The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria

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Over the weekend of July 16-17, representatives of the opposition to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad met in Istanbul to choose a "National Salvation Council." Among the diverse attendees were delegates speaking for Syria's Kurds, the largest ethnic minority in the country at more than 2 million people, some 10 percent of the population. All of the multiple Kurdish parties in Syria envision a pluralistic state in which their cultural and linguistic rights are recognized. Those at the Istanbul gathering wanted the name of the country changed from the Syrian Arab Republic to the "Republic of Syria." When the other delegates at the conference refused this request, these Kurds walked out in protest.

Some may have been surprised to learn that there are Kurdish parties in Syria at all. Pending promised revisions, or the collapse of the present regime, Article 8 of the Syrian constitution outlaws all political parties but the ruling Baath and its coalition partners. But opposition parties do exist, and Kurdish parties have been around since 1957. In the 54 years since the founding of the first one, the Kurdish political landscape has evolved and matured -- albeit on the sidelines, since much of the activity has been covert. Parties have split, and split again, with amoeba-like efficiency; they have died just as quickly. Today there is no accurate count of the parties or their members. Membership is a closely guarded secret, in fact, with only 2-3 percent of the members known outside party circles. [1] Most observers, however, believe there are 15 parties, with estimates of total membership ranging from 60,000 to 200,000. The higher numbers come from Kurdish party officials. If they do not exaggerate, then the party members all together would make up about 10 percent of the Kurdish population.

For most of their history, Kurdish political formations in Syria have run up against the precepts of Arab nationalism. The Kurds, with their different language and customs, and their ties to ethnic brethren in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, have been seen as a threat to the project of Arab unity. In 1957, just one year before implementation of the short-lived union between Syria and Egypt as the United Arab Republic, the power of Arab nationalist ideology was near its zenith. The founding of the first Kurdish party came, in part, in reaction to this state-sponsored program, which aimed to submerge the Kurds in Arab culture. The reactions of Arab oppositionists to the Kurdish platform in Istanbul show that old ideas of Arab nationalism retain considerable purchase. A new Syria is destined to emerge, however, from the months of upheaval engulfing the country in 2011. If that Syria is to be more democratic, Kurdish aspirations will have to be integrated into the broader spectrum of the country's politics, moving the Kurds from the sidelines onto the field.

1927-1957

Just who are the Kurdish political parties in Syria? What are their origins and what is their future?

In the three decades prior to the 1957 establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), Kurds in Syria were viewed with some suspicion, though much less than afterward. The origins of the Kurdish political movement can be traced back to the 1920s, when, like all indigenous political activism, it faced the scrutiny of the French Mandatory authorities. The newly established Republic of Turkey to the north was also keeping an eye on Kurdish developments in Syria. The failure of the Kurdish-led Sheikh Sa'id revolt in Turkey in 1925 led to the exodus of a substantial number of Kurdish fighters to Kurdish regions in northeastern Syria, as well as to Damascus, Aleppo and even Lebanon, where they sought to escape Ankara's aggressive pursuit.

The Kurdish exiles from Turkey quickly engaged in Kurdish society in Syria, becoming a part of the social, cultural and political fabric, but their prime objective remained retaliation against the Turkish government. The first attempt at fighting back against the Turks was the founding of the pan-Kurdish Xoybun (Independence) League, a secular, nationalist group founded on October 5, 1927 at a gathering in Bhamdoun, Lebanon. The league's political branch was led by well-known Kurdish author Celadet Bedirxan, who was assisted by a group of Kurdish intellectuals, many of whom had been educated in various European countries. Syrian Kurdish national figures eagerly joined Xoybun and branches opened across the Kurdish regions. As Xoybun spread, Kurds in Syria began to consider it an essential center of knowledge and learning in a society dominated by backwardness. Many Kurdish writers, poets and philosophers, such as Cegerxwin and Qedri Can, participated in Xoybun-sponsored activities. The organization offered a space where Syrian Kurdish intellectuals could gain experience speaking about issues of nationalism, self-determination and oppression, providing a foundation for the emergence of the Kurdish political movement. [2]

In 1946, the year Syria gained independence from France, Xoybun was dissolved. Dissolution happened as Kurdish-Soviet relations were on the rise and interest in purely "nationalist" ideas was waning. The Syrian Communist Party was gaining popularity among the Kurds. Former members of Xoybun became active Communists; many of the party's prominent leaders, in turn, were of Kurdish background. In a few short years, the Communists took control of the "Kurdish street" in Syria. But, toeing the line from Moscow, the Communists held a vastly different view of the Kurdish issue than Xoybun had propagated. The party's leadership proclaimed that the Kurdish question in Syria did not have an independent existence. Kurds were simply another group of Syrian citizens who needed to be integrated into a consolidated working class.

The First Kurdish Political Party

The push was soon on to fashion something new. In the summer of 1957, the KDPS was created as a "left-wing and nationalist" alternative to the Communists, who were led by a Kurd, but did not promote Kurdish rights. [3] The KDPS was, many observers say, just a continuation of Xoybun as most of its founders and leaders had been prominent members of that defunct pan-Kurdish group. [4] The party's founding members chose Nur al-Din Zaza, a leading Kurdish intellectual, as the first president. But political infighting erupted almost immediately over the goals and principles of the KDPS -- and even the party's name.

An early fracas involved Jalal Talabani, the long-time political leader of Iraq's Kurds who since 2005 has served as president of Iraq. Talabani was living in Syria in the 1950s and was a key link to the Kurdish activists in Iraq. In 1960 he forced the KDPS to change the party's name to the Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Syria. This switch from the word "Kurdish" to the far more provocative "Kurdistan" helped to foment an atmosphere of anxiety among KDPS leaders. Osman Sabri, one of the party's founding fathers, was particularly concerned by the use of "Kurdistan," as the term might imply that the party was insinuating that Kurdish areas of Syria belonged to a greater Kurdistan that straddled national boundaries. [5] This message was not one the party wanted to send.

That unwanted message was partly responsible for the wave of detentions carried out in August 1960. Scores of KDPS cadres, including leading members of the executive committee, were arrested by Syrian state security. While under interrogation, some detainees remained loyal to the party's strict rules of confidentiality; others broke and gave their captors sensitive information about the internal workings of the party. [6] In the end, the whole party structure was revealed, leading to the detention of more than 5,000 people. So began the split between political heavyweights Osman Sabri, on the left, and Nur al-Din Zaza, on the right, which led the Kurds of Syria into further turmoil and political stagnation.

Salah Badreddin, an early member of the Kurdish political movement, describes his own left wing of the party, led by Sabri in the early 1960s, as "national, democratic and peaceful" with "unchangeable principles" and a "decisive, clear stand." The right wing, led by Zaza, he described as "adventurer [sic], bargaining and opportunist," [7] in reference to those who revealed party secrets in the August 1960 crackdown. The two factions unofficially split in 1962, with the official separation coming in 1965. The right wing of the party was taken over by Hamid Hajj Darwish, as Zaza was then in prison. Its ranks consisted mostly of Kurdish "notables," such as urban merchants and professionals, as well as religious leaders and landowners. [8] The left was made up of teachers, students and former Communists.

Four years after the collapse of unity with Egypt, Arab nationalism remained the baseline of political ideas in Syria. At the 1965 KDPS conference, the delegates accordingly asked basic questions: Who are we? What do we want? What is our relationship with the state? What is our relationship to Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdish revolt in Iraq? According to Badreddin's account, Sabri's leftist group would answer: We are a people that wants national rights and self-determination. We are a part of an alliance with democratic forces within Syria. And, finally, we are part of a struggle under the leadership of Barzani. The right would answer: We are a minority asking for limited cultural rights, we are loyal to the Syrian authorities and we are not swayed by the idea of a pan-Kurdish liberation movement. [9]

In 1970, at a meeting hosted by Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan, an attempt was made to reunite the two factions. In the end, their differences were irreconcilable and a third party was created, also called the KDPS, with PL (Provisional Leadership) added to its acronym, and headed by Daham Miro. The new KDPS-PL was, in effect, a Syrian branch of Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq, but it did not take root. Today, its rump is the smallest of three Kurdish parties in Syria that continue to boast the

appellation KDPS. The larger two of these groups have added "al-Parti" to their names to advertise their genealogy in the founding KDPS of 1957.

Splits and Breakaways

The right-wing branch coming from the 1965 split was led by Hamid Hajj Darwish and retained the name KDPS for some time. The right subdivided in 1975, around the time that Jalal Talabani announced from Damascus that his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) would break with Barzani in Iraq. Having tied himself to Talabani, Darwish thought a party name change would signal his loyalties, and in 1976, he changed the name of the KDPS to the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria. A pro-Barzani faction broke away under the original name and exists to this day. The Progressive Party of Darwish eventually saw two offshoots, one dubbed Wekhevi (Equality) and the other the Kurdish National Democratic Party. This side of the Kurdish political spectrum, however, did not see anywhere near the number of fissures that the left did.

In 1975, Osman Sabri saw his left faction of the original KDPS cleave in two. The cause, again, was the developments among the Kurds of Iraq. Salah Badreddin led the anti-PUK faction, Yekitiya Gel (Unity of the People), [10] while the pro-PUK branch kept the KDPS name. This group still exists and is led by Nesreddin Ibrahim. In the late 1970s a splinter group emerged from Yekitiya Gel calling itself the Kurdish Left Party, also still extant, under the leadership of Mohammad Mousa. In 1980 Badreddin changed the name of Yekitiya Gel to the Kurdish Popular Union Party, which split in 1991, with one branch retaining the original name and the other favoring Yekiti. In 1994 a faction calling itself the Kurdish Democratic United Party left Yekiti. And, finally, in 2005 some members of the Left Party and the Popular Union Party joined together to form the Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi). Azadi is led by Kheir al-Din Murad. Today there are five parties with roots in Badreddin's Yekitiya Gel.

Most of the splits on left and right were the result of personal differences rather than ideological disagreements. Broadly, as well, the left and right diverge over tactics rather than ideology, with the left-wing groups preferring to organize on the ground and demonstrate party strength through marches and the like, and the right-leaning groups favoring dialogue with the authorities. Ideological similarities have, in fact, led to alliances between left and right factions in the latter years of Bashar al-Asad's regime.

A few other parties that exist today do not have their genesis in the original KDPS. One is the Future Movement, founded in 2005 under Mishal Tammo. The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party is another. One of the most important, however, is the Democratic Union Party, better known by its Kurdish-language initials, PYD. The PYD was founded in 2003 by former members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the well-known organization in Turkey whose fighters have waged an anti-government insurgency off and on since the 1980s. In 2005, the Kurdish Accord, better known by its Arabic name, Wifaq, split from the PYD. Allegations of Wifaq's cooperation with Syrian intelligence services led to armed hostilities between the PYD and Wifaq, with at least one Wifaq member assassinated by the PYD.

Membership and Leadership

Despite all the splits over the years, almost all the Kurdish parties in Syria follow a similar, complex set of bylaws that determine the conditions for individual membership. Joining a party is not a simple act of registration and receipt of a membership card.

An applicant who wants to join a particular party has to submit a written request explaining the reasons behind his desire to be a member. He must be at least 18 years of age. Thereafter, a specialized body from within the party begins an informal investigation of the applicant to assess whether he has a solid reputation within its designated social and political circles.

Once the application is approved, the applicant is referred to "qualifying cells" for an induction process that may last up to six months. During this months-long training, the applicant attends organizational courses, seminars on Kurdish culture and history, and courses in formal written Kurdish. In Syria, Kurdish is not an officially recognized language and its use has been restricted by law and through intimidation. Various decrees, for instance, have forbidden the use of Kurdish in workplaces and other public arenas. Though Kurdish is spoken at home and in the street, the Kurdish political party system is the sole institution in Syria through which Kurds can learn Kurdish in an academic setting. Contingent upon passing the courses, junior members are transferred to a higher status, known as a band, which together constitute the mainstay of the party.

A political party is usually divided into several bodies, which are differentiated by their tasks and roles. The central committee is the leading body of the party. It consists of several different fractions divided by function: legal, media relations and the political bureau, which has the highest authority for approval of any decision made by the party. Under the central committee are the local committees, which are made up of subcommittees. The subcommittees are clusters of bands.

The PYD and the Future Movement are the only two Kurdish parties in Syria that do not have these intricate organizational structures. They simply have a leading committee and local branches wherever they have supporters. Additionally, those who wish to obtain membership in these two parties do not have to go through the lengthy process required by other parties. [11]

Membership in any party carries with it certain duties and rights. Members have the right to vote or to be elected to office. They have the right to resign from the party, but must provide sufficient justification. They have the right to freedom of religious expression as well. Duties include attendance at party meetings and conventions, working to implement the party's policies and, of course, preserving the party's secrets. There are also strict laws governing members' behavior, with disciplinary procedures that are taken against members who violate the party's regulations. The most severe punishment is expulsion from the party, which can be ordered if a member fails to account for continued absences from party meetings, is found to have been collaborating with state intelligence services or attempts to destabilize or divide

the party. The only body that has the power to expel members from the party is the central committee.

More traditional Kurdish parties still rely on the leadership of a sole figure. There is a certain dependency on these leaders, who themselves become stand-ins for the party. For instance, the leader of one party calling itself the KDPS, Abdulhakim Bashar, is in office for life, having been appointed in 2008 after the death of Nezir Mustafa, who had led the group for the previous 12 years. Another example would be the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party, which holds a referendum during its general congress to reinstate its leader, Hamid Hajj Darwish. He has been in office since 1965, first with the KDPS and since 1976 as head of the Progressive Party.

Yekiti and the PYD are unique among the Kurdish parties in Syria in that they change their leaders on a regular basis. Yekiti elects a new secretary-general every three years at its party congress. The PYD, according to its website, holds an election for the position of secretary-general every four years and that person can be reelected to a second term.

From Hafiz to Bashar

During the 30-year rule of Hafiz al-Asad (1970-2000), Kurdish political parties operated with limited interference from the government. They were weak and fragmented, and Damascus considered them to pose little threat. In fact, Asad was far more concerned with Kurdish movements in neighboring countries than with Kurds in Syria. He saw the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey as sources of leverage in his various disputes with Baghdad and Ankara.

Syria supported opposition groups in Saddam Hussein's Iraq and allowed the opening of the PUK office in Damascus in 1975. In 1979 Damascus formalized relations with Barzani's party, as well, and in ensuing years sought to weaken the regime in Baghdad by bringing the rival factions among the Kurds of Iraq together. Offices for both parties were established in the Kurdish-dominated city of al-Qamishli, in the northeastern corner of Syria. It was standard for both parties to recruit Kurds in Syria to join their *peshmerga*, "those who faced death" in the battles with the Iraqi army.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK also operated freely in Syria, which became a breeding ground of sorts for PKK militants. An estimated 20 percent of PKK fighters hold Syrian citizenship. [12] Hafiz al-Asad's regime tolerated the PKK's activities, all the while pretending its personnel were not even present on Syrian soil. By 1998, with Ankara intensifying its efforts to quash the insurgency in southeastern Turkey, this game became impossible to sustain. Wishing to avoid a major confrontation, the Asad regime signed a security accord with Turkey, known as the Adana Agreement, by which Syria labeled the PKK a terrorist organization, prohibited its activities and those of its affiliates, and agreed to block the supply of weapons, logistical materiel and money to the PKK from Syrian territory. This move forced Abdullah Öcalan out of his Syrian refuge, leading to the PKK leader's eventual capture and imprisonment. The rest of the PKK operatives left the country soon after, leaving something of a vacuum, for their presence had galvanized the Kurds of Syria into ending their relative quiescence.

Bashar al-Asad took over as president after the passing of his father in the summer of 2000. The Kurdish population, at this point, was more politicized than ever before. The Kurdish political parties, though banned, saw it as their obligation to mobilize the Kurds to push for greater political and cultural rights. Members of the various parties and Kurdish cultural activists joined other Syrian intellectuals in the salons of the "Damascus spring," a short-lived thaw in the authoritarian political climate when opposition figures attempted to articulate a program of political reform that the new president might follow. The "spring" soon faded in the capital, but on the Kurdish front the regime did soften its stance, removing much of the state security apparatus from the Kurdish regions and ordering Baath officials to meet with Kurdish party leaders. The parties were emboldened to test the new regime's tolerance of their demands for increased cultural and political rights. They organized a series of demonstrations, in the expectation that the regime might relax some of its repressive laws. [13] This transition period would soon end, however.

On March 8, 2004, the Transitional Administrative Law was adopted in Iraq, a sort of provisional constitution that preserved the autonomous "Kurdistan Regional Government" the two Iraqi Kurdish parties had previously declared. It was a huge victory for the Kurdish cause, and all over Syria, Kurds celebrated the announcement. To monitor the situation, Damascus moved extra security forces into Kurdish areas and placed the troops on alert.

Four days later, on March 12, there was a soccer match in al-Qamishli pitting the local heroes against the team from Dayr al-Zawr. The fans of al-Qamishli's team were mostly Kurds, while those from Dayr al-Zawr were mostly Sunni Arabs. The Dayr al-Zawr fans insulted Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, and held up photographs of Saddam Hussein. The Kurds shouted slogans in support of President George W. Bush. The rival taunts eventually escalated into riots at the stadium, and the army and other security forces deployed to the scene. Seven Kurds were killed in the ensuing clampdown. The next day, in addition to the funeral marches, there were massive demonstrations in Kurdish cities where Kurdish flags waved amidst the crowds. Syria had never seen demonstrations of this magnitude by Kurds. The reaction of security forces was unparalleled as well. Thirty-two were killed, hundreds wounded and 2,000 arrested over a five-day period. [14] By the end of 2004, most of the 2,000 detained had been released; a final 312 were given amnesty and released in March 2005.

The wave of arrests after the soccer match was followed by intense repression of Kurdish cultural and political expression, wiping away the Kurds' hopes of gains under the new president. In June 2004 the Syrian military intelligence service summoned several Kurdish leaders to warn them that all Kurdish parties in Syria were to cease their political and cultural activities. The Kurds were told, for instance, that the state would no longer tolerate the teaching of the Kurdish language, even in private. The Kurdish activists maintained their ties to other oppositionists. Eight Kurdish parties were signatories to the 2005 Damascus Declaration calling for an end to emergency law, a constitutional convention and other democratizing measures. Those parties that did not sign this document objected that it did not include a provision for constitutional recognition of the Kurds as the largest ethnic minority in the country.

Party Demands

In the early 2000s, the Kurdish parties of Syria coalesced into three broad alliances around several axes, one being their relationship with the Baathist regime. The first group, the Kurdish Alliance, consists of the Left Party, Azadi, the Democratic United Party and the Progressive Party -- three descendants of the left wing of the old KDPS and one of the right. These four parties have been more accommodating toward the state, sometimes agreeing with the state's viewpoint on particular issues. The Progressive Party, for instance, was allowed to open Nur al-Din Zaza Hall, a cultural foundation where the party leader Darwish maintains his offices, because he has not pushed for more than baseline cultural rights for the Kurds. The Kurdish Democratic Front, which stakes out a sort of middle ground, consists of two of the parties named KDPS (under Abdulhakim Bashar and Nesreddin Ibrahim, respectively), Wekhevi and the National Democratic Party. The third coalition, the Coordinating Committee, distinguishes itself with its more hardline demands upon the regime, to which it is often hostile. The parties in this group are the Future Movement, Yekiti and Azadi, which, in a seeming contradiction, has a hand in the Alliance as well.

In his Decree 49, promulgated on April 7, Bashar al-Asad promised to grant "Syrian Arab" citizenship to some 225,000 Kurds. Most are descendants of the 125,000 in the northeastern Hasaka region who were stripped of citizenship by a 1962 census. These "foreigners," as the regime has called them, make up about three quarters of the stateless Kurds living in Syria. The others, who number about 75,000, are "unregistered" and have no legal status whatsoever. Decree 49 said nothing about them. Beyond the core agenda of citizenship for all Kurds in Syria, the Kurdish parties are divided over exactly what to demand from the state. Some of the parties have similar demands and differentiate themselves only by the tone used in voicing them. The parties' demands can be separated into three, progressively more radical categories: cultural, linguistic and political rights; constitutional recognition of Kurds as a minority in Syria; and autonomy.

Linguistic rights -- recognition of the Kurdish language and the right to teach in Kurdish -- is one of the most widely sought reforms among the Kurds in Syria. Protesters in Kurdish regions often carry signs reading, "We want the Kurdish language taught in schools." For some parties, the political program stops here, with the addition of cultural rights. The Progressive Party, for example, has limited its demands to preserving the cultural identity of the Kurds in Syria. They ask to be allowed to hold festivals celebrating Kurdish literature, song and dance. Such cultural activities, however, are often seen as political by the government, with its commitment to old-style Arab nationalism. Participation in a cultural event sponsored by a Kurdish party, even one with close ties to the government, carries with it the risk of persecution.

A good number of parties, most descended from the left wing of the old KDPS, seek constitutional recognition of the Kurds as an ethnic minority in Syria. In a 2005 interview, Mohamed Mousa, secretary-general of the Left Party, said this measure is needed because some Syrian Arabs believe that Kurds are alien to the country. "These groups must realize that the Kurdish presence in Syria is a natural result of the Sykes-Picot treaty of 1916, which divided the whole region without any consideration for ethnic differences," he concluded. [15] The PYD insists on this demand as well.

While no party seeks full independence from Syria, some have gone so far as to petition for autonomy for the Kurdish regions. Yekiti, at its sixth party convention in 2009, acknowledged the autonomy project and put the idea forward for the consideration of the national movement as a whole. Two weeks after the convention, on December 26, 2009, security forces arrested four senior Yekiti members -- Hasan Saleh, Marouf Mulla Ahmed, Mohamed Mustafa and Anwar Naso -- charging them with "aiming at separating part of the Syrian lands" and "joining an international political or social organization." Autonomy is obviously a sensitive topic for the Syrian authorities. "There used to be a red line on detaining known Kurdish political leaders. But since 2004, this line is no longer there," a Kurdish activist told Human Rights Watch earlier that year. [16]

Intelligence services generally watch Kurdish leaders closely, sometimes excluding them and their families from public-sector employment. The three parties of the Coordinating Committee, given their stance against the government and their more explicit language in demanding Kurdish rights, are the most frequently targeted. The state security presence is high in the Kurdish regions, with around 1,000 agents based in al-Qamishli alone.

The PYD also gets heightened harassment from the state, but for different reasons. Because the party's founders belonged to the PKK, Ankara sees it as little more than a PKK branch in another country, and one that, since 1998, is under treaty obligation not to tolerate PKK activity. The Syrian regime, whose diplomatic and commercial relations with Ankara improved considerably in the era of Bashar al-Asad, has often detained PYD leaders and members in deference to its erstwhile Turkish friend. As one PYD member confirmed, "Our party members are the ones that are most subject to arrest and torture. It is because of Syrian-Turkish relations and because we adopt Öcalan's ideology." [17] The regime may harbor a special fear of the PYD because, as probably the largest Kurdish party in Syria, it is able to mobilize large crowds.

Though some parties attract more unwelcome attention than others, there has been an overall increase in harassment of Kurdish politicos in the mid- to late 2000s. Abdulhakim Bashar, leader of the KDPS, suggests that autonomy for the Kurds of Iraq, the various "Kurdish openings" in Turkey and better networking among Kurds inside and outside Syria have raised the alarm in Damascus. "The fear that Kurdish popular movements would become a general phenomenon in Syrian society has pushed the authorities to use all repressive means to try to tame the Kurds," he says.

The Road Ahead

In an effort to unify the Kurdish political voice, a large coalition of nine political parties was formed in December 2009 under the name of the Kurdish Political Congress. The coalition embraced the entirety of the Kurdish Democratic Front and the Coordination Committee, as well as the Left Party and the Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party. As the Syrian uprising spread in the spring of 2011, these original nine parties brought three others, including the PYD, into an expanded coalition known as the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties. The press often refers to the National Movement simply as "a group of 12 Kurdish political parties." According to Hassan Saleh of Yekiti, the main reason for forming this disparate assemblage of

characters was to streamline the Kurds' message in the face of Arab opposition. [18] It is a milestone for cooperation among the Kurdish parties of Syria.

The National Movement held an unprecedented gathering in April, and the next month in al-Qamishli they announced their own plan for resolving the crisis embroiling Syria. The plan calls for an end to one-party rule, a modern, civil state that ensures the rule of law, and true equality for all citizens, among other demands. The program is very similar to those of other opposition groups in the country. And yet, outside the Kurdish press, the National Movement's announcement was largely ignored.

Many of the Kurdish parties believe that the Arab opposition in Syria still does not recognize the Kurds as a major part of the Syrian political equation. No party inside Syria sent official delegates to the Istanbul conference in mid-July, but Mishal Tammo, leader of the Future Movement, attended in his personal capacity. Tammo is one of the Kurds who walked out when the other oppositionists would not acquiesce in removing the term "Arab" from the name of the Syrian state. "Once a democratic state has been established, if the Syrians still turn to the Arabs, we will turn to Erbil and Diyarbakır," he told the press. [19] referring to the official capital of Iraqi Kurdistan and the unofficial capital of the Kurdish nation in southeast Turkey.

The Kurds of Syria have long had a brotherly, but at times chaotic, relationship with the Kurds of Iraq. After the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq in 2004, however, this relationship was altered. The differences among parties in Syria already did not track so closely with the differences between Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, but when these two figures consolidated forces, that correlation ceased entirely. For its part, the unified KRG downgraded its formal links to the parties in Syria, in a demarche to Damascus similar in intent to its gestures to Ankara, notably its relatively muted protests when Turkey attacks PKK fighters based in northern Iraq. Most Kurdish parties in Syria continue to keep offices in Erbil, however. (And the KRG wields clout in those parties' internal affairs; Barzani appointed Abdulhakim Bashar as the new head of the KDPS in 2008, for example.) With many signs pointing to the end of the Asad regime, the KRG may be looking to rebuild more robust ties to its Kurdish political allies in Syria.

For the moment, at any rate, the Kurdish parties in Syria are on their own. They have before them the tasks of reconciliation with the Arab opposition, with each other and, most important, with the Kurdish street. Despite the public disagreements, the Kurdish and Arab opposition parties have tacitly committed to working together until the Asad regime is toppled. The thorny questions of the "Arabness" of Syria and the extent of Kurdish cultural rights, let alone autonomy, are on hold.

As for the Kurdish parties themselves, they disagree with each other as often as they disagree with the Arab opposition. They have always lived in a state of fragmentation, much to their common detriment. Intra-Kurdish differences in Syria, however, have hardly ever escalated to the point of violence, as has happened among Kurdish political factions elsewhere in the Middle East. The demise of the Asad regime, if it comes, will be a litmus test of their mutual tolerance.

Coming to terms with Kurdish youth, who have taken charge of street protests in Kurdish-majority areas, may prove the most difficult task of all. As elsewhere in Syria, the engines of the uprising in majority-Kurdish areas are "local coordinating committees" that are youth-led and politically unaffiliated. The Kurdish committees have called for the "liberation" of the Arab areas of Dar'a, Idlib and Hama, showing the pan-Syrian solidarity against the regime that has characterized the committees in other parts of the country from the time of their emergence. These local activists also believe that a resolution of the Kurdish question will only come about through organizing on the ground. In June, the Future Movement of Mishal Tammo froze cooperation with other parties on the grounds that the youth should be at the forefront of Kurdish activism.

The young activists say that they are in regular contact with Kurdish party cadres and that a few of the more militant parties back, and take part in, the demonstrations. But if or when the regime falls, it will be the unaffiliated youth, and not the self-declared Kurdish National Movement, that will be able to claim credit. The youth may dismiss the Kurdish parties as being out of touch with their own visions for the future. Syria is moving toward inevitable change. The question is whether the Kurdish National Movement can adapt to the new environment, shedding its ineffectual clandestine past and embracing transparency to become a genuine representative of the Kurdish people in Syria.

Endnotes

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[14] See Eva Savelsberg, "The Making of the al-Qamishli Uprising by Kurdish Internet Sites in the Diaspora," unpublished paper presented at the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, Barcelona, July 2010.
[15] *Tahawwulat*, August 2, 2005.
[16] Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and*

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[17] Human Rights Watch, p. 43.

[18] Telephone interview with Hassan Saleh, Yekiti party leader, July 10, 2011.

[19] *Rudaw*, July 21, 2011.

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