties, but predominantly young people who supported the protests against the regime in the spring of 2011. At the beginning of the revolution, only the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (Şepêla Pêşrojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) publicly positioned itself on the side of the protestors.⁵ A split subsequently arose between the Future Movement and the other Kurdish parties: The Future Movement is the only party aside from the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK), that is not a part of the Kurdish National Council.

There is no sound evidence of organizational ties between the young people who were active in 2004/2005 and those who began organizing demonstrations in spring 2011. In fact, local coordinating committees in the Arab parts of the country were the model for the development of similar groups in the Kurdish regions.⁶ Initially these Kurdish committees discussed and shared the weekly demonstration slogans with their Arab allies.⁷ At the end of March 2012, however, Kurdish activists began using their own slogans—slogans that often made reference to specific Kurdish issues and had not previously been accepted as general slogans.⁸ Aside from the question of providing for specific Kurdish issues in the slogans, the use of religious mottos also became a point of contention. In the words of a Kurdish activist:

»Our revolution is committed to freedom and dignity. We no longer have sympathy for the fact that so many of the slogans that are designated as the main slogans have an Islamic context.«⁹

4 KurdWatch, December 2011, »Who is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? The development of Kurdish Parties, 1956–2011«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf> and <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en_2.pdf>.

5 In addition, some of the early youth activists were members of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê).

6 Interview mit 'Abdussalam 'Uthman, politician and activist, January 10, 2013.

7 KurdWatch, June 29, 2011, »Jan Qamishloki, Kurdish activist: »Most demonstrators do not pray««, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview1.html>>.

8 KurdWatch, April 7, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: For the first time, Kurdish activists demonstrate under their own slogan«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2497&z=en>>.

9 KurdWatch, May 16, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: Demonstrators criticize Islamic slogans«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2533&z=en>>.

In addition to the difficulties with the Arab opposition, the Kurdish parties played a significant role in the »Kurdification« of the protest discourse, as was also reflected in the progressive disappearance of the Syrian independence flag of 1932—the symbol of the Syrian revolution—at demonstrations in cities like al-Qamishli. From the beginning, most party representatives were not really interested in the protests and distanced themselves from the Arab opposition, especially from the part that advocated for an overthrow of the regime. For example, party members were critical that »the Arabs« had abandoned the Kurds in their fight against the Syrian regime in 2004, and thus they saw no reason to support the »Arab revolution« now.

Initially local coordinating committees and youth groups were very attractive to young people, but over the past two years, their influence has gradually diminished. One reason for this is that it is difficult to continually develop activities given the scarcity of resources, limited support from the outside, and scant organizational skills. Another aspect seems to be even more important, as the activist ‘Abdussalam ‘Uthman explains in an interview:

»The coordinating groups were initially very popular. After a while their popularity decreased. The people saw that the coordinating groups were behaving more and more like our parties. At the moment they are very weak; they cannot change society.«¹⁰

Indeed, many of the early youth groups have disbanded; others have split or have merged together only to split again shortly thereafter. Currently, there are only a few independent youth groups, and most have close ties to one of the Kurdish parties.¹¹

The Kurdish National Council, which was founded in October 2011 and currently unites all of the Kurdish parties except the Future Movement and the PYD, also includes representatives of various youth groups (as well as representatives of women’s groups and independent figures). These new actors were not able to significantly influence the council’s politics, but instead they have been assimilated and marginalized by the parties. Representatives from four youth groups did

10 KurdWatch, December 25, 2012: »‘Abdussalam ‘Uthman, politician and activist: ›Khabat Derki kidnapped me, he held a gun to my head‹«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2719&z=en>.

11 When the policymakers within these parties realized that the youth groups were gaining more and more supporters, they founded their own youth organizations; see also Adib Abdulmajid, »Kurdish youth forces in Syria accuse parties of squeezing them out«, *Rûdaw*, January 14, 2013, <<http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5656.html>>.

not participate in the Kurdish National Council's second conference (January 10 and 11, 2012), because the quota for the youth groups had been lowered from thirty to fifteen percent. Moreover, the parties have been accused of favoring party-affiliated youth groups over independent youth groups in order to create additional seats for the parties.¹² The extent to which the representatives of the youth groups have been dominated and manipulated by the parties became clear in February 2013 during preparations for the youth conference, the body that elects youth group representatives to the Kurdish National Council. The conference was not arranged by representatives of the youth groups, but by a committee dominated by the »old guard« of the parties. The members included Isma'il Hami, Secretary of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, Yekîti for short), and Faysal Yusuf, former chairman of the Kurdish National Council. Not surprisingly, the youth representatives elected had close ties to political parties, especially to the Yekîti, both wings of the Azadî, and 'Abdulkhakim Bashar's Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)].

Yet in cities like al-Qamishli, 'Amudah, 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobanî), and ad-Darbasiyah, young people can be observed joining forces in groups united by common interests and goals, not by party affiliation. Youth and community centers focusing on education, culture, politics, and human rights and built upon on the work of volunteers have arisen and are enjoying great popularity. Even if some of the activists have close ties to political parties, their clientele is not restricted to this target group. This all suggests that there is a generation of young people who are becoming active outside of deadlocked party structures and schemes and who want to assume responsibility at a local level. To date, however, this group remains too small to be able to exert a lasting influence on Kurdish society.

From the outset, the situation in 'Afrin has looked somewhat different. Here the PYD allowed the newly established youth groups no room to develop. Young people who wanted to organize themselves and carry out dissident demonstrations have been intimidated, threat-

12 KurdWatch, January 24, 2013: »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish National Council newly elected«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2740&z=en>>.

ened, kidnapped, and killed. The situation is similar in al-Malikiyah (Dêrik) where the PYD is also strong.¹³

The parties of the Kurdish National Council: Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Qandil

The Kurdish National Council was founded in October 2011 with the goals of profiting from the popularity of the youth groups, unifying the Kurdish political parties programmatically,¹⁴ and more effectively representing Kurdish demands. Thus far, none of these goals has been realized.

As explained above, although the parties have managed to assimilate the youth groups, this has not led to an increase in popularity or legitimacy, but only to the suppression of potential rivals.

Programmatically, the Kurdish National Council has hardly anything new to offer. Ideas for the political future of the Kurds in a Syria post-al-Assad are nothing more than buzzwords. With regard to a solution to the Kurdish issue, the Kurdish National Council's first declaration on October 26, 2011 stated:

»The conference was of the opinion that the Kurdish people are an original component of Syria. They are living on their historic, ancestral land and represent a crucial part of the national fabric of peoples in Syria. This makes both the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people as an essential part of the Syrian people and as the second largest ethnicity necessary, a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish question that secures the people's right to self-determination within a still-existing Syrian nation-state. Further the conference was of the opinion that a solution to the Kurdish question represents, on the one hand, the beginning of true democracy and, on the other hand, a test for the Syrian opposition, which is striving for a better future for Syria on the basis of the principle that Syria belongs to all Syrians.«¹⁵

In April, the Kurdish National Council formulated a new political program that differs from the original program in that it no longer explicitly calls for the right of self-determination for the Kurds and for political decentral-

13 See, for example, KurdWatch, February 8, 2012, »'Afrin/al-Qamishli: PYD sympathizers attack demonstrators in 'Afrin and al-Qamishli«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2449&z=en>>; KurdWatch, December 30, 2012, »'Ayn al-'Arab: PYD abducts activists«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2724&z=en>>.

14 Previously there were numerous short-lived coalitions of Kurdish political parties; see also KurdWatch, December 2011, »Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956–2011«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf>, 19–21.

15 See »Closing Statement of the Kurdish Patriotic Conference in Syria«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_D029_en_ar.pdf>.

ization. Isma‘il Hami, secretary of the Yekîti and member of the Kurdish National Council, emphasized in a press release that the demand for self-determination nevertheless remains a part of the program. According to Hami, this demand is echoed in the call to seek the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people and its national identity, as well as the call for the recognition of the Kurdish language as an official language and the recognition of the legitimate national rights of the Kurdish people in accordance with international norms and conventions.¹⁶ Finally, in December 2012, Faysal Yusuf, then chairman of the Kurdish National Council, summarized the Kurdish demands as follows:

»Our requirements are the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people and its identity as well as the guarantee of its legitimate national rights in accordance with international norms and conventions. In addition, in accordance with its share of the total population of Syria, the Kurds should have approximately a fifteen percent share of representation in the Coalition [for more on this body, see below] and its committees. All discriminatory practices and decrees affecting the Kurds must be repealed, the victims must be compensated, and the status quo ante must be reinstated. Moreover, Syria should officially be called the ›Republic of Syria‹, not the ›Syrian Arab Republic‹. Furthermore, we demand that the Coalition commit itself to supporting all national armed groups, not only the Free Syrian Army.«¹⁷

With regard to its stance toward the Syrian revolution and an overthrow of the regime, there are two factions in the Kurdish National Council on these issues. One wants to support the revolution more clearly. The most important representatives of this faction are the Yekîti, both factions of the Azadî, and ‘Abdulkhakar Bashar’s el-Partî. These parties, which were united in the Kurdish Democratic Political Union—Syria (Yekîtiya Siyasî ya Demokrata Kurd—Sûriyê), founded on December 15, 2012, have close ties to Mas‘ud Barzani’s Iraqi-Kurdish Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).¹⁸ The KDP-Iraq supports—if cautiously—the Syrian revolution. The second faction consists primarily of

16 KurdWatch, May 2, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish National Council drafts new political program«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2519&z=en>>.

17 KurdWatch, December 28, 2012, »Faysal Yusuf, Chairman of the Kurdish National Council: ›Sometimes things are demanded of the Council that only a government could accomplish‹«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2721&z=en>.

18 KurdWatch, January 7, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Democratic Political Union—Syria established«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2727&z=en>>.

The Yekîti has since left the group; see KurdWatch, July 2, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: Yekîti leaves Political Union«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2871&z=en>>.

The reason for this was allegedly that, in their opinion, in contrast to ‘Abdulkhakar Bashar’s el-Partî, they did not receive sufficient financial support from the KDP-Iraq.

‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish’s Kurdish Advancement Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) and Muhiyuddin Shaykh Ali’s Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Yekîti) [Partiya Yekîti ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Yekîti)]. The Advancement Party maintains close ties to Jalal Talabani’s Iraqi-Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which has been hesitant about the Syrian revolution thus far. For its part, the Democratic Yekîti, which is largely strong in ‘Afrin, traditionally has good relations with the PYD and its mother party, the PKK. This faction rejects closer cooperation with those parts of the Syrian opposition that clearly advocate an overthrow of the regime. This discord contributed significantly to the fact that the Kurdish National Council has never been a member of the Syrian National Council, and only in September 2013 decided to join what currently is the most important oppositional alliance, the National Coalition, founded on November 11, 2012. This decision seems to be motivated by the consideration that after a (at that point of time likely) U.S. military strike the Syrian opposition, and the FSA respectively, might win the upper hand and that in this case it would be a mistake not to be part of this opposition.

At the end of May 2013 the Kurdish National Council had still declined an invitation by the National Coalition to take part in its meeting in Istanbul, where a decision was to be made to expand the coalition’s personnel. The official explanation was that the content was to be negotiated before discussing concrete seats. In fact, the Kurdish National Council was in no position to make a joint decision to this effect. Originally Kamiran Hajo, European representative of ‘Abdulhakim Bashar’s el-Partî, was to participate as the representative of the Kurdish Democratic Political Union—Syria. Shortly before the beginning of the talks, his participation in the event was called off.¹⁹ Perhaps the Political Union feared that going it alone could lead to the collapse of the fragile Kurdish National Council. Two representatives of Mustafa Jum‘ah’s Azadî and a member of the Kurdistan Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîtiya Kurdistanî li Sûriyê) were present in Istanbul, but they had no mandate to negotiate in the name of other par-

19 Telephone conversation with Kamiran Hajo, May 28, 2013.

ties or even in the name of the Kurdish National Council. Bassam ‘Abdullah, member of the Syrian National Council and the Future Movement:

»The members of the Azadî have claimed to speak in the name of the Kurdish National Council, however, the National Council has not confirmed this. In fact, the Yekîti has released a statement that the Azadî members do not represent it. The Kurds are not officially present in Istanbul. The only party that clearly expressed interest in becoming a member of the National Council was not considered.«²⁰

Indeed, the Future Movement was for some time the only Syrian-Kurdish party that unequivocally advocated for stronger cooperation with the National Coalition—a position that enjoyed little popularity among the Kurdish population, where a strengthening of Kurdish nationalist positions is rather evident. The fact that the Future Movement does not have close ties to either the Iraqi-Kurdish parties KDP and PUK, or the PKK also means that it does not receive any financial subsidies from these sides. This significantly limits its opportunities to do political work, and according to statements from a member of the European organization, is leading to a decline in membership.²¹

Aside from the political disagreement within the Kurdish National Council, over the past two years there has also been a continued tendency of splits within individual parties. Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, three parties of the Kurdish National Council have split: the Azadî,²² the Kurdish Left Party in Syria (Partiya Çep a Kurdî li Sûriyê)²³ and ‘Abdurrahman Aluji’s Kurdish Democratic Party—Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî—Sûrî).²⁴ In all three cases, the split can be traced back to personal disputes. In Aluji’s party, the disputes concerned the successor of the deceased party leader. On the other hand, both factions of the Azadî are members in the Kurdish Democratic Political Union—Syria and do not follow any discernibly different political goals. And in the case of the Left party, even Salih Gado, chairman of the Kurdish Left Party in Syria (Central Committee)²⁵ ultimately admitted that »organizational differences of opinion« were among the reasons for the split.²⁶

20 Interview with Bassam ‘Abdullah, member of the Syrian National Council and the Future Movement, Berlin, May 31, 2013.

21 Interview with a member of the European organization of the Future Movement, Berlin, June 8, 2013.

22 KurdWatch, November 7, 2011, »Aleppo: The Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Azadî) divided«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2170&z=en>>.

23 KurdWatch, April 16, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Left Party in Syria splits«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2505&z=en>>.

24 KurdWatch, November 7, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: Aluji’s party has split«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2685&z=en>>.

25 The other faction bears the addendum »Congress«.

26 KurdWatch, April 18, 2012, »Salih Gado, member of the politburo of the Kurdish Left Party in Syria: »Some Kurdish parties are coming up with lots of excuses to avoid joining the Syrian National Council. The truth is they are still afraid of the regime««, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2504&z=en>.

Another party currently affected by internal disputes is the Democratic Yekîî. Though Muhiyuddin Shaykh Ali was again elected party secretary at the last party congress, which took place from April 30 to May 1, 2013, there is criticism that he was only re-elected because the party congress took place in 'Afrin. According to critics, he actually has fewer supporters than the al-Qamishli/al-Jazirah wing of the party. Representatives of this wing also accuse him of having cooperated with the regime for years and of effectively implementing PYD policies since the revolution. Ali is also accused of manipulating the political principles of the program that was adopted at the party congress. Allegedly the closing statement called for the fall of the regime, but the published version speaks only of an end to the rule of the security apparatus.²⁷ As a result of the conflict, one group of members announced its withdrawal from the party in early May.²⁸ The differing positions on the PYD, the regime, and the Syrian opposition, which incapacitate the Kurdish National Council, thus also lead to conflicts within individual parties.

The PYD: Between strategic alliance with the regime and the consolidation of its own power

The third and most important actor in the Kurdish regions is currently the Democratic Union Party (PYD), founded in 2003. After the deportation of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in October 1998,²⁹ numerous high-ranking PKK cadres were successively extradited to Turkey and PKK supporters in Syria were arrested and detained long-term. The PYD was established in order to further bind PKK members and sympathizers living in Syria to the party. At the same time, the new party's founding was intended to help evade state repression. The latter was hardly successful: Until the beginning of the protests in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the most prisoners, its members were also, as a rule, sentenced to longer prison terms than the members of other parties and were systematically subjected to torture. Since then, the balance of power has shifted in favor of the PYD, and the PYD/PKK has once again entered a strategic alliance with the Syrian government.

27 For more accusations against Ali, see KurdWatch, April 25, 2013, »'Afrin: Democratic Yekîî re-elects Muhiyuddin Shaykh Ali as Secretary«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2814&z=en>>.

28 KurdWatch, May 14, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: Democratic Yekîî threatens split«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2829&z=en>>.

29 For more on cooperation between the PKK and the Syrian regime in the 1980s and 1990s, see Savelsberg & Tejel 2013: 192–195.

The Iraqi president and chairman of the PUK allegedly played a key role in initiating contact between the Syrian government, the PKK, and, as a third partner, the Iranian government.³⁰ During Saddam Hussein's rule, Talabani spent many years in asylum in Damascus—his good relations with the al-Assad family stem from this time. There are also no reservations regarding the Iranian government and the PKK: During the intra-Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s in Iraq, both supported the PUK against its (then) political opponent, Mas'ud Barzani's KDP. Against this background, Talabani was able to negotiate the following deal: In September 2011, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), the Iranian arm of the PKK, ended its armed fight against Iran. This was not only in the interest of Iran, but also in the interest of the PUK, as armed attacks by the PJAK regularly led to Iranian retaliation on PUK-controlled Iraqi territory. At about the same time, the PYD in Syria was reinvigorated. According to information from various activists, as many as two hundred PKK militiamen from Turkey and Iraq as well as weapons of Iranian origin were smuggled into Syria at that time. Thus armed, the PYD began to prevent the Kurdish population from effectively participating in the revolution.

The Syrian government clearly profited from this arrangement as its own security forces did not need to take action against the Kurdish population. It could thus avert a situation in which massive violence would prompt the Kurdish political parties to abandon their wait-and-see approach to the Syrian revolution. At the same time, the government could focus its powers on the main centers of uprising. In addition, any weakening of the Syrian revolution is also in the interest of Iran: The fall of the Ba'th regime and the potential for (extremist) Sunnis in Syria to seize power would mean the loss of an important regional ally for Iran and would impede direct access to Hizbullah in Lebanon.

The PYD and its militia, the People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), currently exercise state-like power in Syria's Kurdish regions. They have erected numerous checkpoints and control vast swaths of land along the border to Turkey and Iraq. They charge taxes on gasoline as well as border fees.³¹ The Syrian

30 A PUK member in Berlin confirmed that Talabani facilitated contact between the PKK/PYD, the Iranian regime, and the Syrian government; private conversation, Berlin, December 2012.

31 KurdWatch, July 3, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: PYD controls cross-border smuggling«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2572&z=en>>; KurdWatch, June 12, 2012, »Al-Qamishli: Further demonstrations—for the first time, the PYD constructs check points in al-Qamishli«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2555&z=en>>.

regime has ceded the administration of a growing number of cities and villages to the PYD. The fact that all of these cities were taken over by the PYD without notable armed conflicts, points to agreements—whether official or unofficial—between the PYD/PKK and the Syrian regime.³² At the time this report was completed (in the first half of September 2013), the PYD controlled most cities in the province of al-Hasakah with the exception of al-Qamishli and al-Hasakah, the two largest and strategically most important cities. ‘Afrin and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab (Kobani) are also under PYD control. State employees have remained in their positions. They also continue to receive their salaries from the government, but are supervised by PYD members assigned to the individual agencies. In addition, the PYD has established its own courts, parallel to the state judicial system; however, the judicial basis on which they operate is unclear. The qualifications of the appointed judges are highly questionable. In al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipî) and ad-Darbasiyah, for example, judges with only an elementary education were appointed. Party loyalty is the decisive factor in determining appointments.³³

On the one hand, the PYD’s basic financial position as a branch of the PKK is already considerably better than that of all other parties; on the other hand, the PYD knows how to economically use its control over vast parts of Syria’s Kurdish regions: Customs duties and protection money, for example for the military protection of the oil fields in Rumaylan,³⁴ guarantee high revenues for the PYD. These revenues are a significant reason why controlling the Syrian-Kurdish regions is attractive for the PYD or rather the PKK. Another reason is that the border region to Turkey can be used not only as a refuge, but also as a place for recruiting and training new fighters.

The International Crisis Group’s report from January 2013 asks why the regime would have an interest in ceding control of vast areas to the PYD thus publicly displaying weakness and giving the impression that additional regions, which have remained quiet thus far, are slipping from the government’s grasp.³⁵ For one, Syria is once again playing its »Kurdish card« against Turkey. In the summer of 2011, the ruling Justice and Development

32 See, for example, KurdWatch, December 1, 2012, »‘Amudah/ad-Darbasiyah: Syrian regime cedes additional cities to the PYD«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2702&z=en>>.

33 Telephone conversation with an activist from ad-Darbasiyah, June 3, 2013; conversation with an acquaintance of the judge appointed in al-Qahtaniyah, Berlin, June 2, 2013. The cooperation between the Syrian regime and the PYD also includes military support. An activist with close contacts to the YPG stated to KurdWatch that in early 2013, Syrian army helicopters openly supported the YPG with weapons against the FSA; telephone conversation with an activist from al-Qamishli, January 31, 2013.

34 Negotiations between the PKK and representatives of the regime, including the head of the Political Security Directorate in al-Hasakah, preceded the takeover of the oil field; see KurdWatch, June 8, 2013, »Rumaylan: PKK and Syrian regime cooperate in Rumaylan«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2849&z=en>>.

35 ICG 2013: 16.

Party (AKP) deeply upset the Syrian regime when it positioned itself on the side of the Syrian opposition. Like his father, Bashar al-Assad also utilizes the PKK to put pressure on Turkey. The AKP can neither politically nor militarily afford to let the PKK/PYD permanently establish itself in Syria's Kurdish regions. At the same time it is not in the AKP's interest to resolve the conflict militarily. A Turkish invasion of Syria would allow the PKK and its Kurdish critics to close ranks and would also seriously disrupt the peace process that has just begun in Turkey.

Since the Free Syrian Army (FSA) began operating in the Kurdish regions, the transfer of control to the PYD offers the Syrian government another advantage: Instead of government troops, the PYD provides the armed response to the FSA there. The PYD, in turn, profits from the fact that Islamist groups such as the Jabhat an-Nusrah fight alongside the FSA. In January 2013, many of the parties represented in the Kurdish National Council expressed their willingness to support the YPG in acting against the Jabhat an-Nusrah.³⁶

Ultimately the Syrian regime may also willingly cede control to the PYD because it assumes that this control will be comparatively easy to regain, should the government survive the protests and the civil war politically. When PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was deported from Syria in 1998 and the PKK lost its bases in Syria and in Lebanon, the PKK responded with neither protests nor (armed) attacks against the Syrian government.

The PYD itself denies any cooperation with the Syrian regime. In an interview with KurdWatch, Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD, stated:

»Since September 17, 2011, the PYD has called for the fall of the regime and all of its related symbols. [...] We have [...] always said that we are not a Shababiah, and not a tool in the hands of anyone against anyone else. We are free and independent, and we pursue our own strategy.«³⁷

In fact, the PYD cannot afford to openly admit that it is cooperating with a regime that enjoys very little sympathy among the Kurdish population.

The PYD's commitment to the Syrian regime is of an entirely strategic nature. If in the first year of the revo-

36 KurdWatch, January 26, 2013, »Ra's al-'Ayn: Fighting again between FSA and YPG«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2742&z=en>>.

37 KurdWatch, June 4, 2013, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: ›We are free and independent, and we are pursuing our own strategy‹«, <http://kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2846&z=en>.

lution the PYD prevented dissident protests primarily to »unburden« the regime, in recent months, consolidating its own supremacy has become increasingly important. In Syria's Kurdish regions, the PYD is laying claim to the role of state power. This is also evident in an interview with KurdWatch where Salih Muslim Muhammad was critical of the fact that participants in Kurdish National Council demonstrations were armed. In contrast, the arming of its own security service (Asayiş) is seen as self-evident and is justified by the fact that Asayiş supposedly act independently of the parties.³⁸

In addition to its cooperation with the regime, the PYD must also deny that it is a branch of the PKK. The PKK is still considered by various states to be »terrorist« or at least »criminal«, and is banned. Both the PYD and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (Encûmena Gel ya Rojavayê Kurdistanê), a PKK body with PYD participation that is also active in Syria, figure they have better chances of being internationally recognized if they deny their close organizational ties to the PKK.

Though the ideological agreement between the PYD and PKK is clear—as reflected, for example, in the numerous slogans demanding the release of Öcalan or referring to the PKK's armed struggle in Turkey that PYD supporters chanted during the Friday demonstrations—no clear chain of command can be traced from the PYD leadership to the PKK leadership in the Iraqi Qandil Mountains. At the same time, the close organizational and personal ties between the PYD, the People's Council of Western Kurdistan, and the PKK are obvious. For example, the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), which was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 2005 and is now controlled by PKK leadership in the Qandil Mountains, had a Syrian branch, the KCK-Rojava. This branch was disbanded on July 7, 2011. The same day, the formation of the Democratic Society Movement of Western Kurdistan (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk a Rojavayê Kurdistan, TEV-DEM) was announced. The PYD is a member of both TEV-DEM and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan. At its first conference on December 16, 2011, the People's Council not only adopted its own charter, it also adopted the TEV-DEM charter.³⁹

38 KurdWatch, June 4, 2013, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: ›We are free and independent, and we are pursuing our own strategy‹, <http://kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2846&z=en>; see also ICG 2013: 15.

39 See the declaration of the People's Council of Western Kurdistan at <<http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/the-declaration-of-the-peoples-council-in-western-kurdistan>>; see also Tanir, van Wilgenburg & Hossino 2012: 9.

This branched system of organizations, parties, and federations, which is intended to suggest the democratic inclusion of various social groups, must not disguise the fact that decisions are ultimately made at the PKK headquarters in the Qandil Mountains or in İmralı.

The decisions made there are implemented in Syria by PKK cadres; this is clearly reflected in the PYD's »personnel«. Its chairman Salih Muslim Muhammad is not the only PKK member in the leadership ranks. The power to make military and political decisions within the PYD and YPG rests largely in the hands of PKK commanders who were detailed to Syria. Noteworthy examples include Nazir Hajji Mansur, territorial authority for the Jazirah; Jamshid 'Uthman, Kurd from Iran and military authority for the Jazirah and Tall Abyad; Haval Kamal, military authority for 'Afrin; Zuhaf Kobani, responsible for diplomatic relations in Europe; Nawaf Khalil, European authority based in Brussels. A further example of the personnel shared between the PKK and the PYD/YPG is Shahin Jallo, supreme commander of all military units in Syria; for years he was the PKK authority for Europe and a member of the PKK's Central Committee. The PKK functionary 'Umar Husayn 'Alush is currently the political authority for the region of 'Ayn al-'Arab. Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, all military authorities for the region of 'Ayn al-'Arab (a total of four) were Kurds from Turkey and PKK members; currently a Turkish Kurd named Shiyar holds this position. He, too, was once a PKK commander. With Aldar Khalil and Ilhan Ahmad, a former PKK fighter and a former member of the KCK hold further high positions within the PYD. Both are PYD representatives in the Supreme Kurdish Committee, a union consisting of the People's Council of Western Kurdistan and the Kurdish National Council. Finally, the current speaker of the YPG, Redur Khalil, fought for the PKK for a decade.⁴⁰

The strength of the PYD compared to all of the other parties in Syria's Kurdish regions is due to the fact that it has a core of militarily well-trained cadres and commands enough resources to get potential sympathizers to commit to it long term. The number of armed PYD members is estimated at ten to twenty thousand.⁴¹ Other Kurdish parties, for example the Yekîti or the Azadî, have only several dozen fighters.⁴² They are not

40 Interview with 'Akif Hasan, former PYD authority for diplomatic questions in Europe, June 13, 2013; information from 'Abdussalam 'Uthman, politician and activist, July 26, 2013; information from a previous commander of the PKK who left the PKK in 2013, August 27, 2013.

41 Kurd Press, July 26, 2013, »6 Kurds killed in clash with al-Nusra«, <<http://www.kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=4984>>.

42 This militarization of the Kurdish conflict in Syria is a new phenomenon: Over the course of the Syrian revolution, Syrian-Kurdish parties have begun to form armed units for the first time.

in a position to prevent the PYD with its YPG militia-men from kidnapping, interrogating, torturing, and even killing members of the parties of the Kurdish National Council at will.⁴³

On June 27, 2013, the largest PYD attack to date took place in ‘Amudah: When demonstrators demanded the release of activists kidnapped by the YPG⁴⁴, threw stones at YPG vehicles, and berated the YPG as »Shabbihah« (a militia loyal to the regime), YPG fighters began firing into the crowd. At least eight people were killed, including an eight-year-old child who was run over by a YPG vehicle. YPG fighters erected checkpoints in the city and carried out raids; several dozen people were abducted. Moreover, the YPG closed off the city and prevented doctors from al-Qamishli from treating the injured in ‘Amudah. A curfew was also imposed. Aras Ahmad Bango, an armed guard for the Yekîti party office, was killed by a gunshot to the head on the roof of the party office. YPG fighters then stormed the party office and brought all those present—between fifty and seventy people, mostly party supporters—under its control. All of the office equipment was destroyed. In addition, the party office of Mustafa Jum‘ah’s Azadî and the hunger strikers’ tent⁴⁵ in the center of ‘Amudah were burned down. In order to prevent the funeral marches for those killed from turning into mass demonstrations against the PYD, the relatives of the deceased were forced to bury them with only the immediate family present.⁴⁶ For the first time since the beginning of the protests in the Kurdish regions in the spring of 2011, there were no dissident demonstrations in ‘Amudah on the Friday after the attacks. With the exception of al-Qamishli, the youth movements also canceled their protests in other Kurdish cities. Officially this was to protect social peace and prevent intra-Kurdish bloodshed, but in fact, it was out of fear. Following the protests, Salih Muslim Muhammad termed collaboration with the Cooperation of the Youth of ‘Amudah treason, and members of the youth movement were kidnapped.⁴⁷ The attack in ‘Amudah not only put an end to the cautious attempts to denounce PYD politics at demonstrations and protest against them with a hunger strike,

- 43** For examples of more recent cases, see KurdWatch, June 6, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: Asayiş interrogates activists«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2848&z=en>>; KurdWatch, May 23, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: YPG kidnaps sixty-seven members of el-Partî«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2837&z=en>>; KurdWatch, May 20, 2013, »Tall Ma‘ruf: PYD’s Asayiş kidnap member of the Yekîti«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2833&z=en>>; KurdWatch, May 22, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: PYD’s Asayiş kidnap activist«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2834&z=en>>; KurdWatch, May 22, 2013, »Ra’s al-‘Ayn: PYD’s Asayiş kidnap student«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2835&z=en>>; KurdWatch, March 21, 2013, »Raju: One dead and several kidnapped following YPG attack«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2786&z=en>>.
- 44** KurdWatch, June 20, 2013, »‘Amudah: YPG kidnaps activists«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2859&z=en>>.
- 45** KurdWatch, June 27, 2013, »‘Amudah: Hunger strike against PYD attacks«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2866&z=en>>.
- 46** KurdWatch, July 3, 2013: »‘Amudah: Situation escalates following YPG attack on demonstration«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2873&z=en>>. Various institutions were also attacked

but the PYD was also able to end the political activities of other groups. At the time of the completion of this report in the first half of September 2013, there were no more dissident demonstrations taking place in the Kurdish regions. To describe these totalitarian policies as »democratic self-governing«, as collective self-administration from below, based on the organization of the people in civil institutions,⁴⁸ twists the PYD's true actions.

Further inconsistencies in PYD policies become clear when considering its publication of a draft of a constitution, the »Social Contract for Western Kurdistan« in July 2013. Although the document emphasizes that Syria is considered a completely sovereign state, and the self-administered regions (»Western Kurdistan«—not further defined) are geographically and administratively an integrated component thereof, the sovereign powers granted to the self-administered region are more reminiscent of statehood than of self-administration within a Syrian state. For example, a total of twenty-one ministries are planned, including the ministries of Justice, Interior, and Defense—only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is missing. The relationship between the central power and the autonomous region is in no way specified; the respective responsibilities and spheres of authority remain entirely unclear.⁴⁹ The fact that 'Amr Ose, a representative in the Syrian parliament and secretary of the regime-affiliated »National Initiative for the Syrian Kurds«, denied PYD plans to split off the Kurdish regions and stated that the recommendations »did not extend beyond establishing a temporary administration until the end of the crisis«,⁵⁰ further suggests that the constitution was coordinated with the Syrian government. Regardless, the draft of the constitution stands in direct contradiction to the position expressed by PYD chairman Salih Muslim Muhammad in November 2011, that the PYD rejects classic models like »federalism, confederalism, self-government, and autonomy«. ⁵¹ However, it is unclear as to what extent the draft constitution is still relevant after the People's Council of Western Kurdistan and the Kurdish National Council adopted a nine-point plan on September 8—one that foresees the implementation of

in al-Qamishli; see KurdWatch, July 5, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: PYD attacks civic institutions and el-Partî offices«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2875&z=en>>.

47 KurdWatch, July 18, 2013, »'Amudah: PYD's security service kidnaps activist«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2885&z=en>>.

48 As Salih Muslim Muhammad contends, for example in an undated Interview on the website pydrojava.net: »Interview with Mr Saleh Muslim Mohamed the leader of Democratic Union Party PYD«, <http://www.pydrojava.net/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=79>.

49 The draft was published on July 18, 2013 on Rihab News; see <<http://www.rihabnews.com/?p=41174>>.

50 See *al-Watan*, July 23, 2012, »Ūsī: Akrād Sūriyah yissa'ūna la idārah dhātiyyah maḥalliyya fī ba'ḍ manātiq al-Jazīrah la-ḥāḡal-farāgh al-ḥāḡil: nafā wujūd ayy mashrū'in in fiṣālī ladihim« [»Ose: Syria's Kurds strive for local self-administration in some parts of the Jazirah in order to ›fill the vacuum‹ that has arisen: denies the existence of any separatist aspirations among them«]. 'Amr Ose is a former PKK member and was a conduit between Abdullah Öcalan and the Syrian government.

51 See KurdWatch, November 8, 2011, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: ›Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurd-

elections in the Kurdish regions alongside the elaboration of a transitional constitution.⁵²

The events of 'Amudah also make clear that the policies of mediation and containment advanced by the Iraqi-Kurdish president and chairman of the KDP, Mas'ud Barzani, against the PYD have failed. In summer 2012, Barzani invited the Kurdish National Council and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan to Erbil multiple times for a mediation session. In July 2012, the Supreme Kurdish Committee (Desteya Bilind a Kurd) was formed, with both sides assigned fifty percent representation. The Supreme Kurdish Committee was intended to help administer Syria's Kurdish regions.⁵³ Thus far, a joint administration only exists on paper and there is little to suggest that this will change. After trying unsuccessfully to clear up differences of opinion between the parties in November 2012, Barzani again invited the leaders of the parties of the Kurdish National Council and representatives of the PYD to Erbil in April/May 2013. However, PYD representatives failed to appear at the meeting, explaining that the PYD is »not part of the problem«. ⁵⁴ The formation of the Supreme Kurdish Committee did not lead to increased influence for the parties of the Kurdish National Council, instead they are now also constrained in their freedom to make political decisions. For example, Faysal Yusuf, then chairman of the Kurdish National Council, stated in December 2012 that the Kurdish National Council no longer wanted to negotiate with the Arab opposition as the National Council, but rather as the Supreme Kurdish Committee.⁵⁵

Following the attacks in 'Amudah, various local committees of the Kurdish National Council as well as many leading figures froze their membership in the Supreme Kurdish Committee.⁵⁶ This has not led to a change in PYD policies.

The KDP-Iraq is not relying solely on a negotiated solution with the PYD, and is simultaneously providing military training to Kurds from Syria, including many refugees. By October 2012, one thousand two hundred people had allegedly been trained.⁵⁷ Whether Barzani and the KDP are seriously considering their deployment remains open. On the one hand, the training of

istan are responsible for the unrest here«», <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html>>.

52 KurdWatch, September 18, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: Nine-point plan for the administration of the Kurdish regions signed«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2929&z=en>>.

53 See »Hewlêr Declaration of both councils«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_D031_en_ar.pdf>.

54 KurdWatch, May 12, 2013, »Erbil: PYD and Progressive Party absent at meeting with Barzani«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2828&z=en>>.

55 KurdWatch, December 28, 2012, »Faysal Yusuf, chairman of the Kurdish National Council: »Sometimes things are demanded of the Council that only a government could accomplish««, <http://kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2721&z=en>.

56 KurdWatch, July 7 2013, »'Amudah: Yekîti and local committees of the Kurdish National Council leave the Supreme Kurdish Committee«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2878&z=en>>.

57 ICG 2013: 3–4.

armed fighters supports Barzani's claim to influence the developments in Syria's Kurdish regions. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that in terms of numbers, the YPG is far superior to the fighters trained by Barzani. This is all the more true for the small military units of the Yekîti or the Azadî. In spite of this the PYD repeatedly mounts armed responses to these units and kidnaps their leadership personnel.⁵⁸ The attacks underline the PYD's claim to be the sole legitimate armed Kurdish group in Syria's Kurdish regions.

The Free Syrian Army: Potential ally or Islamist danger?

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was founded in the summer of 2011 with the goal of protecting peaceful demonstrations. It was initially comprised of small units of deserted soldiers who were joined by civilians and a few foreign fighters. Over the course of the civil war, radical Sunni groups within the FSA have continually gained strength, supported primarily by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, but also by Turkey. Many of these groups are fighting for the Free Syrian Army against the regime, without formally submitting to its command structure. In the Kurdish regions, the Jabhat an-Nusrah is especially noteworthy. Numerous Islamists fight in this armed unit, which was founded in early 2012, who had previously fought against the Americans in Iraq with support from the Syrian Ba'th regime. Generally speaking, attempts to bring the various FSA units under a central command have failed. The FSA remains essentially decentralized; there is no common strategy and the coordination of military operations is often locally limited.⁵⁹

Against this background, a unified position on the »Kurdish question« exists neither within the FSA nor within the armed groups linked to it. Colonel Riyad al-As'ad, supreme commander of the Free Syrian Army stated in July 2012 that the FSA would never leave al-Qamishli to the agenda of any Kurdish party, but rather would fight for every centimeter of Syrian ground. He continued, however, that there are currently no plans to open a second front against the Kurds as the FSA does not have the necessary strength.⁶⁰

58 See, for example, KurdWatch, January 20, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: YPG storms Yekîti military drill ground«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2738&z=en>>.

In April 2013, the YPG kidnapped seven members of the Yekîti's Shaykh Ma'shuq Khaznawi Battalion; see KurdWatch, May 18, 2013, »Al-Qamishli: YPG releases Yekîti fighter«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2832&z=en>>.

See also KurdWatch, April 2, 2013, »Al-Hasakah: YPG arrests leader of Kurdish Intervention Forces«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2800&z=en>>.

59 For more on the structure of the FSA, see Zein 2013: 21–22.

60 MESOP, July 31, 2012, »Leader of Free Syrian Army says no Kurdish region allowed to establish in Syria«, <<http://www.mesop.de/2012/07/31/leader-of-free-syrian-army-says-no-kurdish-region-allowed-to-establish-in-syria>>. The article in the journal *Rûdaw*, which was given as the original source, was no longer available on June 10, 2013.

Nevertheless, there are various Kurdish units within the FSA, including the Mish'al at-Tammu Brigade. In March 2013, its commander, Usama Sulayman Mansur Hilali, stated to KurdWatch:

»We began preparations about a year ago [for a Kurdish brigade]. We didn't receive any support from the Kurds. In contrast, the Free Syrian Army was willing to support us. In the beginning, there were only two of us. Myself and another young Kurdish activist from al-Qamishli. We had already joined the Free Syrian Army. I wanted us Kurds to also take part in the revolution. I was truly received with open arms by the Free Syrian Army. They were very proud that I, as a Kurd, would fight with them. At the time I was with a brigade in Hama. I really liked how they accepted me. I didn't have a Kurdish flag, so they made me one. I then began preparations to form a Kurdish brigade with the name Mish'al at-Tammu. Later we announced the formation of the brigade in Tall Abyad. At the time, Tall Abyad was free, and we had the opportunity to work here.«

For young people who are critical of the PYD's totalitarian structure, joining the FSA offers an alternative:

»The PYD wants to establish a new dictatorship in the Kurdish regions. Only the images of the dictators will be changed. They are making a claim to sole representation of the Kurdish regions. They will tolerate no partners alongside of them. What they have done to the Kurds in the last two years, the regime has not done in the last forty years.«⁶¹

The relationship between the FSA and the PYD is fickle. After weeks of fighting between the YPG and FSA in early 2013 in Ra's al-'Ayn, the parties signed an agreement and divided up the administration of the city amongst themselves.⁶² While critics of the PYD said that the agreement also included the Islamic Jabhat an-Nusrah, the PYD claimed that the Jabhat an-Nusrah is no longer present in the city.⁶³ In the spring of 2013, the YPG was also observed fighting together with Free Syrian Army units on several occasions.⁶⁴ At the same time, armed conflicts between the FSA and YPG broke

61 KurdWatch, March 26, 2013, »Usama Sulayman Mansur Hilali, Commander of the Mish'al at-Tammu Brigade: ›I went from water carrier to weapon carrier««, <http://kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2791&z=en>. See also Hevidar Ahmed, »KNC leader: Kurds are disappointed by PYD's actions: interview with Abdulhakim Bashar«, Kurd Net, August 1, 2012, <<http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/8/syriakurd569.htm>>.

62 KurdWatch, February, 23 2013, »Ra's al-'Ayn: YPG signs agreement with FSA«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2762&z=en>>.

63 KurdWatch, June 4, 2013, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: ›We are free and independent, and we are pursuing our own strategy««, <http://kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2846&z=en>; see also ICG 2013: 15.

64 See, for example, KurdWatch, April 19, 2013, »Aleppo: Ongoing fighting in Shaykh Maqsud«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2811&z=en>>. The FSA and PYD allegedly supported one another even earlier; see Wladimir van Wilgenburg, »Kurdish militias help out Syrian rebels in Aleppo«, Syrian Assistance, August 13, 2012, <<http://www.syrianassistance.com/1/post/2012/08/kurdish-militias-help-out-syrian-rebels-in-aleppo.html>>.

out on May 23, 2013 near the Shiite villages of Nubbul and az-Zahra', twenty kilometers south of 'Afrin, with several Kurdish battalions participating on the side of the FSA. At that time, Nubbul and az-Zahra' had been under an FSA embargo for more than a year. The FSA accused the YPG of delivering provisions to the government troops and Hizbullah fighters stationed in the villages.⁶⁵

Principally, it must be assumed that the YPG will tolerate and cooperate with the FSA as long as the FSA does not question the PYD's claim to sole representation in the Kurdish regions. This is problematic for the FSA insofar as the YPG is cooperating with the Syrian regime, for example by protecting the oil fields in the Kurdish region on its behalf.

In addition, the YPG considers the Kurdish units of the FSA in particular to be competition. This explains the various attacks, whether militarily or in the media, against these units and their leaders. On February 10, 2013, for example, members of the Asayiş, the security service of the PYD, kidnapped Ibrahim Mustafa, the press spokesman for the Kurdish brigade Ahrar al-Kurd, in Jalabiyah, fifty kilometers south of 'Ayn al-'Arab. He was accused of membership in an enemy organization.⁶⁶ Usama Sulayman Mansur Hilali, commander of the Mish'al at-Tammu Brigade, accuses the YPG of having attacked members of his brigade during fighting in Ra's al-'Ayn and killing them in ambush.⁶⁷ Armed conflicts with the Salahuddin al-Ayyubi Battalion have also occurred.⁶⁸ As with the militias of the parties of the Kurdish National Council, in its conflicts with the Kurdish units within the FSA, the YPG is not concerned about the units' conceptual orientation, but rather more concerned with keeping armed Kurdish rivals in check.

In skirmishes between the YPG and Islamist units such as the Jabhat an-Nusrah, it is not always clear what can be traced back to attacks by the Islamists and what was provoked by the YPG. For example, in mid-July 2013, the YPG drove the Jabhat an-Nusrah out of Ra's al-'Ayn, after its chairman Salih Muslim Muhammad had claimed in late March 2013 that they were no longer present there.⁶⁹ There is much to sug-

65 KurdWatch, June 10 2013, »'Afrin: Fighting between YPG and FSA«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2850&z=en>>.

66 KurdWatch, March 8, 2013, »'Ayn al-'Arab: PYD security service kidnaps press spokesman for Ahrar al-Kurd«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2772&z=en>>.

67 KurdWatch, March 26, 2013, »Usama Sulayman Mansur Hilali, Commander of the Mish'al at-Tammu Brigade: »I went from water carrier to weapon carrier««, <http://kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2791&z=en>.

68 KurdWatch, October 14, 2012: »'Afrin: Three dead in fighting between People's Defense Units and a Kurdish unit of the Free Syrian Army«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2660&z=en>>.

69 KurdWatch, July 23, 2013, »Ra's al-'Ayn: YPG expels Islamic units from the city«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2887&z=en>>.

gest that the fighting did not flare up again because of pressing problems, but rather because the YPG had intentionally chosen this moment to distract from the conflicts in 'Amudah and win back sympathy from the Kurdish population by fighting against the Islamists.

By causing a distraction from the events in 'Amudah, the most recent reports about alleged massacres of Kurdish civilians also primarily benefit the PYD. An Iranian news channel reported four hundred fifty Kurdish civilians who were supposedly killed by Islamist fighters near Tall Abyad.⁷⁰ The numbers were taken up by the Russian foreign minister. There was also talk of massacres by FSA units in the villages of Tall Hasil and Tall 'Aran.⁷¹ In contrast, independent activists report that there was no targeted extermination campaign against Kurdish civilians, but instead only skirmishes between the YPG and Islamist units. Civilians were also allegedly killed in this fighting, but in far fewer numbers than claimed. In addition, the skirmishes were reportedly provoked, at least in part, by the YPG.⁷²

On the initiative of Mas'ud Barzani, an appointed eight-member investigative committee that includes representatives with close ties to the PKK/PYD, as well as to the KDP-Iraq and the Kurdish National Council came to the same conclusion: They did not come up with evidence that Kurdish civilians have been the targeted victims of Islamist groups, but that there simply have been fights between different armed groups.⁷³

Summary and outlook

At the beginning of the revolution, the Kurdish youth groups played a key role in mobilizing activists. Soon, however, traditional political parties and powers like the Kurdish National Council and the PYD were again dominant. While the Kurdish National Council has successfully assimilated and marginalized the majority of the youth groups, the PYD and its militia, the YPG, dominate all other Kurdish parties. Kurdish units of the Free Syrian Army have played a comparatively small role thus far; they are viewed by the PYD and by armed units of the parties of the Kurdish National Council as illegitimate competition, and they are opposed ac-

70 Kurd Net, August 8, 2013, »Disturbing report alleges killings of 450 Kurds in Syria by Arab-Islamic jihadists«, <<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/8/syriakurd839.htm>>; Kurd Net, August 8, 2013, »200 Syrian Kurds still in the hands of armed Arab-Islamic jihadist groups, 56 jihadists killed«, <<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/8/syriakurd840.htm>>.

71 KurdWatch, August 15, 2013, »Aleppo: Fighting between Kurdish Front Brigade and FSA«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2908&z=en>>.

72 Interview with activists, August 7, 2013; KurdWatch, August 6, 2013, »Al-Ma'bada/al-Qahtaniyah: Fighting between Islamic units and YPG«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2897&z=en>>.

73 KurdWatch, September 9, 2013, »Erbil: No targeted massacres of Kurds in Syria«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2924&z=en>>.

cordingly. Both the Kurdish National Council and the PYD have thus become impediments to rather than supporters of democratization in the Kurdish regions. Their political focus is primarily oriented toward their respective »sponsors« in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and the Qandil Mountains. This makes cooperation with the Syrian opposition difficult, especially since neither the Kurdish National Council nor its individual parties have developed ideas for the future of the Kurdish population in Syria beyond buzzwords like »federalism« and »democracy«. The PYD on the other hand limits itself to pure power politics dressed up as Kurdish nationalism.

At the present moment it is unclear what the consequences of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process initiated in March 2013 will be. Will a rapprochement between the PKK and Turkey lead the PKK/PYD to end its cooperation with the Syrian regime and cause the PKK-Teheran-Damascus connection to crumble? Currently the PKK has suspended its fighting in Turkey,⁷⁴ a ceasefire that is not in Iran's interest. Nevertheless, a positioning of the PKK/PYD on the side of the opponents of the Assad regime would hardly lead the PYD to give up or qualify its totalitarian claims regarding the Kurdish regions. Moreover, it seems certain that a withdrawal of armed PKK fighters from Turkey would not lead to a complete disarming of the party. On the one hand, most of the PKK fighters would presumably withdraw to the Qandil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan; on the other hand, it may be safely assumed that the PKK presence would also become stronger in Syria and in Iran. This would not contribute to a stabilization or de-escalation of the political situation—quite the contrary.

References

International Crisis Group (ICG) 2013: *Syria's Kurds. A struggle within a struggle*. Brussels: ICG (ICG Middle East report, 136), <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/136-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.pdf>>.

74 Thomas Bormann, »PKK zieht sich in den Nord-Irak zurück« [[»The PKK withdraws to Northern Iraq«](http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/pkk-abzug100.html)], Tagesschau.de, March 8, 2013, <<http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/pkk-abzug100.html>>.

Savelsberg, Eva & Jordi Tejel 2013: »The Syrian Kurds in ›transition to somewhere‹.« In: Mohammed M.A. Ahmed & Michael M. Gunter (Eds.): *The Kurdish spring. Geopolitical changes and the Kurds*. Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, pp. 189–218.

Tanir, Ilhan, Wladimir van Wilgenburg & Omar Hossino 2012: *Unity or PYD power play? Syrian Kurdish dynamics after the Erbil Agreement*. London: The Henry Jackson Society, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/HJS_Unity-or-PYD-Power-Play_-Report.pdf>.

Zeid, Huda 2013: »Identitäten und Interessen der syrischen Oppositionellen.« In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 63 (8), pp. 17–23, <http://www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/APuZ_2013-08_online.pdf>.