

Wolfgang Taucher - Mathias Vogl - Peter Webinger

# THE KURDS

---

History - Religion - Language - Politics

Wolfgang Taucher - Mathias Vogl - Peter Webinger

# **THE KURDS**

---

History - Religion - Language - Politics

# Imprint

## Published by

Wolfgang Taucher  
Mathias Vogl  
Peter Webinger

Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior  
Herrengasse 7 / 1010 Vienna / Austria  
[BFA-Staatendokumentation@bmi.gv.at](mailto:BFA-Staatendokumentation@bmi.gv.at)

## Editors

Alexander Schahbasi  
Thomas Schrott

## Editorial Team

Stefanie Rieder  
Sarah Kratschmayr

## Layout

Martin Angel

## Print

Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior

## Disclaimer

The content of this publication was researched and edited with utmost care. Liability for the correctness, completeness and up-to-dateness of contents cannot be incurred. The Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, the publishers, the editors, authors and individuals involved in the publication do not assume any liability for possible damages or consequences arising from the usage, application or dissemination of the contents offered. The responsibility for the correctness of information provided by third parties lies with respective publishers and thus excludes liability by the publishers of this volume.

The articles in this publication reflect the opinions and views of the authors and do not represent positions of the publishers or the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior.

Articles by the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum adhere to the scientific standards as defined by the advisory board of the Country of Origin Information Unit and are based on the quoted sources. The publication does not claim completeness and does not provide conclusions for the assessment of any individual asylum application. The publication is furthermore not to be seen as a political statement by the Country of Origin Information Unit or the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.

## Copyright

This publication and all the data therein are protected by copyright. All rights of utilization are reserved to the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior. Reproduction and distribution in any possible way – for commercial and non-commercial usage – are prohibited without prior written permission by the publishers.

ISBN 978-3-9503643-6-1

© 2015 Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior

## Contents

Foreword   <i>Wolfgang Taucher, Mathias Vogl, Peter Webinger</i> .....	6
<i>Janet Klein</i> Kurdish identity in the Ottoman Empire .....	8
<i>Diane King</i> A religious landscape of the Kurds .....	22
<i>Jaffer Sheyholislami</i> The language varieties of the Kurds .....	30
<i>Walter-Josef Fend</i> Kurdish political parties in Turkey .....	52
<i>Walter Posch</i> The changing faces of the PKK .....	88
<i>Sabina Catar</i> Kurdish political parties in Syria .....	112
<i>Sebastian Bauer</i> Kurdish political parties in Irak .....	140
<i>Simone Langanger</i> Kurdish political parties in Iran .....	162
<i>Map</i> Kurds in the middle East .....	184



## Foreword

The fourth volume of our *regiones et res publicae* series is to serve as a background reader on the Kurds, covering history, religion, language and politics. In the current upheaval in the Middle East – with Kurds being an ethnic minority in several states in the region – a profound understanding of this group is essential for authorities dealing with migration and asylum issues.

Within this anthology Janet Klein, associate professor and director of the World Civilizations Program at the department of history of the University of Akron, reviews the history of the Kurds during the Ottoman period. Diane E. King, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Kentucky, provides an overview over religious groups. Jaffer Sheyhislami, associate professor at the school of linguistics and language studies at Carleton University, analyzes language varieties of the Kurds. Major Kurdish political parties and organizations in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran are covered by Dr. Walter Posch, senior researcher at the National Defense Academy of the Austrian Ministry of Defense, as well as Walter Fend, Sabina Catar, Sebastian Bauer and Simone Langanger, country analysts at the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.

In light of the ongoing developments and the increasing flows of refugees to Europe, the aim of this book is to contribute towards a better understanding of the region and its people.

**Wolfgang Taucher**  
Director of the Federal Office  
for Immigration and Asylum

Austrian Federal Ministry  
of the Interior

**Mathias Vogl**  
Director-General for  
Legal Affairs

Austrian Federal Ministry  
of the Interior

**Peter Webinger**  
Deputy Director-General  
for Legal Affairs

Austrian Federal Ministry  
of the Interior



# **Kurdish identity in the Ottoman Empire**

*Janet Klein*

In 1913, Abdullah Cevdet, a Kurdish-Ottoman intellectual, wrote in a Kurdish gazette, “We are in a period in which the nationalities are being decided and recognized.”<sup>1</sup> Just over a century later, some Kurds still say that their “nationality” has not been recognized. The vast majority of works on the Kurds over the past century has been consumed with the question of Kurdish “nationality,” whether those works focus on asserting Kurdish “nationality,” on denying or suppressing it, or on exploring the various facets and dynamics of this struggle. This chapter serves to briefly walk the reader through the contexts and contours of the process through which modern Kurdish identities have been constructed, proclaimed, debated, suppressed, and reasserted in dialogue with parallel processes undergone by the Kurds’ neighbors. This chapter demonstrates that Kurdish identities, particularly modern Kurdish identities, have been neither static nor uniform throughout the Ottoman period (and beyond), and highlights the role that relational processes of identity construction have played as modern Kurdish identities have been developed “in conversation” with those of their neighbors and with wider historical shifts underway.

In the sixteenth century, during the height of Ottoman expansion, Kurds were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. A smaller number became part of the new Safavid Dynasty (est. 1501) in Persia, across the border. Both empires were in competition over Kurdish populated areas, but the Ottomans were more successful negotiators and an influential group of Kurdish notables opted to join the expanding empire. The level of autonomy granted to local Kurdish notables did vary across place and time, but the larger understanding was that they were engaged in a mutually beneficial arrangement with the Ottoman state, whereby the Ottomans would gain the land and loyalty of Kurdish chiefs and notables, and the latter would be assured a



wide measure of autonomy.<sup>2</sup> While this arrangement was mostly satisfactory to Kurdish notables, it does not seem to have significantly changed conditions on the ground for the average Kurdish peasant or nomad; after all, they largely continued to live under the aghas and sheikhs whom they had lived under or served before. With the military campaigns in the region more or less over, however, they did likely benefit from the increased security that the new arrangement brought to the region.

The battles over Kurdistan, whose oral history was versified in the Kurdish epic, *Mem û Zîn*, by Ehmed-ê Khanî in the late 16th century, did sharpen a feature of Kurdish identity that would continue to take shape through subsequent centuries, and exists even today: the notion of the Kurds as a people divided and Kurdistan as the battleground on which the wars between others were fought, with Kurds caught in the middle and “splashed with blood.”<sup>3</sup> While later Kurdish nationalists would see the Kurds during this moment as a self-aware “nation,” who recognized that the Kurds needed their own ruler, history does not bear out this claim for this period, most significantly because this view eclipses the agency of the Kurds in the deals between the Ottoman state and Kurdish leaders, and subsequent efforts on the part of locals to continually negotiate, through even less formal means, more satisfactory arrangements for themselves, often at the expense of “Kurdish unity.” Extending into the modern period, these “negotiations” could include rebellions, the assumption of more local power than had been agreed upon, or even temporary “defection” across the border with Iran. Leaving the empire with tens of thousands of animals, for example, was to take an enormous amount of wealth into the territory of another state. Kurdish agency has been sorely lacking from narratives on Kurdish history until recently.

While the concept of the Kurds as a “people divided” would really take shape in the modern period, the situation surrounding its emergence has indeed colored Kurdish history from the sixteenth

century, and particularly since the nineteenth century. Outsiders have pointed to the “fickle” or “wishy-washy” behavior of Kurdish leaders who have negotiated with rivals or enemy states, and even Kurdish nationalists have abhorred this lack of unity and the role that Kurdish leaders have played in achieving said lack of unity. But if we perhaps see this as “bet-hedging behavior,” which is a survival strategy of non-dominant groups living in frontiers, borderlands, and bordered lands, we may arrive at a more nuanced picture of these negotiations and the agency that local Kurds brought to them. There continued to be local power struggles in the region, and certain Kurdish leaders sought to expand their local influence and holdings of wealth (in land, animals or symbolic power), frequently at the expense of other Kurds. They often enlisted the support of “outsiders” as much as “outsiders” used Kurdish leaders for their own purposes.<sup>4</sup> This view may not support nationalists’ claims, but it does return Kurdish agency to Kurdish history, and it helps us see the dynamics of Kurdish society over the centuries in a more nuanced light.

The flexible arrangement negotiated by Kurdish leaders and the Ottoman state in the sixteenth century was never static, but it was more radically altered in the nineteenth century when central Ottoman authorities embarked on a series of centralizing and “modernizing” reforms designed to stave off further territorial losses. It was during this period that the major Kurdish principalities were brought down in a series of military operations that stretched over decades. This campaign included the most expansive and well known of them — the emirate overseen by Mîr Bedir Khan. Bedir Khan Beg (as he was also known) took inspiration from Mehmed Ali’s modernizing military reforms in Egypt, and recruited elite units from Kurdish tribes, who were now under his authority instead of under their tribal chiefs, whose job it had traditionally been to command “soldiers” from their own tribes. Bedir Khan Beg even made military agreements with at least one government official. It is said that he had the Friday prayers recited in his name and that he even had his own coins minted. All this, plus his refusal to send troops to assist the Ottomans in the war

with Russia (1828-29) indicated to the central Ottoman government that his emirate had to go. In the 1840s, the last of the Kurdish-Ottoman emirates had been destroyed by the same state that had seen that a flexible governing policy in their eastern regions was an asset to the state. This version of flexibility was gone, but a new sort of these emirates, now tribal but still backed by the state, would emerge later in the century. Here, too, emerging tribal powers would draft the state into their battles on the ground as much as the state employed them in the state's interests.

With the Kurdish emirates destroyed, tribes re-emerged as the most powerful local socio-political entities in the region. But tribes did not completely fill the void that the emirates had left. Instead of expanding and replacing the functions the emirates had performed, as Martin van Bruinessen has suggested, these "tribal entities that we see articulating themselves in each consecutive phase of administrative centralization became correspondingly smaller, less complicated, and more genealogically homogenous: emirates gave way to tribal confederacies, confederacies to large tribes, large tribes to smaller ones."<sup>5</sup> Power had moved away from many traditional leaders,<sup>6</sup> and rivalry among chieftains was replaced, in the words of a British agent observing the transformation, by "a hundred petty quarrels among the descendants."<sup>7</sup> Shifts in tribal structures are, in fact, the norm over time. We just need to historicize these changes in order to understand them, and in so doing, we undermine the essentialist primordial notions of "tribe" and "tribal" that have frequently been reified and blind to historical changes not just to individual tribes, but to a society's "tribalness" over time. The features of given tribes have changed often in response to the world around them, and this has not just been as a reaction to modified relations between tribes and surrounding or incorporating states, but also to changes in the value of different kinds of resources and the group's access to them.<sup>8</sup>

One of the problems that emerged in the Ottoman East<sup>9</sup> was that while tribal power re-emerged across the region, there was a

disruption in “normal” governance. The state was unable to bring centralized rule to the region, and nor could it fill the governance void left by the destruction of the emirates; the tribes, on their own, were not able to govern the region either. But the time-honored tradition of ruling through local agents did continue, albeit with fresh faces. The state carried on indirect rule in the nineteenth century through new intermediaries — individual tribal chiefs — often installing pliant chiefs where necessary, thus interfering with the tribal order as locals had constructed it. Other factors also influenced the changing face of power in the region. The commercialization of agriculture, the rising value associated with land ownership, and the “modern” land-registry system were economic factors that had contributed to conflicts over resources on the ground. Added to this was the shift in the waters of the Euphrates River from the eastern channel to the western, which displaced tribes, not to mention the occasional distribution of irrigable land from the government to tribal notables in exchange for fixed rent. All of these led to new tribal rivalries and feuds.<sup>10</sup> Provincial reorganization ensued in the middle of the century, but governance would still a problem. Once again, the state had to turn to the tribes to act as intermediaries in local governance, and now policing.

The Ottoman state created a new version of the longstanding relationship with Kurdish notables in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of the Hamidiye Cavalry Regiments, a Kurdish tribal militia that was ostensibly formed to act as a local bulwark against Russia, but in reality was to be a local militia to be called up against Armenian nationalist activities in the region. It was also a means to bring the remote and difficult-to-govern region into the Ottoman fold, and to transform the Kurds into “civilized” Ottomans and to remove them from a nomadic (and more difficult-to-govern) lifestyle. While many other Kurds (peasants and notables alike) abhorred this institution, we cannot ignore that Kurdish tribal leaders engaged in their own efforts to draft the Ottoman state into ongoing conflicts over resources on the ground. In other words, their activities demonstrate both Kurdish agency in the process of “conquest” or

“reconquest,” and also highlight Kurdish divisions on the ground.<sup>11</sup> Both perspectives nuance our understanding of Ottoman History and Kurdish History as well.

The circumstances surrounding the formation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry demonstrate how difficult it is to separate Kurdish history from that of the Kurds’ neighbors, here Armenians in particular. It highlights the problems in writing “ethnic” and “national” histories. Too often, certain groups are drafted into nationalist teleologies, which confuse more than they explain. As such, in our discussions of Kurdish history we need to strike a balance between the history of one “people” and the history of a region or political entity, prescient and clear along the way about the historical and discursive constructions of these “peoples,” regions, and entities. In other words, while there are those who have continued to deny that the Kurds have a history,<sup>12</sup> we can certainly assert Kurdish history as a valid topic of study while noting its relationality to the histories of others, and to larger histories that involve Kurds and others as well.

While the Ottoman state undoubtedly negotiated with the Kurds as Kurds since the earliest moments of contact, and while there was certainly an awareness of Kurdishness over the following centuries, most Kurds have had overlapping identities, and historical events have conditioned which ones have come to the fore at different times. The key issue that concerns us here, however, is how the assertion of a unique Kurdish identity in terms of nationality has played out over the past century. With the rise of nation-states, an accompanying by-product was the concept of statelessness, and this notion (sometimes a reality) has been particularly relevant to constructions of Kurdish identity over the past century; the history of these realities cannot be separated from the histories of the Kurds’ neighbors and the states that house them. Most significantly, a unique modern Kurdish identity emerged in the modern process of national thinking, and new ideas surrounding what I call “peoplehood” and the nation. This thinking is intimately linked to the concept (and for some, the

reality) of statelessness. Most significantly, these paradigms are related to modern constructions of citizenship, and constructions of minorities as byproducts of the citizen-making process.<sup>13</sup> For Kurds, this development was closely connected to the processes through which Armenians — their neighbors - were “minoritized” in the late-Ottoman period, and also through which the Ottoman state began to be regarded as the domain of Turks and Turkishness, both interrelated developments.

Part of the wider reforms that brought the central Ottoman government to see centralization as a modernizing goal that would preserve the territorial integrity of the remaining empire was also the interest in promulgating new concepts of citizenship. This was still an empire, but one that had begun to “think” like a nation-state. Demarcating boundaries was an important part of this shift, and so was defining the people who would live within those boundaries. This process cannot be separated from the fight for sovereignty and territorial integrity, which was constantly undermined by external powers.<sup>14</sup> The Ottoman citizenship law of 1869 transformed the status of Ottoman subjects organized along religious lines to citizens—all nationals of the same state, and all equal in “matters of military service, in the administration of justice, in taxation, in admission to civil and military schools, in public employment, and in social respect,”<sup>15</sup> building upon the earlier Hatt-ı Hümayun of 1856. While these reforms and transformations were celebrated in various Ottoman spheres, the thinking that surrounded notions of “citizenship” could not ultimately be extricated from wider events and processes faced by those who were concerned with preserving the territorial integrity of the empire. As European powers and Russia claimed an interest in protecting “minorities” in Ottoman domains (read Christian), the concept of citizenship came, in the Ottoman domains as it did elsewhere, to be less inclusive than the reforms intended, and to focus on weeding out those who were suspect — not just “second-class citizens,” but those whose loyalty to the state was deemed dubious. For the Ottoman state, as with other

modern states, what could have been not just a legal document for a broader definition of “national belonging” but also a social practice was marred by the concept of threat and the realities of foreign intervention. In the case of Christians, who were now seen as imperial stooges who were linked to the external powers seeking to dismember the empire and meddle in its internal affairs, citizenship would not mean equality.<sup>16</sup> The Armenians came to be associated with this threat, and were never able to benefit from the new concept of citizenship, even though the vast majority of Armenians continued to be loyal to the empire and while many did seek reforms they did not agitate for secession.

While Kurdish and Armenian history had been linked as long as the two groups had lived as neighbors in eastern Anatolia, as “brothers of land and water,”<sup>17</sup> a new sense of Kurdish identity was sharpened in this process. Some Kurds began to express concern over rumors that the sultan was about to grant the Armenians a “beylik” (principality) of their own, under which Kurds would be subordinate subjects.<sup>18</sup> Others chose to profit from the notion that Armenians were disloyal, and were traitors to the continued existence of the empire. These parties drew upon the ongoing and changing needs for Ottoman governance in the region, the growing suspicion of Armenians, and the quest for local power to usurp Armenian land and wealth.<sup>19</sup> It was the convergence of all of the factors described thus far in this chapter that helped to contribute to the emergence of a unique, albeit conflicted, Kurdish identity.

In their gazettes and journals, Kurdish writers displayed this sense of conflictedness. Many of them had grown increasingly aware of the dynamics that surrounded them, and, true to the bet-hedging strategies of a people in the borderlands, they began to explore a variety of options for survival, first as individual leaders seeking to maximize their wealth base, and later as a community caught up in the nation-state-making process. Particularly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Kurds carved out a modern identity in dialogue

with constructions of Armenian and Turkish nationalist identities in particular.

After the Treaty of Berlin (1878), Kurds responded to the rumors that the sultan seemed to be doing the bidding of the European powers who had designated the Ottoman East (“Kurdistan,” to the Kurds) as “the six Armenian provinces,” and who were set on dismantling the empire and handing Kurdistan over to the Armenians, along with the Kurds within.<sup>20</sup> Already by 1879 a British agent in the region reported that Turks and Kurds in Van “appear[ed] to be deeply irritated” with the presence of European consuls in the region and believed that local Christians had brought them there “to upset the old order of things.”<sup>21</sup> The rebellion led by Sheikh Ubeydullah the following two years also garnered support among the Kurds because of the rumors that had begun to circulate that the sultan, in cahoots with European powers, would soon grant the Armenians (and also the Nestorians) territory — territory that was also inhabited by Kurds.<sup>22</sup> When Sadettin Pasha, an Ottoman official tasked with convincing Kurds to go along with the new reform package of 1895, toured the Van region in 1896 he was struck by how many Kurds believed these rumors to be true.<sup>23</sup> In their articles, Kurds were especially concerned with violence against Armenians, and how it would make Kurds (and indeed the Ottoman Empire) look in the eyes of the international community, and how this violence served as a reason for Europeans to meddle in Ottoman (and because of where they lived, Kurdish) affairs. Much of the violence against Armenians had been committed by the Hamidiye Light Cavalry, who sought to profit from the atmosphere of fear and suspicion to expand their own status and land-holdings.<sup>24</sup> In 1900, Abdurrahman Bedir Khan wrote,

*What really irritates me in Europe, because of my nationality, of which I am a proud member, are the Europeans’ reproachful comments on clashes with Armenians. What are the reasons for this looting and plunder, which make you [Kurds] guilty in the eyes...of Europe? Believe me, I know all of these reasons. I know*



*everything about how Armenians desire to separate this holy land, Kurdistan, from the Ottoman body, and to make it a land for themselves... However, all of these events do not give you the right to clash with the Armenians. It is never right to trust the policies of the government.*<sup>25</sup>

Some Kurds even published in Armenian journals to the same effect (which was frequently not just one of ambivalence about Kurdish-Armenian relations but about opposition to Sultan Abdülhamid II). In one such article, Abdullah Cevdet blamed the sultan for paving “the way for an Armenian-Kurdish struggle” through rumor-mongering.<sup>26</sup>

As the new century progressed, Kurdish thinkers remained engaged in the question of identity, and where they fit into the new categories being suggested by their contemporaries or imposed by the state. Armenians tended to be the group against whom they defined their identity, but so, increasingly, were Turks. In this exploration, Kurdish writers turned to the most contemporary research in “peoplehood” studies (if we might call it that) to probe Kurdish identity vis-à-vis the identities of the Kurds’ neighbors. Sometimes, “racial” research led them to link themselves to Armenians and other “Iranic” peoples. By 1913 one writer suggested that ultimately Armenians and Kurds were the same people:

*As is known, Kurds and Armenians are grandchildren of the same Urdu people... Although our script, literature, language, and racial customs used to be the same, later the Armenians accepted Christianity and sought a separate existence from us. Recently they advanced and began to pursue an unclear goal. It is these kinds of actions that put the Armenians on a different path from us Kurds. I wish these two racial brethren, Kurds and Armenians, would join hand in hand and work towards pursuing the same goals and establish a basic mutual existence. Yes, the Kurds are a little behind; Armenians are a little ahead. But do not assume that they will never accept this proposal of*

*ours. Let us Kurds show who we are. Without a doubt, time will bring them and us together.*<sup>27</sup>

After the war, however, articles in the Kurdish press began to ridicule Armenian claims for their piece of the post-Ottoman settlement, and to favor Kurdish claims. Each side used statistics, history, and “racial” studies to bolster their claims at the upcoming peace conference.<sup>28</sup> While Kurds sometimes linked themselves to Armenians “racially” and in other ways in their pieces dedicated to Kurdish history and identity in their press, it became clear that they were doing so for a variety of reasons, key among which was their need to separate themselves from “Turks,” whom some Kurds were seeing had been starting to deny Kurdish identity as such, and to actively engage in Turkifying Kurds (and indeed others). A number of articles in the Kurdish-Ottoman press take up this subject,<sup>29</sup> and we must see the Kurds’ attempts to link themselves to Armenians in this light as well.

While the Kurds were conflicted about their relationship with Armenians for many decades, much of this conflict grew to rest in their relationship with Turks, even more than Armenians and other Christians, and also more than Arabs and other Ottoman “elements.” This was because a Turkish nationalist identity-in-the-making saw Armenians first, then Kurds, as the primary “Others.”<sup>30</sup> There was no single Kurdish position at the end of empire. Kurds were straddling a variety of options (as were other Ottoman groups presented with the breakup of the empire), and pursued a number of strategies to obtain what they felt was the best settlement for them. In this they were not unified. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the notion of “Kurdish unity” has been historically and discursively constructed in different contexts over several centuries; here, however, we are concerned with the post-World-War-I settlements.

Kurds took an active interest in carving out for themselves the best post-war settlement they could imagine they might have, but

even here there was no “Kurdish unity,” because the realities of living in what we now call a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic empire did not mean the same thing to all Kurds. With history as hindsight, we see that for Kurds and other non-dominant groups in the empire, power and privilege had not, at least until the late-nineteenth, but really the twentieth century, been wrapped up in ethnicity (although this claim is complicated, and although it certainly had been wrapped up in religion, but only to a certain extent, as works like Christine Philliou’s show<sup>31</sup>). It was not “Kurdish disunity,” Kurdish fickleness, or Kurdish wishy-washiness that caused the variety of responses to the dilemmas posed by the occupation and likely dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. Rather, we need to recognize that Kurds were as complex in their socio-political and geo-political aspirations as were neighboring groups, and even groups in other imperial settings far away.

Kurds, as a people who had existed on the frontiers of empires, then on the borderlands as they evolved, and then across borders as they evolved, developed complex strategies for dealing with issues of sovereignty and access to resources. History has shown that although Kurdish nationalist historiography has lamented a “Kurdistan divided,” Kurdish elites in the Ottoman period tended to pursue their own interests, rather than the interests of a “Kurdish community,” in part because the notion of what and who this community consisted of was in flux and not national.

*Janet Klein is an associate professor of history at the University of Akron, Ohio, USA.*

- <sup>1</sup> Doktor Abdullah Cevdet, "Bir Hitab," *Rojî Kurd* 1 (2 Haziran, 1329/15 June 1913), 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Please see my *Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 53-63.
- <sup>3</sup> In Ismet Cheriff Vanly, *Survey of the National Question of Turkish Kurdistan with Historical Background*, (N.p.: Hevra, 1971), 16.
- <sup>4</sup> Historians of the Ottoman Empire, here of the Kurdish element, might benefit from recent attempts to rethink the notion of "conquest" in other imperial settings. Increasingly scholars are finding that so-called "conquests" have not been uni-directional, but recognize the agency of the "conquered" in their own efforts to draw would-be "conquerors" into their own local power struggles. These historians recognize that we should not see the process teleologically; in other words, we should recognize how so-called "conquered peoples" in imperial settings frequently drafted the "conquerors" (or conquistadors (in the Latin-American context)) into their own local power struggles. One good example is Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "Kurds, States, and Tribes," in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, edited by Faleh Jabar and Hosham Dawod, (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 169. See also his *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, (London: Zed Press, 1992), Ch. 2.
- <sup>6</sup> [Mela] Mehmûd Beyazîdî, *Edet û Rûsnametname-yê Ekradyîyê*, (edited and translated into Russian, with Kurdish original, by M.B. Rudenko), (Moscow: Izd-vovostochnoi lit-ry), 1963), 102.
- <sup>7</sup> [Unsigned], Report on Vilayet of Bitlis, Jan. 30, 1885, (TNA: FO 195/1521).
- <sup>8</sup> See my *Margins of Empire*, esp. Ch. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> The notion of the "Ottoman East" is a new and exciting development in Ottoman Studies, which aims to demonstrate that the "periphery" is as important for studying the empire's dynamics as a whole as are more central areas, and which also seeks to highlight how "ethnic" approaches to the region's history have failed to capture the complexity of the region's dynamics. See the forthcoming volume by Yaşar Tolga Cora, Dzvoinar Derderian, and Ali Sipahi (forthcoming, 2016).
- <sup>10</sup> Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900-1950: A Political, Social, and Economic History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 25.
- <sup>11</sup> See note 4 above.
- <sup>12</sup> A good example is Abdülhaluk Çay, *Türk Millî Bütünlüğü İçerisinde Doğu Anadolu Aşiretlerinin Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Kültürel Yapıları ve Bölücülük Meselesi*, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1995), 23, cited in Ergül, İl. Abdülhamid'in Doğu Politikası ve Hamidiye Alayları, (İzmir: Çağlayan Yayınları, 1997), 5.
- <sup>13</sup> See my forthcoming work, tentatively titled "Making Minorities in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians and Kurds," *Ab Imperio* (2016).
- <sup>14</sup> See my *Margins of Empire*, "Introduction."
- <sup>15</sup> Roderic Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876*, (New York: Gordian Press, 1973), 55.
- <sup>16</sup> See my "The Minority Question: A View from History and the Kurdish Periphery," in Will Kymlicka and Eva Pfössl, eds, *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- <sup>17</sup> Jelle Verheij, "'Les frères de terre et d'eau': Sur le rôle des Kurdes dans les massacres arméniens de 1894-1896," *Les annales de l'autre Islam* 5, edited by Martin van Bruinessen, (Paris: ERISM, 1998).
- <sup>18</sup> Sami Önal, ed. *Sadettin Paşa'nın Anıları: Ermeni-Kürt Olayları* (Van, 1896), (İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2003), 21.
- <sup>19</sup> See my *Margins of Empire*.
- <sup>20</sup> Treaty of Berlin, Article 61 (1878) reads: "The Sublime Porte undertakes to carry out, without further delay, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by Armenians, and to guarantee their security against the Circassians and Kurds. It will periodically make known the steps taken to this effect to the Powers, who will superintend their application." cited in Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, (New York: Holt, 2006), 39.
- <sup>21</sup> Clayton to Trotter. No. 4 . Political. Van, Aug. 29, 1879 (TNA: PRO: FO 195/1237).
- <sup>22</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: its Origins and Development*, reprint of

- Dr. Jwaideh's Ph.D. thesis, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 83. Jwaideh emphasized the Kurds' fear of Armenian ascendancy in the region, as well as the new European consuls in the region (which I have documented in my own review of British archives above).
- <sup>23</sup> Sadettin Paşa'nın Anıları, 21, 49, 98-99.
- <sup>24</sup> See my Margins of Empire (esp. Ch. 4).
- <sup>25</sup> Abdurrahman Bedir Khan, "Kürdlere," *Kurdistan* 25, (18 Eylül, 1316/ 1 October, 1900), 2 (reprinted in M. Emîn Bozarslan's reprints of this journal: *Kurdistan: Rojnama Kurdî ya pêşîn / İlk Kürd Gazetesi, 1898-1902*, (Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1991).
- <sup>26</sup> Bir Kürd [Abdullah Cevdet's pen-name], [Untitled?] *Droshak* (January, 1900), cited in Garo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve Ermeni-Kürt İlişkileri*, 15. yy'dan Günümüze, (Stockholm: Orfeus, 1986) 223-224. See FN 47 in my "Conflict and Collaboration," 164.
- <sup>27</sup> Mevlânzâde Rifat, "Muhterem Hetawî Kurd Gazetesi Müessislerine," *Hetawî Kurd* 2 (21 Teşrin-i Sâni, 1329/ 3 December, 1913), 2.
- <sup>28</sup> See my M.A. Thesis, "Claiming the Nation: The Origins and Nature of Kurdish Nationalist Discourse: A Study of the Kurdish Press in the Ottoman Empire," (Princeton University, 1996), 43, n.94.
- <sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Kurdîyê Bitlîsî* (Halil Hayali), "Kürdler Münasebetiyle," *Jîn* 2, 3 (20 Teşrin-i Sanî 1334/20 November, 1918), 1-6; *Kurdîyê Bitlîsî* (Halil Hayali), "Kürdler Münasebetiyle," *Jîn* 3 (20 Teşrin-i Sanî 1334/20 November, 1918), 1-4, reprinted in M. Emîn Bozarslan, *Jîn: Kovara Kurdî-Tirkî/Kürdçe-Türkçe Dergi, 1918-1919*, Vol. 1, (Uppsala: Weşanxana Deng, 1985); and Süleymaniyeli Tefik, "'Jîn' Dergisi Aracılığıyla Kurdîyê Bitlîsî Kardeşime," *Jîn* 4, (28 Teşrin-i Sanî, 1334/28 November, 1918), 1-4, reprinted in Bozarslan, *Jîn*, Vol. 1. See also Y[usuf] Ziya, "Kürd Tarihinden Baban Hanedanı," *Jîn* 9 (16 Kânûn-i Sanî, 1335/16 January, 1919), in Bozarslan, Vol. 2, 445, and *Kurdîyê Bitlîsî* (Halil Hayali), "Mühacirin Müdiriyeti Neşriyatından 'Kürdler' Münasebetiyle Dehak Efsanesi," *Jîn* 1 (Teşrin-i Sanî, 1334/7 November, 1918), Bozarslan, Vol. 1, 7-11. Some pages are illegible. Please see Bozarslan's transliteration on pp 189-192; Barzinicizade Abdulvahid, "Gönül İsterki," *Kurdistan* 8, (29 Mayıs, 1335/ 29 May, 1919). Please note that although the title of this journal is the same, it is not the same publication as the *Kurdistan* gazette that was published between 1898 and 1902; and Hizanizâde Kemal Fevzi, "Hükümet-i Hazıraya Açık Mektub," *Jîn* 13, (10 Mart, 1335/10 March, 1919), 3, (reprinted in Bozarslan, Vol. 3, (1986)).
- <sup>30</sup> See Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- <sup>31</sup> Christine Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

# **A religious landscape of the Kurds**

*Diane E. King*

The Kurds are a religiously diverse ethnic group with significant populations in northwest Iran, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Kurdish-majority Rojava cantons in northern Syria, and southeast Turkey – a region referred to as “Kurdistan” by ethnic Kurds and their supporters. Significant numbers of Kurds also live in the major cities of those four countries, as well as in Western Europe and in several cities in the United States. While most Kurdish people are Sunni Muslims and belong to the Shafi’i madhhab (school of jurisprudence), some are Shi’i, and some Yarsan (also called Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka’i), Alevi or Yezidi. Others are agnostics, atheists, recent converts to non-sectarian Christianity or fit other religious descriptions.

## **Religions and adherents**

Perhaps more contrasting statements may be made about the Kurds and their approaches to religion than about any other population in the Muslim-majority areas of the world. On the one hand, a visitor from outside the region is likely to notice many signs of religious practice and expression. Mosques seem to be everywhere, even in very remote villages with many being built over the past two decades. In a town or city on a Friday, throngs of men can be seen praying in the mosques, while the women pray at home. Churches are also readily visible, especially in those areas where Christians have long clustered. In Turkey, many churches are ruins or have been converted to mosques or other buildings, their worshippers absent since the Armenian genocide. Elsewhere, however, Christians can be seen heading to and from church on Sundays. Judaism was once the third main religion, until virtually all of the Jews left following the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. According to descendants of Jews with whom I have spoken, those who stayed converted to

Islam. However, Jewish influence is still felt in some cities and rural communities, and in those places, people still speak of the Jewish community that existed until a few decades ago. One point about faiths has been made repeatedly: adherents need non-adherents to help them with their rituals: Muslims helping Jews on the Sabbath, Yazidis helping Muslims at their circumcision ritual, and so on. To some degree, this interdependency still exists.



A teenage girl performing Salat, the Muslim prayer, in her home in Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (1995). © Diane E. King

Despite the generally high degree of religiosity in Kurdistan, it also encompasses non- or anti-religious movements. The PKK has Marxist-Leninist - therefore atheist - roots and although it adopted a softer stance on religion following the initial years after its founding by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978, it still embodies the antithesis to the religious groups and parties in the area, such as the Islamist movements in both Sunni and Shi'i Islam.

Not all religious people in Kurdistan are content to practice or oppose religion peacefully. The Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja and the surrounding area has long had a significant Salafist population, which gave rise to a violent Islamist group, Ansar al Islam, in the early 2000s. Now the Islamic State is drawing a few people, mainly young

men, to its violent Sunni Islamist cause from diverse locations in Kurdistan. Islamic State-controlled cities are a short bus or taxi-ride away, and while most Kurds are strongly opposed to the Islamic State and the forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government are at war with it, a few Kurds have joined its ranks.

Although Islam is the religion of the majority of Kurdish people, non-Muslim Kurds represent a diverse array of faiths and sub-categories within them. Christianity in Kurdistan has, until the recent introduction of non-sectarian Protestantism, long been conflated with ethnicity. The Christians include Armenians living in Kurdish-majority northeast Iran and Syriac, Chaldean or Assyrian Christians living in Turkey, Syria or Iraq. To speak Syriac (also called neo-Aramaic) as a first language is to belong to one of the local Christian denominations. Infant baptism is virtually universal, and makes official what is already assumed: that the infant is inheriting both a specific expression of the Christian faith and an ethnic identity. Kurdistan is also home to a number of syncretistic religions, such as the Yarsan and Alevis. As van Bruinessen (1997) notes regarding the Alevis of eastern Turkey, they are Zaza or Kurmanji Kurdish speakers who belong to particular Alevi-identified tribes. He goes on to note that they traditionally make pilgrimages and observe dietary restrictions and that some have recognized divine incarnation or presence. Their beliefs are not well-known by all adherents or by outsiders and the Turkish state has not looked on them favorably, denying that they are Sunni Muslims and driving their practices and expressions of identity underground.

In the past year, the Yezidi (Êzidî) Kurds have, unfortunately, become the most famous of the religious minorities in Kurdistan, as many of them were victimized by attacks on Shingal (Sinjar) by the Islamic State. Yezidis believe in a supreme God and venerate Melek Taus, the Peacock Angel. Their villages are easily distinguished from the surrounding Muslim and Christian villages by the ribbed spires of their shrines that tower above the other structures. Yezidis are also important politically in Iraq, where they fought alongside other Kurds



against the Iraqi government.



Yezidi men serving in the Peshmerga forces, Dohuk Governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (1998). © Diane E. King

In the 2014 attacks, thousands of people fled up rocky and inhospitable mountainsides in an attempt to escape the onslaught by the extreme and violent Sunni group Islamic State, which is largely comprised of Iraqi Arabs but has also attracted Sunnis from many other backgrounds and countries. Thousands of Yezidis died or were killed, many of them adult men who were singled out and executed. According to media reports, word of mouth and social media accounts, several thousand more Yezidis remain in captivity, where they are sexually and otherwise abused.

## **Refugees**

Especially the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq have become a place of refuge for many people who have fled conflicts in adjacent areas, in which people of different religious categories are facing off as enemies or in which religious persecution is occurring. Many are survivors of religiously-motivated atrocities such as massacres and rape, may have seen friends and family members victimized or killed and may have lost their possessions and homes. The main aggressor

is the Islamic State, which currently controls a few Kurdish-majority towns and villages as well as significant swaths of territory adjacent to Kurdish-majority areas in Iraq and Syria. Some territories, most notably the town of Kobani ('Ayn al-'Arab), were temporarily under the control of the Islamic State but have been re-taken by Kurdish forces.

Many people who have sought and found refuge in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the PYD-controlled cantons of Rojava are Kurds from rural areas such as Shingal that are geographically separated from the rest of the Kurdish-majority area and Arab-majority cities such as Mosul and Damascus. Many of those who have fled are not ethnically Kurdish, but are Arab, Assyrian Christian, Chaldean Christian or members of the other collective identity categories that are passed down the generations by fathers. Now a new entity, the Islamic State, seeks to unsettle this century-old system in a profoundly destructive way: It seeks to forcibly convert, kill, enslave, imprison or expunge all but likeminded Sunni Muslims from the territory it occupies. Many of the people seeking refuge in Kurdish areas have fled the threat of forced conversion or adherence to the Islamic State's extreme and violent brand of Sunni Islam.

Sufi movements - mystical movements within Islam - are a very important part of the Kurdish religious landscape. Two main orders operate in Kurdistan, the Qadiri and the Naqshbandi. Sufi leaders (and in many cases their male patrilineal descendants) carry the title "shaikh" in Kurdistan. The role of a shaikh is not only religious; a shaikh is often a powerful economic or political patron, with the ability to influence and lead people beyond his circle of religious followers. As was the case in the Barzani and Talabani lineages whose members belonged to the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders respectively and who founded the two main Kurdish movements in Iraq.

### **Religious categories and the state**

In all four quadrants of the Kurdish homeland, religious identity

is assigned at birth by the state based on the identity held by the infant's father. It is thus part of the broader regime of patrilineal descent reckoning, in which social categories are passed down the generations by fathers, which constitutes a powerful conceptual frame for identifying and organizing people and is invoked in settings ranging from the family to the state. Patrilinearity is the form of descent reckoning common to the vast majority of corporate groups and states from Morocco to Pakistan, and Kurdistan is no exception. In it, only fathers pass on identity categories such as lineage, tribe, ethnicity, religion and citizenship, while these categories are often overlapping or fused.

Voluntarily changing one's assigned religious category ranges from bureaucratically difficult (in all four states) to life-threatening (such as in Iran if the conversion is from Islam, since the state has the option to apply the death penalty in such a case). Citizens of the four states are only allowed by law to adhere to a short list of faiths, which appear on state-issued individual identity documents (although not all such documents). Religious adherence outside of one of the faiths allowed by the government, as well as agnosticism and atheism, is prohibited by the laws of each state, which is ironic given that in all of the Kurdish homeland countries (except Iran since 1979) the state has to varying degrees claimed to be secular or has promoted aspects of secularism. Generally speaking, Kurdish areas can be viewed as places that have experienced a deficit of religious freedom. Millions of ethnic Kurds now live under a Kurdish flag in their enclaves in Iraq and Syria, but this has so far not resulted in significant changes to the interrelationship between religious categorization and citizenship.

How easy or difficult is it in Kurdish areas to change one's religion? May adherents freely and without fear of shunning, backlash or violence abandon religion, convert to a different faith or invite others to join their religious group? In most places where Kurds live, these questions - inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- are mainly outside of Kurdish control, since the central state government sets the laws. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, however, has more sovereignty and has thus had more opportunities to protect religious freedom. The KRG has made tremendous progress in the area of religious liberty, and has made particular efforts to harbor religious IDPs and refugees. It has allocated substantial budgets to support them and allowed foreign relief organizations to provide aid. It has also allowed for some religious flexibility and experimentation. For example, it permitted the opening of a Kurdish Protestant church, Kurdziman Church of Christ, in 2000. Church representatives claim that it was “the first registered church of Muslim-background Christians in the whole Middle East.” At the same time, the Kurdistan Regional Government has not made significant changes to, or attempted to dismantle, the system that it received from the Iraqi government in which each infant is assigned to a state-recognized religious category: On the contrary, it has created a new quota system based on religion (King 2014: 152-153). So, although the KRG deserves recognition for its accomplishments in the area of granting religious refugees a safe haven, it is also still a sectarian state just as the Iraqi state of which it is a part.

*Diane E. King is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Kentucky, USA. This article draws on fieldwork she has been conducting since 1995 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and with Kurdish communities in the United States.*

Bruinessen, Martin van

1992 Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan. London: Zed Books.

1997 "Aslini Inkar Eden Haramzadedir! The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis." In Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East: Collected Papers of the International Symposium „Alevism in Turkey and Comparable Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East in the Past and Present“ Berlin, 14-17 April 1995. K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B.K. Heinkele, and A.O. Beaujean, eds. Pp. 1-24. Leiden: Brill.

King, Diane E.

2014 Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Rudaw

2015 PKK Declares Autonomous Region in Turkey's Dersim Province.

<http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/180820151>.

United Nations General Assembly

1949 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.

# The language varieties of the Kurds

*Jaffer Sheyholislami*

Most Kurds identify themselves as speakers of the Kurdish language or *Kurdî* (کوردی), in Kurdish. In terms of the number of speakers, Kurdish ranks fourth in the Middle East following Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and fortieth in the world (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami, & Skutnabb-Kangas 2012). Being strong numerically, however, has not always resulted in the official recognition of Kurdish, nor has it helped the language to be immune from stigmatization, suppression and even endangerment. Most of the Kurdish speaking areas have been divided among four countries: Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria (some scholars also include Armenia and other Caucasus and Central Asia republics in addition to Lebanon). Each state has treated Kurdish under different policies from outright prohibition of the language (e.g. Turkey 1925 - 1992; Iran 1925 - 1941; Syria 1965 - 2011), to various degrees of tolerance (e.g. Iran 1942 - present; Turkey 1992 - present; Syria mid-1930s - early 1960s), and official recognition (e.g. Iraq 1930s - present [local level] and 2005 - present [national level]). Different policies towards Kurdish, coupled with other geographical and socio-economic factors, have contributed to the rise of particular challenges for the language. Among these are the lack of a common standard language, a unified writing system and mutual intelligibility<sup>1</sup> across the main dialect groups – which are influenced by various aspects of the dominant state languages (sound system, vocabulary, grammar, idioms, and other discourse features).

## **A general description**

Kurdish is a macro-language<sup>2</sup> consisting of at least five dialect groups: Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (Kirmashani/Faili/Kalhuri), Zazaki and Gorani/Hawrami. These groups belong to the northwestern branch of Iranian

languages, a branch of the Indo-Iranian family, which is a sub-group of the world's largest family of languages - the Indo-European languages. On both linguistic and sociolinguistic grounds, this categorization sets Kurdish apart from Arabic and Turkish and places it close to Dari, Balouchi, Pashtu and Persian/Farsi. While linguists overwhelmingly accept this as a fact, there is less consensus as to the varieties of Kurdish itself. Whereas a number of Western philologists and theoretical linguists do not consider Zazaki and Gorani/Hawrami as Kurdish, the vast majority of the speakers of these varieties - except for a group of Zazaki intellectuals - consider their speech variety a Kurdish "dialect". While Central, Southern and Gorani/Hawrami groups are spoken in Iran and Iraq, Zazaki is spoken in Turkey only; Kurmanji is spoken in all major Kurdish areas. Only two dialect groups, Sorani and Kurmanji, have standardized literary varieties.

### **Kurdish Variety Groups**

#### **Kurmanji (Kurmançî کورمانجی )**

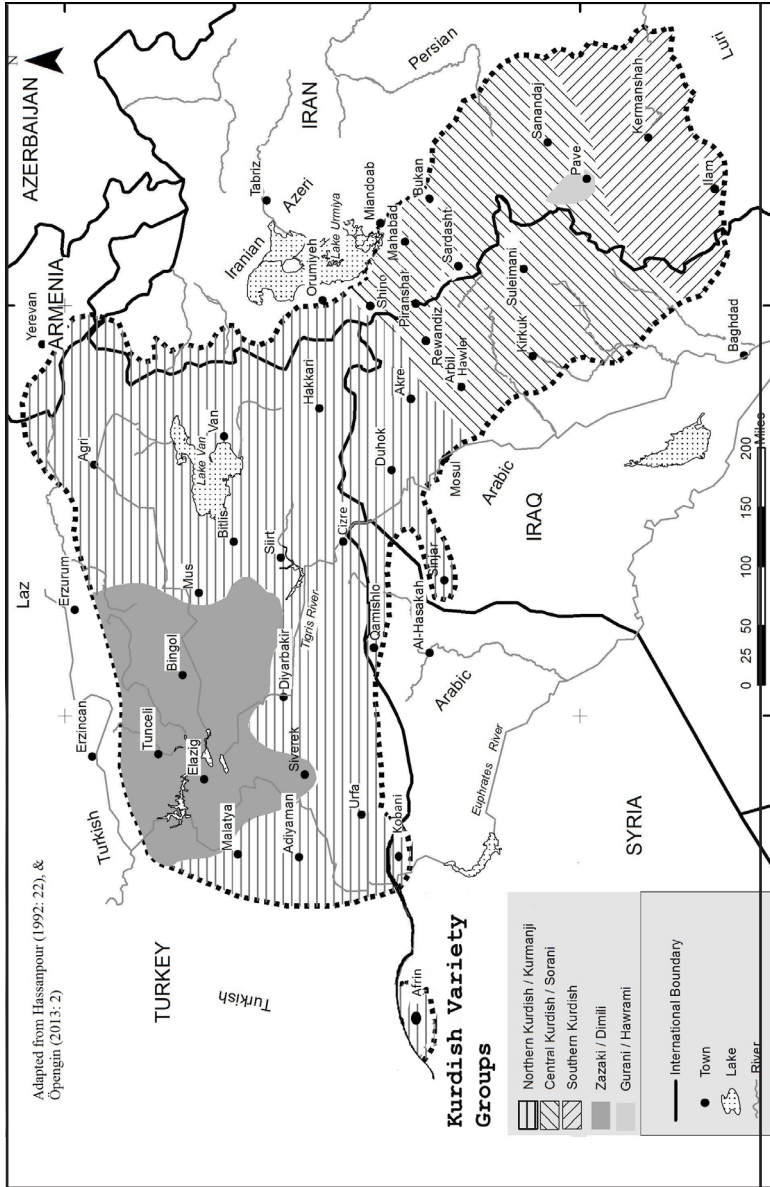
Kurmanji, or Northern Kurdish, is by far the largest Kurdish dialect group spoken by the vast majority of Kurds in Turkey (approx. 10-15 million), all Kurds in Syria (approx. 2 million), a large number of Kurds in Iraq (1-1.5 million), a smaller community in Iran (about 1 million, including Khorasan) and numerous communities in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (about 500 thousand to 1 million). Kurmanji - spoken by about 65% of all Kurds - is the only variety of Kurdish that is spoken in all major Kurdish areas in the Middle East, in addition to sizable populations in urban centers such as Istanbul and Damascus as well as diaspora communities in Germany, France and Sweden.

Kurdish scribal and literary culture, mostly in the form of poetry, started in Kurmanji at the turn of the 16th century. Kurdish print and media culture also started in Kurmanji. This included the first periodical *Kurdistan* (1898), the first book *Alifbayê Kurmançî* (Kurdish/Kurmanji alphabet in 1909), the first radio programs (in

Soviet Armenia in the 1920s) and the first satellite television (MED-TV in 1995). Significant standardization efforts of Kurmanji, however, started in the 1930s and 40s with the publication of two periodicals, Hawar and Ronahî. In the 1980s more steps towards modernization and intellectualization were taken by Kurdish intellectuals living in exile and diaspora communities in Europe at a time when Kurdish was banned in Turkey.

Standard Kurmanji, codified in the periodical Hawar in the 1930s, was based on the Botan dialect spoken in urban centers, such as Cizre in southeast Turkey. Over the years the standard Kurmanji has been enriched by contributions from all Kurmanji dialects. Kurmanji can be divided into two major dialect groups: Badini, or Southeastern Kurmanji, is spoken in the Duhok and Hawler/Erbil provinces in Iraq, in the Hakkari province in Turkey and in the northwestern part of the West Azerbaijan province (around and north of the city of Urumiya) in Iran. The second dialect group can be divided into three dialects: Central Kurmanji, spoken in the Mardin, Batman and Diyarbakir provinces in Turkey, Haseke province in Syria and the Ezidi-populated Sinjar/Shingal area east of Mosul in Iraq; Western Kurmanji, spoken in north of Aleppo in Syria and Gaziantep, Adiyaman, Kahramanmaraş and Malatya provinces in Turkey; and Northern Kurmanji, spoken in the Tunceli, Bingöl, Muş, Ağrı, Erzurum and Kars provinces in Turkey and north of Urumiya in Iran, as well as in Armenia and Georgia.





Kurdish Variety Groups (adapted from Hassanpour 1992 & Öpengin 2013)

### **Sorani (Sorani سۆرانی)**

Sorani, or Central Kurdish, is only spoken in Iran and Iraq. Writing in this variety lagged behind Hawrami and Kurmanji by about 200 years, yet from the early decades of the 1800s Sorani inserted its literary advantage. Although in the past two decades most Kurdish varieties - especially Kurmanji and one of its dialects in Iraq, Badini - have enjoyed a renaissance, Sorani continues to be the dominant medium in publishing, broadcasting, schooling and administration matters mainly because it is the main variety used in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. The literary standard of Sorani was initially based on the Sulaimani (Babani) variety, but over the past several decades standard Sorani has been enriched by influences from Hawleri, Mukriyani and Ardalani varieties. Sorani was also the official language of the short lived Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad in 1945-1946.

Like all speech varieties, Sorani is internally diversified. Major sub-dialects of Sorani Kurdish include Babani (spoken in Sulaimani and the surrounding areas), Hawleri (spoken in Erbil/Hawler, Rawanduz and thereabout), Mukriyani (spoken in Mahabad and the rest of the Mukriyan region - Bokan/Bukan, Sardasht, Piranshar, Shino and Naghada) and Ardalani (spoken in Sanandaj and surrounding towns and villages). Whereas the first two main dialects are spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan, the latter two are spoken in Iran. Due to geographical proximity, the Baban variety is close to Ardalani whereas Mukriyani is closer to Hawleri. The Baban and Mukriyani sub-dialects continue to be most influential in shaping standard Sorani. Sorani is predominantly written in the modified Perso-Arabic alphabet.

### **Southern Kurdish (کوردی باشووری)**

Similar to Sorani, Southern Kurdish, also referred to as Pehlewani, Kirmashani or Kermanshahi, is only spoken in Iraq and Iran. In the past decade, some dialects of southern Kurdish have become more visible in publications and broadcasting and on the World Wide Web and social media. Some of these dialects are as follows: Kirmashani

(spoken in and around the city of Kirmashan/Kermanshah), Garusi (spoken in the city of Bijar and its surroundings), Laki (spoken in the most southern parts of the provinces of Kirmashan and Ilam as well as the northern parts of Luristan/Lorestan) and Fayli/Ilami (spoken in Ilam and parts of Kirmanshah, but more so in the most southern part of Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly in Khanaqin and Mandali).

### **Gorani/Hawrami** (گۆرانی / هه‌ورامی)

There is no consensus as to what this group should be called. Whereas most Western philologists (Mackenzie 1962, 2002) label this dialect group as Gurani (or Gorani) and delineate it as being linguistically different from Kurdish proper (Kurmanji, Sorani, and the Southern group), others with sociolinguistic orientations prefer the term Hawrami (Hassanpour 1998) or Gorani/Hawrami (Haig & Öpengin 2014). Scholars of Kurdish, however, are unanimous in acknowledging that, regardless of linguistic differences, the vast majority of speakers of this group identify themselves as Kurds.<sup>3</sup>

Gorani/Hawrami is predominantly spoken in the Kurdish areas in Iran (southwestern corner of Kurdistan Province and northwestern corner of Kirmashan Province) and Iraqi Kurdistan (the Hawraman region and Halabja). Among all Kurdish dialect groups Gorani/Hawrami has the oldest literary tradition, going back to the 16th century when it was the language of the court of the Ardalan principality in Sanandaj. Many speakers of this variety follow the Yarasani religion, with a large number of its religious texts written in Gorani. Hawrami or Hawramani is considered the most archaic dialect of this group. Hawrami intellectuals have been more active in recent years, in the form of holding cultural events and literary conferences, publishing books and periodicals, broadcasting radio and TV programs and utilizing social media. The medium of education for Gorani/Hawrami speakers is Farsi in Iran and Sorani or Arabic in Iraq.

### **Zazaki** (زازاکی)

Zazaki is also referred to as Dimilî, Kirdkî and Kirmanjkî. Similar

to the Gorani/Hawrami group, Zazaki has been described by many philologists and theoretical linguists - mostly of European origin - as non-Kurdish. However, except for a group of Zaza intellectuals, most Zaza people (numbering about 2-3 million) identify themselves as Kurdish regardless of how others might label their language as non-Kurdish or a Kurdish dialect (Haig & Öpengin 2014). Zazaki dialects are usually categorized into Northern (spoken in the Tunceli-Erzincan provinces), Central (spoken in the Bingol-Diyarbakir provinces) and Southern (spoken in the Diyarbakir province and Siverek town) (Paul 2009). Literary tradition in this speech variety started in the 1980s, spearheaded by a group of Zazaki intellectuals residing in Western Europe. Since then, there has been a modest growth in Zazaki textbooks, dictionaries, periodicals, TV programs, websites and social media texts.

### **Kurdish script**

Today, Kurdish is mostly written in two scripts: Roman/Latin (in Turkey and Syria) and modified Perso-Arabic (in Iran and Iraq). This difference has further fragmented Kurdish, because those who read and write in one script, seldom consume literature in the other.

Kurdish has been written in many scripts: Perso-Arabic (15th to the early 20th century throughout the main Kurdish areas in the Middle East), Armenian (1920s) followed by Latin/Roman (1927)<sup>4</sup>, then Cyrillic (1945) and finally in both Cyrillic and Latin (in Armenia and other Ex-Soviet republics), modified Perso-Arabic (early 1920s to present in Iraq and Iran) and Latin (early 1900s to present in Turkey and Syria)<sup>5</sup>. A debate over a “unified Kurdish script”, which started in the 1960s, resurfaces every once in a while, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan and also among Kurds in the diaspora. Two main camps in this debate can be identified: One is the pro-Latin/Roman camp, championed by the vast majority of Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Armenia and also some Kurds in Iran, Iraq and the diaspora. The second camp, favoring the Perso-Arabic script, includes the majority of Kurds from

Iraq and Iran as well as some Kurds in the diaspora. In September 2012, 471 Iraqi Kurdish writers, poets, artists and educators signed a petition to call upon the KRG and its parliament to declare the modified Perso-Arabic alphabet the official script of the KRG. With the rise of Kurmanji to prominence in Syria and its impressive revival in Turkey, the Roman script has also influenced Badini speakers in Iraq, Kurmanji speakers in Iran and even some Sorani speakers who find the Roman alphabet more capable of representing Kurdish sounds. In this respect, the pro-Arabic alphabet Sorani speakers may fear that they'll lose the hegemony they enjoyed for decades, especially in Iraq where Sorani was thriving but Kurmanji was abandoned. To rebut the previous petition, a counter petition written in Roman script and signed by 472 people, rather playfully, described the first petition as unproductive and detrimental to Kurdish solidarity.

Aside from the debate over the feasibility of Roman and Arabic script for writing Kurdish, there are internal debates within each camp. The Arabic-based script, for example, has undergone at least three reforms in Iraqi Kurdistan since 2005. One would expect such debates to resurface, but what is clear is that Kurds in Turkey will continue to prefer Roman script mainly because it is also the script of the official language of the country. For similar reasons Kurds from Iran and Iraq would prefer the Perso-Arabic script. A unique case here is the Kurdish region in Syria, where the script is Roman and thus different from that of the central government, which is Arabic. There is a good reason for that: In that area, Kurdish identity in general - and language in particular - has been under the influence of Kurds from Turkey for a very long time. Roman script has also gained popularity among Kurds in the diaspora, perhaps due to their exposure and level of comfort with European languages. This could also be the reason for many Sorani Kurdish dictionaries and learning textbooks that have preferred the Roman script over the Perso-Arabic one (Wahbi & Edmonds 1966, Thackston n.d., Awde 2013).

### **Use, status and vitality of Kurdish**

## **Iraq**

As early as 1917, British authorities in Sulaimani started publishing a periodical (Têgeyîştinî Rastî [Understanding the Truth]) in Sorani Kurdish. The writing system designed for this publication became the basis for the Perso-Arabic script of Sorani.<sup>6</sup> In 1930, the Kurds and other linguistic minorities in Iraq refused to support Britain's plan for the country's independence unless their linguistic rights were recognized. The Iraqi parliament drafted new legislation to create the "local languages law", in which linguistic minorities, such as Kurds, were granted positive rights in their region (Hassanpour 2012). The Sulaimani, Hawler and Kirkuk regions were instructed to have Sorani as their official language and the Kurdish-speaking regions of the Mosul governorate (Duhok, Amedi, Akre, Zakho and Zeban) were given the right to choose their own dialect, Badini, a dialect of Kurmanji. A number of Sorani elites viewed this move, the legal recognition of two "dialects" of the "same language", as a deliberate act by the Iraqi state to undermine the unity of the Kurds. However, Sorani Kurdish gradually became the language of education, media and even the public sphere, especially in the Sulaimani region. Badini remained to be used in the private domain only and Arabic continued to be the official language of the Mosul governorate.<sup>7</sup> In 1958, when Iraq became a republic, and later in 1968, 1969 and 1970, the Iraqi constitution was amended with more laws, expanding language and cultural rights for the Kurds. However, for the most part, only Sorani speakers welcomed these changes. In 1958 when Radio Baghdad started airing programs in Badini in addition to Sorani, publishing and literary activities in Badini started to spread locally as well, but the dialect never reached the developmental stage in the sense of becoming the medium of instruction in schools or the language of public administration until the late 1990s.

Following the no-fly zone imposed by the US and its allies in northern Iraq in 1991, and the establishment of the KRG in 1992, Kurdish became the official language of Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition,

linguistic rights of other minorities were recognized as itemized in Article 7 of the KRG draft constitution:

- i) Kurdish shall be the official language of the Kurdistan Region.
- ii) Official correspondence with the federal and regional authorities shall be in both Arabic and Kurdish.
- iii) The teaching of Arabic in the Kurdistan Region shall be compulsory.
- iv) The Turkmen language shall be considered the language of education and culture for the Turkmen in addition to the Kurdish language. Syrian shall be the language of education and culture for those who speak it in addition to the Kurdish language.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that the constitution draft does not make any reference to Kurdish dialect diversity and does not specify which dialect is official (Sorani or Badini, or both). This is important as the matter remains to be a challenge for KRG.

Except for Zazaki, most of the other Kurdish dialects are spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan: namely Sorani, Kurmanji (called Badini there), Faili (a Southern dialect) and Hawrami. However, until the mid-1990s standard Kurdish in Iraq meant Sorani Kurdish. This dominance of Sorani started to be seriously challenged when in 1996, the Duhok Assembly and Board of Education called upon the KRG in Erbil to help them replace Sorani with Badini in schools starting with grades one to three. The timing could not have been better for this move as the KRG in Erbil was led by the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) whose leadership (i.e. Barzani) spoke Badini. The KDP had recently expanded their headquarters from Duhok to Erbil after they had gained the upper hand in the civil war (1993 - 1998) with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KDP government agreed and assisted the Duhok governorate to introduce Badini as the medium of instruction to their school system. By 2002, Badini was the medium of instruction for grades one to six. However, in the mid-2000s, when

the PUK and KDP power-sharing KRG was formed again, both the Ministry of Education and the Kurdish Academy were reluctant to give their consent to Duhok's call for expanding their language rights to higher levels of education and other public domains. The KDP was no longer the sole decision maker in Erbil, as the PUK had strong influence in both the Ministry of Education and the Kurdish Academy. The KRG came under constant pressure by the majority of Sorani speaking writers, poets and artists to declare Sorani the official language of the Kurdistan region. This materialized in a controversial letter signed by influential Sorani literary figures that was submitted to Kurdish authorities.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, Duhok's Board of Education gradually and bilaterally completely replaced Sorani in all levels of education by 2012. This replacement was also extended to other domains: media, public signage, public and private institutions. Thus, Kurdish in Iraq is practically a double-standard language as the KRG has committed itself to the promotion of both dialects.

This is not the only challenge that dialect diversity has posed to the KRG. Since 2006, Hawrami speakers have, on more than one occasion, demanded official recognition of their "language" by the KRG and also the right to education in their mother-tongue. Their request has been ignored for they neither have the numbers of Badini speakers, nor the political leverage (i.e. the support of KDP or another powerful political party).

KRG's refusal to declare one Kurdish dialect as the sole official language of the region, along with increasing calls for language rights and mother-tongue education of other dialects (e.g. Hawrami) and the fear that other dialects (e.g. Shabak, Faili) may follow suit, have convinced some Kurdish elites and policy makers that it would be better to declare English as the official language of the KRG. In fact, English has grown in popularity in recent years. There have been reports suggesting that English is gradually replacing Arabic as the second language of the KRG.<sup>10</sup> There are numerous private schools at all levels that use English as language of instruction (e.g. schools:



Ishik, Cambridge, Choueifat, Media; universities: Cihan, Kurdistan, American University). From 2011 onwards, several programs in various public universities (e.g. Soran University and Duhok University) have started to make English the sole language of instruction in a number of degree programs, such as sociology and political science. Furthermore, other groups, mostly concerned with education and business, are actively promoting the status of English by using it, not only to make it the region's second language (instead of Arabic), but also designate it as one of the official languages. In fact, in the early months of 2015, a group of parliamentarians submitted a bill to the KRG's Constitutional Committee to recognize English as one of the official languages of Iraqi Kurdistan. English is deemed this important, not just because it has become a "global language", but also because there are many Kurds who see Arabic as the language of the dominant group in Baghdad, who committed atrocities in Kurdistan. These Kurds may not mind if Arabic is completely replaced with Kurdish or/and English.

Despite this, Arabic continues to play an important role in Iraqi Kurdistan. For one thing, it is the Iraqi state's language. Thus, for many, Arabic is considered important as a key to social goods and services in the country. Secondly, most senior Kurdish politicians and law makers, especially those with university degrees, were educated in Arabic. Some of those in power continue to use Arabic; for example when writing bills and laws at the KRG parliament. Yet for others, Arabic is significant for its representational value as a symbol of Islam, which is the religion of the majority of the Kurds.

### **Iran**

The Kurdish language landscape in Iran is similar to that of Iraqi Kurdistan, as it is home to all Kurdish dialect groups, except for Zazaki. More so, with Sorani being the variety that is more standardized and modernized, especially compared to Gorani/Hawrami or the Southern variety group. However, unlike in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish in Iran has never enjoyed an official status except for a short period (1945 -

1946), when Iranian Kurds established the Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad - Kurdish was an official language of the fragile republic.

During the reign of Reza Khan (1925 - 1941), the language was banned from public use (Hassanpour 1992), but his son, the late Mohammad Reza Shah (1941 - 1979), somewhat relaxed the assimilationist policies towards minorities. For example, limited publications and state run broadcasting in Kurdish were allowed, but Kurdish was still largely confined to private and non-official domains. For the most part, this treatment of Kurdish in Iran, which has been termed “restricted and controlled tolerance”, has continued in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Sheyholislami 2012a). Despite this, one should acknowledge the fact that the 1979 revolution brought some changes that have bore significant influence over Kurdish use, vitality and standardization.

Article 15 of Section 2 of the current Iranian constitution reads:

The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian. (cited in Sheyholislami 2012a: 31)

Language activists and those interested in using Kurdish beyond the private domain have strived to capitalize on this article by offering private Kurdish lessons.<sup>11</sup> They have recorded and distributed poetry and songs in multimedia formats, published books and periodicals, established language assemblies and academies and have held literary and linguistic conferences as well as cultural events. Often at these gatherings, Article 15 of the Iranian constitution is invoked as a way to advance demands for mother-tongue education.<sup>12</sup> The state, however, often looks at demands for education in minority languages from a security point of view which perceives calls for minority rights,

not just as a challenge but as a threat to political and territorial integrity of the state.

Outside the country, three developments have added a positive spin to the vitality of the language. The first one is the extensive and active usage of the language by Iranian Kurdish oppositional groups, who run about six 12/7 or 24/7 satellite TV stations, about a dozen radio stations, over two-dozen active websites and weblogs, and several weeklies or seasonal journals with contents ranging from cultural to political and current affairs. Iranian Kurds in the diaspora have also played an important role in the development of Kurdish, by actively participating in literary activities and using the language beyond their private lives. Access to social media, especially YouTube and Facebook, has helped language users to share their linguistic activities across international borders and between host countries and the homeland. Finally, various dialects of the language have been the subject of academic research in recent years (Anonby 2004/5; Karimi 2010; Karimi-Doostan 2005; Öpengin 2013; Sheyholislami 2012a).

### **Turkey**

The situation of Kurdish in Turkey is both similar and different to Iran. In both countries, Kurdish use is still largely restricted to private domains. There is very limited, if any, use of the language in the public sphere; the language has no official status in either country, nor is it the medium of instruction in public education, as is the case currently in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan.

The first Turkish constitution of the post-Ottoman Empire denied the existence of any language but Turkish in the country. With the aim of creating a highly centralized and ethno-centric state, the “modern” Turkish regime actively pursued a policy of Turkification to “wipe out notions of Kurdishness” and change Kurds into Turks (Üngör 2012: 131-132). In later years (1950s-1980s), making references to Kurdish were either completely avoided or when texts concerning culture and

language in Turkey had to make such references, they resorted to depreciating terms such as “degenerate variety of Persian”, or even “degenerate variety of Turkish”, when in fact, by then it had been well established in linguistic circles that Kurdish and Turkish belonged to very different families of languages. In addition to banning the use of Kurdish in public life, education and media, the Turkish state carried out various policies that aimed at Turkifying the Kurds, such as stripping 30,000 villages of their native names, preventing Kurds to give Kurdish names to their children (Öpengin 2015) and confining Kurdish children to boarding schools in order to forget about their Kurdishness (Üngör 2012). The treatment of Kurdish in Turkey was so harsh that it was termed “linguicide” or “linguistic genocide” (Hassanpour 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak 1994) and by the 1990s, many sociolinguistic English textbooks started making reference to the Kurdish case in Turkey to exemplify how a state could prohibit millions of people from using their native language in the public sphere, education and legal system.

In 1991 the legal ban on Kurdish was lifted, partially due to Turkey’s attempts to meet the requirements for its candidacy for EU membership at the time. This change led to more positive developments with respect to Kurdish and other minority languages in the country. In 2001 private language courses to teach non-Turkish languages were allowed, so were publishing, broadcasting and giving Kurdish names to children. More promising changes took place from 2008 onward, when, due to the absence of guerrilla warfare, a Kurdish civic nationalist movement marked its presence in the politics of the country. In 2009, a 24/7 government sponsored Kurdish TV station (TRT 6, now called TRT Kurdî)<sup>13</sup> starting broadcasting in Kurdish. In the same year, a Kurdish section at the Mardin Artuklu University, which provided intensive teacher training courses, was established. A few other universities (e.g. Muş Alparslan University) followed suit and initiated BA programs focusing on Kurdish language and culture with various degrees of success. In 2012, it became possible for students in state run schools to take Kurdish as an elective subject,

but only in grades six, seven and eight and for two hours per week. In 2014, the state approved that non-Turkish languages can be the medium of instruction in private schools. Finally, in the same year, the state run Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti (Turkish Linguistic Society), which had previously denied the existence of Kurdish as a language existing in Turkey, published a bilingual and bidirectional Turkish-Kurdish dictionary.<sup>14</sup>

### **Syria**

Since 1920 Kurdish was used at intervals for publishing and broadcasting. From 1955 onward, however, Kurmanji Kurdish experienced a similarly harsh treatment as in Turkey. Various bans on the use of the language continued well into the first decade of this millennium. Since 2014, however, the status of Kurdish in Syria has been elevated in many respects. For example, in the largest autonomous region of Jazira Canton, Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac-Aramaic are the official languages, while all other linguistic groups have the right to teach or be taught in their native languages. In the three Cantons in Syrian Kurdistan, Kurmanji Kurdish is now the language of education, media and public institutions.

### **Armenia**

Although much smaller in numbers compared to the Kurdish populations in the other four countries, the Kurds of Soviet Armenia were the first group of Kurds to have access to mother-tongue education and radio broadcasting. Prior to Stalin's 1937 forced migration policy, which victimized thousands of Kurdish families, Kurdish language and literature enjoyed much progress and development. Today, Kurdish is still spoken by thousands throughout Armenia, Azerbaijan and other neighboring republics and continues to be used in publishing and broadcasting.

### **Diasporas**

Prior to the 1990s and the establishment of the KRG, diasporas were the center of Kurdish cultural activities, language revitalization

and standardization efforts. The diaspora was home to the first Kurdish periodical, the first satellite TV station, the first Kurdish websites and the first Kurdish blog. Since the 1950s, in France and later in Germany, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, important works contributing to the development and modernization of Kurdish - especially Kurmanji and Zazaki - were produced and disseminated when Kurdish was banned in Turkey and Syria (Kreyenbroek 1992). Diasporas continue to house several 24/7 TV and radio stations, a few small libraries and publishing houses in addition to online platforms, networks and communities. Since the mid-1990s, however, most of the publishing activities have moved to the KRG and some of them do take place in Turkey, Iran and Syria. Many of the second-generation children of Kurdish origin in the diaspora continue to maintain their mother tongue, but fewer can read or write in the language. The literacy rate amongst Kurds is better in Scandinavian countries, where minority language teaching enjoys more state support.

### **New media and new opportunities**

Currently, there are over twenty satellite TV channels broadcasting in Kurdish. Most of these channels air programs in both standard varieties, Sorani and Kurmanji. The newscast in a number of major channels (e.g. KurdSat and Kurdistan TV) is presented by two news anchors, one in Sorani and the other in Kurmanji (or Badini). Others (e.g. Roj TV and Rudaw) produce and air separate programs, including their newscast in separate dialects and languages. A number of stations also carry one or two weekly programs in other varieties, such as Zazaki and Hawrami. Kurdish is also well represented on the Internet and social media platforms, especially on Facebook, where Iraqi Kurds predominantly write in Kurdish but Turkish, Syrian and Iranian Kurds use both Kurdish and state languages such as Turkish, Arabic and Persian respectively.

### **Concluding remarks**

Since 1991 a new linguistic order has emerged: The language and its speakers have achieved important cultural and political breakthroughs, but there are many more challenges ahead. After being banned, neglected and underdeveloped for much of the twentieth century, Kurdish has entered a new era since 1991. It is now the primary language of Iraqi Kurdistan and also one of the official languages of Iraq. The KRG is committed to promote two standard varieties of Kurdish - Sorani and Badini/Kurmanji. Kurmanji Kurdish also enjoys official status in the three autonomous cantons in Syrian Kurdistan. In 1991 Turkey lifted the ban on Kurdish and since the early 2000s, there has been a proliferation of publishing periodicals and books in Kurdish, a bottom-up corpus planning (e.g. producing and disseminating dictionaries, glossaries, grammar books and learning textbooks), a 24/7 state-run Kurdish television channel, TRT Kurdî, private language courses, a few university BA programs and at least one teacher training program at a public university. Somewhat similar positive developments, but to a lesser degree and at a much slower pace, have been witnessed in Iran; first in the late 1990s, when the first reformist government took power and also more recently during Rohani's tenure. However, in both Turkey and Iran, Kurdish may still be considered endangered.

Being part of a new linguistic order also means grappling with some challenges that could have grave ramifications for the vitality of the language, or lack thereof, and possibly the well-being of its speakers. In Iraqi Kurdistan, it is not clear for how long KRG can remain indifferent about dialect officialization (Sorani and/or Badini) and also Hawramis' demand for mother-tongue education. There is also uncertainty about the place of Arabic and English in Iraqi Kurdistan, where the two languages have been competing for the "second language" status. Another challenge is attending to complaints made by many prominent literary figures, who believe that writing in Kurdish, in many - if not all - genres, from street signage to broadcast materials and published texts (including school textbooks and academic journals) is fraught with gross carelessness

and unprofessionalism. Texts are riddled with numerous typos, misspellings, grammatical errors, style inconsistencies and poor content, possibly due to the absence of vigorous editing and/or peer-review practices. Whereas the former is hampered with carelessness, the latter is not immune from nepotism, something that has plagued almost every other aspect of life in the region.

In Syria, the vitality of the language is very likely tied into the fate of the autonomous cantons in the region (Rojava). In Turkey and Iran, where the vast majority of Kurds (about 75-80%) live, Kurdish speakers seem to have the most serious struggle still ahead of them.

*Jaffer Sheyholislami is an associate professor at the School of Linguistics and Language Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.*



- 1 In linguistics, we say different language varieties are mutually intelligible if the speakers of those varieties can understand each other without switching to each other's speech variety. Sociolinguists usually use mutual intelligibility, coupled with other linguistics and sociocultural factors, to determine whether two or more speech varieties are dialects of the same language or distinct languages.
- 2 'Macro-language' is a useful construct to describe the complex situation of Kurdish. From a sociocultural perspective (e.g., by Kurds themselves) the term Kurdish refers to a collection of related speech varieties that in some instances are not mutually intelligible to the extent that by some accounts all the five major dialect groups have been delineated as separate languages. It is also common to describe the Kurdish situation as a dialect continuum. This, however, can be seriously challenged by purely linguistic measures.
- 3 Sharafnama, the first source of Kurdish history written by the Kurdish Prince and historian Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi in 1597, also designates this linguistic group as Kurdish.
- 4 Romanization of Kurdish dates back to the eighteenth century, but it was done by Western missionaries or philologists for their own purposes (e.g., transcription and pronunciation) and not for the Kurdish population or writing in Kurdish per se.
- 5 It is worth noting that in 1920 the British Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia started to introduce a form of Roman script for Kurdish, however, the plan did not go through when Britain realized that the dominant language of Iraq was going to be Arabic (Hassanpour 1992).
- 6 In 1920, the first textbook for teaching Kurdish in the Sulaimani region was published in Baghdad. It was entitled *Kitebî Awalamîn Qera'atî Kurdî* [The First Kurdish Reader] (Blau 2009).
- 7 In a few instances especially in the Amedi region schools used Sorani at intervals in the 1950s and 1960s.
- 8 Draft Constitution of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Retrieved from <http://content.lib.utah.edu/utis/getfile/collection/qip/id/276/filename/277.pdf>
- 9 In 2008, 53 prominent writers, poets and artists mostly from the Sulaimani region in a written letter called upon KRG government and parliament to declare Sorani as the sole official language of KRG. For details of the debates that followed this request see Hassanpour (2012), and Sheyholislami (2012b).
- 10 Barbarani, S. (2013 April 29). The rise of English in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Retrieved from <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/29042013>
- 11 For example, Soma Centre with branches throughout Iranian Kurdistan, and Ronan Cultural and Scientific Society of Marivan/Meriwan, offer private Kurdish learning courses (for more on this see Sheyholislami 2012a).
- 12 In spring 2015, a group of teachers from the city of Saghez, in the province of Kurdistan, produced a Kurdish booklet complementing the Persian literature textbook so that they could teach Kurdish literature in the last couple of weeks of the school year. In summer 2015, University of Kordestan/Kurdistan in Sanandaj announced that it was going to admit 40 students into its newly created BA degree program, Kurdish Language and Literature, to commence in fall 2015. A similar announcement at the same university was made in 2003 when the reformists were in power. The program, however, was cancelled only days before the semester began (cf. Sheyholislami 2012a).
- 13 TRT Kurdî's official website. Retrieved from <http://www.trt.net.tr/Anasayfa/canli.aspx?y=tv&k=trt6>.
- 14 For more details see Öpengin (2015).

Anonby, E. J.

(2004/5). Kurdish or Luri? Laki's disputed identity in the Luristan province of Iran. *Kurdische Studien* 4/5. 7–22.

Awde, N.

(2013). *Kurdish Sorani: Dictionary and phrasebook (Romanized)*. New York: Hippocrene Books.

Blau, J.

(2009). *Kurdish language II: History of Kurdish studies*. *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Retrieved from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kurdish-language-ii>

history-of-kurdish-studies

Haig, G., & Matras, Y.

(2002). Kurdish linguistics: A brief overview. *Sprachtypologie Und Universalienforschung / Language Typology and*

*Universals*, 55(1), 3–14.

Haig, G., & Öpengin, E.

(2014). Introduction to Special Issue: Kurdish: A critical research overview.

*Kurdish Studies* 2(2), 99 – 122.

Hassanpour, A.

(1992). *Nationalism and language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985*. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press.

Hassanpour, A., Sheyholislami, J., & Skutnabb-Kangas, T.

(2012). Introduction-Kurdish: Linguicide, resistance and hope. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217, 1-18. doi:10.1515/ijsl-2012-0047

Karimi, Y.

(2010). Unaccusative transitives and the person-case constraint effects in Kurdish. *Lingua*, 120, 693-716.

Karimi-Doostan, G.

(2005). Light verbs and structural case. *Lingua*, 115, 1737-1756.

Leezenberg, M. (2014). Elî Teremaxî and the vernacularization of Medrese learning in Kurdistan. *Iranian Studies*, 47(5), 713–733.

Mackenzie, D. N.

(2002). Gurâni. *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Vol. XI, Fasc. 4, pp. 401-403.

Retrieved from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gurani>

Mackenzie, D. N.

(1962). *Kurdish dialect studies-I*. London: Oxford UP.

O'Driscoll, D.

(2014). Is Kurdish endangered in Turkey? A comparison between the politics of linguicide in Ireland and Turkey. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14(2), 270-288.

Öpengin, E.

(2015). The changing status of Kurdish in Iraq and Turkey: A comparative assessment. *Singapor Middle East Papers* 8(3), 1-27.

Öpengin, E.

(2013). Clitic/affix interactions: A corpus-based study of the person marking in the Mukri variety of Central Kurdish. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and Universität Bamberg.

Paul, L.

(2009). Zazaki. In G. Windfuhr (Ed.), *The Iranian languages* (pp. 545–586). London: Routledge.

Sheyholislami, J.

(2012a). Kurdish in Iran: A case of restricted and controlled tolerance.

*International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2012(217). 19-47.

Sheyholislami, J.

(2012b). Language policy, identity and rights in Iraqi Kurdistan. In G.

Kunsang, A. Snaveley & T. Shakya (eds.), *Minority language in today's global society*, Vol. 2, 106-128. New York, NY: Trace Foundation.

Sheyholislami, J., Hassanpour, A., & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (Eds.).

(2012). The Kurdish Linguistic landscape: Vitality, linguicide and resistance. [Special issue]. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.

2012(217).

Sheyholislami, J. & Sharifi, A.

(Forthcoming). "It is the hardest to keep": Kurdish as a heritage language in the United States. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. & Bucak, S.

(1995). Killing a mother tongue: How the Kurds are deprived of linguistic human rights. In Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (Eds.), in

- collaboration with Mart Anauut, *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, 347-370. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Thackston, W. T.  
(n.d.). Sorani Kurdish: A grammar reference. Retrieved from: [http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Sorani/sorani\\_1\\_grammar.pdf](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Sorani/sorani_1_grammar.pdf)
- Üngör, U. Ü.  
(2012). Untying the tongue-tied: Ethnocide and language politics. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217, 127-150. doi:10.1515/ijsl-2012-0052
- Whaby, T. & Edmonds, C. J.  
(1966). *Kurdish-English dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon P.
- Zeydanlioğlu, W.  
(2012). Turkey's Kurdish language policy. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 217, 99-125. doi:10.1515/ijsl-2012-0051

# **Kurdish political parties in Turkey**

*Walter J. Fend*

To understand the historical emergence and present role of Kurdish political parties it is necessary to be aware of the societal cleavages within Turkey as well as the regional and international framework. The external as well as the internal environment have changed since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 triggering dynamic developments, but also counter reactions against political changes, mostly by the ruling civil and military elites. In the case of Turkey developments that challenged the power structure have often been accompanied by serious conflicts and repression ensued by phases of political and social stagnation. With regard to social and political cleavages - saliently elaborated by Lipset and Rokkan<sup>1</sup> in the sixties of last century - Turkey has experienced a distinct pattern of upheavals. Şerif Mardin concluded already in 1973: “[u]ntil recently, the confrontation between center and periphery was the most important social cleavage underlying Turkish politics and one that seemed to have survived more than a century of modernization.”<sup>2</sup> The multinational Ottoman Empire with its Sultan - who was at least formally also the Caliph, i.e. the spiritual leader of all Muslims - was replaced by a secular republic. Though already Sultan Abdulhamid II. conducted a policy of proto-nationalism in shape of a Islamic-Imperial idea, aiming to integrate the predominant nomadic societies of the periphery, it was the Young Turks (1908-1918) that tried to enforce a policy of cultural and educational unification within the bigger framework of centralization throughout areas where much ethnic cleavages existed.<sup>3</sup> However, the “Kemalist” Republic was based on the concept of an exclusive Turkish national identity with secularism at its core, hostile to any expression of Kurdish identity.<sup>4</sup> It seems that in the first period of the Republic centralization did not increase resistance in the form of demands for regional autonomy or independence as it was theoretically predicted by Lipset and Rokkan

for western societies. Nevertheless, the issues of cultural identity and “local opposition to centralization”<sup>5</sup> did emerge. From the outset, the power center of the young republic reacted with repression upon demands from the periphery. In 1925 a Kurdish revolt coincided with activities of a new opposition party which despised centralism. The party was suppressed under the pretext of having links to the “religious reaction”, in fact meaning the rebellious Kurds. According to Mardin the famous Sheikh Said revolt of 1925 - an important part of the present Kurdish narrative - was rather due to religious issues than to ‘Kurdishness’.<sup>6</sup> In the decades that followed, the ruling Kemalist Republican People’s Party was adamant in its stance that political ideas and movements from the periphery would jeopardize the ideological fundament of the Turkish state. Therefore, the official position was: “Do not go into the provincial towns or villages to gather support: our national unity will be undermined”<sup>7</sup>. Apart from this fundamental center-periphery cleavage, which was also based on the disdain of the Kemalist state elite for the rural population, the 1925 episode hints at other crucial fault line of the Turkish Republic: secularism versus religion and the antagonism between a multi-ethnicity society (or state) and the nationalist concept of ‘one nation – one country’. With respect to religion there is an additional rift between Sunni Muslims and Alevis – affecting both Turks and Kurds. As a result of Turkey’s late industrialization and urbanization the left–right cleavage became equally important. With regards to Kurdish issues however, there have been overlaps across the political spectrum - from leftism and secularism to conservatism and Islamism.

The Turkish Republic with its state ideology was a product of the First World War and the struggle against the foreign invasion that followed, both shaping the Turkish mindset. A narrative of a homogenous Turkish nation and external enemies threatening the unity of the country became a crucial pillar of state ideology. Bordering the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Turkey was a corner stone of the NATO alliance, as it is today in the Middle East conflict

zone. External threats legitimized and conserved the Kemalist state ideology of secularism and Turkish nationalism with the military playing a key role in politics - shown by several coup d'états by the Turkish army up to the early eighties. Yet, the end of the Cold War called for more democracy. It was not a coincidence, that in the early nineties the first legal Kurdish parties were vying for seats in the Turkish parliament. Notwithstanding, political parties based on ethnicity or religion were - and still are - prohibited.

The next shift came with Turkey's aspirations for EU-membership, creating a paradox situation. The Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) - which came to power in 2002 pursuing a pro-European policy, was pushing back the authoritarian structures of the secular Kemalists. Part of the AKP policy for more democracy, as required for the EU rapprochement, was to deal with the Kurdish issue. Unlike the previous governments the AKP recognized for the first time the existence of a Kurdish ethnicity and language. Before that, the existence of the Kurds as a different ethnicity was denied and the public use of the Kurdish language was forbidden. Within the official discourse, the Kurds were labeled as "mountain Turks". Also, the AKP-government started to bestow certain rights upon the Kurdish community and was in return rewarded by Kurdish electorate - of course, mainly by those with an Islamic-conservative background living in the peripheral regions in the south-west of the country.

## **Developments**

The Kurdish issue has been prevalent in Turkey since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Yet the formation of opposition parties did not take place until the end of the Second World War. The Turkish law was set on all political parties embracing the whole nation and banning those based on regionalism and ethnicity. Only after the first military coup in 1960-61 some political parties - conservative as well as leftist ones - started to exploit specific religious or ethnic issues for political benefits.<sup>8</sup>

Though the right-wing New Turkey Party (Yeni Türkiye Partisi - YTP) consisted mostly of Kurdish landlords in south-eastern Turkey and received more than 30 percent of the votes in the region, it was the Turkish Workers' Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi - TİP) which was the first party openly recognizing the existence of Kurds in Turkey.<sup>9</sup> The TİP was not a Kurdish party, but its program during the early 1960s contained sensitive language on Turkey's 'Eastern' (Kurdish) problem. Although the party denied regionalism and territorial separatism it asserted that people who spoke Kurdish or Arabic and those with an Alevi religious denomination were discriminated against in Turkey. As a result, in October 1970 the TİP declared that the "natural and requisite revolutionary duty"<sup>10</sup> of the party included support for the struggle of the Kurdish people, their constitutional citizenship rights and the realization of all other democratic desires and hopes.<sup>11</sup>

From 1961-1970 the Kurdish movement can by and large be considered a part of the Turkish Left. Inside the TİP, four Kurds were elected to the Parliament in 1965. The Kurdish movement found a sort of legitimization in the leftist discourses, because 'Marxism-Leninism' - as a supposedly unified ideology - insisted strongly on the right for self-determination of "oppressed nations". Kurdish militants believed that 'Marxism-Leninism' would simultaneously provide them with a framework to remain Kurdish and ensure fraternity between Kurds and Turks. It was thus supposed to allow the emancipation of the Turkish working class and the Kurds.<sup>12</sup> After the 1971 military memorandum, however, the Constitutional Court shut down the party on charges of violating the principle of the state's integrity and indivisibility of its territory.<sup>13</sup> Throughout its history the Turkish military has consistently intervened in politics to preserve the Kemalist character of the state. An emblematic example is General Gürsel, who removed the civilian government in 1960 and declared himself president, publicly declaring in Diyarbakir that "[t]here are no Kurds in this country. Whoever says he is a Kurd, I will spit in his face."<sup>14</sup> Historically, the first Kurdish party was the extreme leftist Democrat Party of Kurdistan - Turkey (PDKT). Founded in 1965 by

Faik Bucak, the PDKT was declared illegal because of its Kurdish self-definition as well as its demands for Kurdish autonomy and - in 1977 - for complete independence.<sup>15</sup>

Since the foundation of modern Turkey, Kurds have participated in non-ethnic, mainstream political parties and even held the position of ministers in government. Kurdish political parties first came into the parliament in 1991, but have never been part of a governing coalition. Almost every Kurdish party has eventually been banned for menacing the territorial integrity of the state and the unity of the Turkish nation.<sup>16</sup>

HEP, the People's Labor Party (Halkın Emek Partisi), is known as Turkey's first legal pro-Kurdish party, because the vast majority of its supporters were Kurdish, its overriding emphasis on the resolution of Turkey's 'Kurdish issue' and its close relationship to the illegal Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). It represented a turning point in Kurdish electoral activism: It was the first time that Kurds promoting a Kurdish national agenda and formed an official political party capable of competing and winning elections at both the national and local levels.<sup>17</sup> HEP emerged as a splinter group of the center-left Social Democratic Populist Party (Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti, SHP). Founded officially in June 1990, HEP's primary demand was the extension of Kurds' linguistic, expression and publication rights, allowing education in Kurdish language, ending the state of emergency law and dissolving the village guard system<sup>18</sup>. The HEP contested in the 1991 parliamentary elections on the SHP's ticket and received 22 out of 450 seats in parliament.<sup>19</sup> While taking their oath in the parliament, several former HEP deputies switched to the Kurdish language and displayed colors associated with the PKK. Soon after this incident, they left the SHP to re-establish HEP. Due to the overt promotion of Kurdish political and cultural rights within the larger framework of the right to self-determination, the HEP was banned by the Constitutional Court in July 1993 on the grounds of cultivating social differences to destroy the inseparable unity of the



Turkish state and its people and illegal activities for the PKK.<sup>20</sup> During the legal process of the HEP's closure, the same political group set up the Freedom and Democracy Party (Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi - ÖZDEP) in October 1992, but the Supreme Court of Appeals Prosecutor's office began a parallel closure lawsuit against ÖZDEP on the grounds that its program sought to undermine the territorial integrity, the secular nature of the State and the unity of the nation. In order to protect themselves from a possible court verdict - that would have implied a personal ban for carrying on similar activities in other political parties - the founders dissolved ÖZDEP.<sup>21</sup> After ÖZDEP's closure in November 1993, members of the same circle established the Freedom and Equality Party (Özgürlük ve Eşitlik Partisi, ÖZEP) only to merge with the newly founded Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi, DEP).<sup>22</sup> The DEP cadres were divided into moderate and radical factions, with the latter maintaining more control over the party's political discourse. With almost no sensitivity to mainstream public opinion in Turkey, the DEP's actions proved to be even more radical and controversial than its predecessor, the HEP.<sup>23</sup> Upon DEP's establishment in May 1993 most of the HEP deputies joined the DEP in order to prevent themselves from losing their seats in Parliament. Compared to HEP, DEP's administrative leaders were closely linked to regional and transnational Kurdish nationalist circles and frequently attended Kurdish demonstrations and meetings outside of Turkey, often organized by the PKK. The party was deeply divided from the beginning between those who advocated maintaining or reestablishing closer relations with the Turkish liberal establishment and those who wanted it to become more closely tied to the PKK.<sup>24</sup>

In January 1994 six persons were arrested at the DEP offices in Lice (Diyarbakir province) when it was shelled by the army. As a result of those events, the DEP withdrew from the local elections in February 1994 enabling the Islamic "Welfare Party" (also known as Refah Party, RP) - to capture a number of mayoralties in Kurdish populated regions, including Diyarbakir.<sup>25</sup> In March 1994, the Turkish parliament lifted the immunity of six DEP MPs, including the first

Kurdish female MP, Leyla Zana. They were later sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of treason and affiliation with the PKK. Other members escaped to Europe and joined the establishment of the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile in Brussels. On June 16 1994 the DEP was disbanded by the Turkish Constitutional Court.<sup>26 27</sup>

The prosecution and eventual conviction of the DEP MPs was given widespread coverage in the international press. The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly demanded the immediate release of the DEP MPs, while the CSCE Parliamentary Assembly or the UN Committee against Torture criticized the human rights situation in Turkey. This alarmed officials in Ankara, as the country aimed to join the European Customs Union.<sup>28</sup>

Anticipating the closure of DEP in June 1994, pro-Kurdish party leaders founded the People's Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi - HADEP) in May 1994. The new party chair Murat Bozlak made an effort to frame the party more broadly, with an emphasis on democracy and human rights, abandoning the confrontational rhetoric. HADEP was the first Kurdish party to participate in elections on its own - in 1995 and 1999. Although it was the dominant party in the Kurdish region, it did not pass the ten percent threshold at the national level thus not winning a single seat in parliament.<sup>30</sup> The party garnered just over 4 percent in 1995 and a mere 4.75 percent in 1999. Instead, most votes in 1995 were cast for the center-right and conservative parties such as the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the Welfare Party RP<sup>31</sup>, which was explained as a consequence of tribal loyalties and ethnic division among the Kurds.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1999 local elections HADEP won 37 municipalities across the Kurdish region, including seven major Kurdish cities. Eventually HADEP shared the fate of its predecessors - it was outlawed by the Turkish Constitutional Court in March 2003. In addition, 46 of its founding members were banned from political activities.<sup>33</sup> The EU criticized the decision as a setback „going against the spirit“ of reform.<sup>34</sup>

HADEP was succeeded by the Democratic People Party (Demokratik Halk Partisi - DEHAP). DEHAP gained around three million votes; more than 6 percent of the total votes in Turkey in the 2002 general elections. Despite its share - that could have been translated to more than 30 MPs - it did not succeed in entering the Turkish parliament due to the ten percent threshold.<sup>35</sup> DEHAP was the dominant party in 12 provinces in eastern and south-eastern Anatolia with an average of about 40 percent, performing better than the nationally victorious AKP which remained at modest 15 percent. Still, whereas in 1995 and 1999 the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (RP) and the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP) benefited from HADEP not passing the threshold, it was the AKP in 2002 that took political advantage of DEHAP not entering parliament.<sup>36</sup> Founded already in 1997 DEHAP dissolved itself in November 2005 (de facto already in August 2005). The decision was taken as the prosecutors tried to close down the party, accusing it of being a focal point for separatist activities and having ties to the PKK.<sup>37</sup> In August 2005, after DEHAP had first joined the Democratic Society Movement (DTH), led by Leyla Zana and three other former lawmakers, they established the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP).<sup>38</sup>

In August 2005 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, at the time Prime Minister, held his landmark speech in Diyarbakir. He became the first Turkish leader ever to admit that Turkey had mishandled its rebellious Kurds. Like all great nations, he declared, Turkey needed to face its past adding that more democracy, not more repression, was the answer to the Kurds' long-standing grievances.<sup>39</sup> In 2005 Erdoğan became the first Prime Minister to acknowledge that "the [Turkish] state has made mistakes about the Kurdish issue"<sup>40</sup>. The reasoning for this admission was - at least to some extent - due to the requirements of the EU's legal and normative framework. Moreover, following Abdullah Öcalan's capture in 1999, the PKK announced a ceasefire allowing a debate on the Kurdish issue without being framed as a security theme. As a consequence, moderate Kurdish groups became supporters of the EU membership in the hope that the process

would bring more democratization and guarantees for human rights. Nevertheless, in August 2005 eight leaders of the DEHAP were sent to the Criminal Court in Ankara. Tuncer Bakirhan, one of the accused, argued that „the DEHAP statement contained words similar to ones used by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Diyarbakir. [...] Those who investigate us should also investigate the Prime Minister.“<sup>42</sup> The court action was in contrast to statements released by DEHAP at that time. In June 2005, for instance, the party gave its full support to a joint declaration by 150 intellectuals calling the PKK to unconditionally lay down its arms.<sup>43</sup> In August, welcoming Erdoğan's statement, the party referred to international developments like the peace process in Northern Ireland that would force the DEHAP to change its position.<sup>44</sup>

The DTP, DEHAP's successor, did not participate as a party in the 2007 elections, but its candidates ran for office independently. It secured 22 seats in the Turkish parliament on its first attempt and was accused by the Turkish government of being a political wing of the PKK. In the 2009 local elections the DTP won mayoralties in almost a hundred cities and towns in the Kurdish region.<sup>45</sup> Although the DTP managed to enter parliament, one of the most important results was the AKP's penetration of Kurdish regions. The positive stance of the AKP towards the Kurdish issue during the first years of its incumbency was bolstered by the EU accession process. The emergency rule over the 13 provinces populated by Kurds was lifted in 2002, broadcasting and education in Kurdish was introduced and former HADEP MPs were released from prison. While the vote shares of DTP decreased only by 2 percent, the AKP increased its support in all 15 provinces (except Siirt). Yet, the local elections resulted in a decline of AKP support due to economic reasons and a growth for the DTP which made the ruling AKP envisage further revisions regarding its policy vis-à-vis the Kurds. Known as the 'democratic opening'-package the AKP-government started to distinguish between the Kurdish issue as such and the PKK terrorism. The program failed, but subsequent developments revealed that it was the AKP's strategy

to delegitimize the DTP and proclaim itself the only party capable of solving the Kurdish issue.<sup>46</sup>

In December 2009 the Constitutional Court found that the party had promoted Kurdish separatism and unanimously issued a ruling to forbid the party permanently and exclude 37 party members from politics for five years. The party was also stripped of its assets.<sup>47</sup> Turkey's chief prosecutor Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya argued that the DTP took orders from the Kurdistan Workers Party.<sup>48</sup> During 2009 more than 1.000 cases were opened against former DTP members and members of its successor party, the Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi – BDP). In Diyarbakir the criminal court sentenced two Kurdish politicians, Diyarbakir mayor Osman Baydemir and former DTP leader Nejmet Atalay, to 10 months in prison for publicly spreading terrorist propaganda by referring to the PKK as „guerillas“ instead of „terrorists“ in a public speech.<sup>49</sup>

The BDP was created in 2008, before the DTP was closed, and many Kurdish MPs joined it.<sup>50</sup> In the 2011 parliamentary elections the party gained 36 seats in the National Assembly.<sup>51</sup> The BDP established and supported a network of 63 independent candidates thus circumventing the high electoral threshold for political parties. The BDP-supported candidates were affiliated with different pro-Kurdish parties and leftist groups, as well as ethnic and religious groups from the country's south-east. Decentralization, education in the mother tongue and more rights for ethnic groups were the main campaign messages of the BDP-supported independent candidates. However, many pro-Kurdish activists were called for informational talks or detained in the last weeks of the campaign.<sup>52</sup> During the campaign period Erdoğan's statements on the Kurdish issue had sometimes such a harsh tone that some authors described his wording as a “U-turn” in AKP's policy. The 2011 elections in the Kurdish region ended with a 12 percent increase for the BDP - to 46.8 percent - and a decrease by 5 percent for the AKP, still giving the AKP a total of 42.1 percent.<sup>53</sup>

A new polarization between the AKP-government and the Kurds was noticeable. In order to contain the potential losses among the Kurds, the AKP and Erdoğan applied a new strategy. Whereas in 2005 Erdoğan had portrayed Turkey under the AKP as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, far removed from the nationalist stance of earlier governments, the AKP itself now adopted an increasingly nationalist tone with an eye on the votes of Turkey's ultra-nationalists. This new stance contributed to the polarization of Turkish society and to the growing rift between Turks and Kurds.<sup>54</sup> The early AKP, who acted as an anti-establishment party pushing back the military as a political force, finally became an establishment party, too. In other words: The AKP became the state.<sup>55</sup> The HDP election success in June 2015 meant the end of AKP's absolute majority in parliament. The resumption of the armed conflict in July 2015 between the Turkish state under the AKP-leadership and the PKK will definitely have an impact on the Kurdish issue, the country as such and most likely the entire region.

## Chronological overview of the Kurdish political parties<sup>56</sup>

	Party name	Founded	Dissolved	Reason for dissolution
	<b>HEP</b> Halkın Emek Partisi - People's Labor Party	June 1990	July 1993	Banned by the Constitutional Court
	<b>DEP</b> Demokrasi Partisi - Democracy Party	May 1993	June 1994	Banned by the Constitutional Court; some MPs imprisoned
	<b>HADEP</b> Halkın Emek Partisi - People's Democracy Party	May 1994	March 2003	Banned by the Constitutional Court for support of the PKK
	<b>DEHAP</b> Demokratik Halk Partisi - Democratic People's Party	Oct. 1997	Nov. 2005	Dissolved itself to form the DTP
	<b>DTP</b> Demokratik Toplum Partisi - Democratic Society Party	Nov. 2005	Dec. 2009	Banned by the Constitutional Court
	<b>BDP</b> Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi - Peace and Democracy Party	May 2008	Apr. 2014	Merged with HDP
	<b>HDP</b> Halkların Demokratik Partisi - Peoples' Democratic Party	Aug. 2012		
	<b>HÜDA-PAR</b> Hür Dava Partisi - Free Cause Party	Dec. 2012		

## Participation in the political process

### H D P – The Peoples' Democratic Party - A Rainbow Alliance beyond the Kurdish Issue

*“This victory is the shared victory of workers, the unemployed, villagers, farmers, the oppressed, thus of those who are exploited,*

*thus of the left. And most of all, this is the shared victory of this country's women...*"<sup>57</sup>

The HDP was formed in 2013 as an alliance of Kurds, other national minorities, leftists, women's and green groups. It is understood that jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan recommended its establishment during his meetings with BDP leaders at his Imrali island prison.<sup>58</sup> Öcalan, having seen a big void on the left flank of the opposition, called for an umbrella party to bring all leftist movements in Turkey together, since the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) appealed only to the Kurds and confined itself to the south-east of the country.<sup>59</sup> BDP and HDP combined different leftist and socialist, progressive and western orientated groups, since the BDP had serious problems to reach out for electoral segments beyond the Kurds in south- and southeastern regions of Anatolia.<sup>60</sup>

When the HDP was founded, serving as an umbrella-organization, its goal was to also win over voters from the main opposition, the Republican People's Party (CHP), which supposedly had lost its credibility of being a leftist party.<sup>61</sup> In hindsight the merger between the BDP and the HDP was not undisputed. Within the HDP, there were leftists' concerns that their influence will be reduced and that the re-founded party could become too accommodating to the AKP-government in the coming months. Among Kurdish activists, including BDP supporters, some feared that the Kurds' political profile and national struggle will be weakened, whereas others said the HDP's socialist background would alienate religious Kurds.<sup>62</sup> Altan Tan, a prominent religious-conservative Kurd and BDP parliamentarian had doubts that the HDP could become a mass party. On the contrary, he criticized that the HDP - embracing all liberal democrats - had decreased into a project limited to the marginal Turkish left.<sup>63</sup> Selahattin Demirtaş the co-chair of the HDP and presidential candidate in 2014, considered the democratization of Turkey as a prerequisite, but not as the only approach to resolve the Kurdish issues: "It is therefore necessary for us to create a multidimensional



front of struggle and to organize ourselves accordingly. Without the resolution of the Kurdish Problem, it becomes harder to create movements for advancement in other fields necessary for the democratization of Turkey such as labor, identity, culture, and the environment.”<sup>64</sup> Quoting its manifesto, the HDP defines itself as a party favoring democracy, freedom and equality, peace, labor, self-government, gender equality and ecology.<sup>65</sup> “We need a non-sexist, ecological, democratic constitution that reflects Turkey’s multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, religiously diverse and multi-identity reality“.<sup>66</sup> “Achieving peace in Turkey is HDP’s top priority”<sup>67</sup> stipulates the short manifesto “HDP - Who Are We?” However, “[t]he only way to construct a two-way peace process and a peaceful, democratic future is through ensuring that everyone lives equally and freely together in the society.”<sup>68</sup> The claim to be the advocate of all ethnic minorities makes education in the minority languages, local self-government and the constitutional recognition of equal citizenship prerequisites for peace.<sup>69</sup> The leftist orientation is visible through its self-definition as a “pro-labor party” and criticizing the capitalist system, which “exploits and alienates the masses. “[Instead] [w]e believe in establishing human economic and social living standards for the working class individuals. [...] fighting against unemployment and poverty, the devastation of the local producer and farmers.”<sup>70</sup> The HDP perceives itself as “a part of the struggle of the oppressed masses.”<sup>71</sup>

The party defines itself as a democratic and peaceful grassroots movement: “Our organization starts from the streets and develops into local assemblies in our neighborhoods.”<sup>72</sup> The HDP perceives itself as a union of: “representatives of labor, ecology and women’s rights associations, artists, writers, intellectuals, independent individuals, workers, representatives of different ethnic and religious groups, the unemployed, the retired, farmers, the handicapped, scientists and those whose cities are being destroyed”.<sup>73</sup> The HDP was trying to evolve its social and electorate base by first addressing its strongholds in the predominantly Kurdish urban centers and agricultural areas

in the south-east of Turkey, which the party inherited from its sister organization, the BDP. In parallel, the HDP started to present itself as a genuinely Turkish party reaching out to voters beyond its mainly Kurdish support base namely to secular Turks, women and gays.<sup>74</sup> During the election campaign the HDP struggled to portray itself as an option for all Turks wishing to stop Erdoğan and seeking a more left-oriented Turkey.<sup>75</sup> Thus in particular during the peace process with the PKK, the HDP became a viable option for urban, middle-class Turks to express their political opposition.<sup>76</sup> Already upon its foundation it was obvious that activists as well as sympathizers of the Gezi-Park protests would consider the HDP as a political option, since the party was ardently involved in those activities. A salient example was Sirri Sureyya Önder, who became extremely popular during the massive Gezi Park protests by being in the frontlines.<sup>77</sup> Demirtaş, as the HDP co-chair<sup>78</sup>, has taken a very sympathetic line toward the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which were celebrated by middle-class Turks as a resistance against AKP policies. The party also released a statement on May 31 2015 - the second anniversary of the protests - accusing the government of suppressing those “who wanted to use their democratic rights”<sup>79</sup> and saluting the Gezi movement as “the resistance that will shed light on the way to establish a democratic future.”<sup>80</sup>

Whereas the HDP has been trying to enlarge its basis to the ethnic, urban Turks of leftist or liberal orientation, it has been a similar challenge to do so with religious, conservative Kurds in the rural areas of south-eastern Anatolia, who embraced the AKP in the past for its liberal policies towards the Kurds. The HDP has increasingly embraced a softer policy on religion, seeking out prominent religious figures to join the party’s ranks, supporting Islamic civil society groups in Diyarbakir and organizing workshops on Islam.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, Selahattin Demirtaş described himself as being both, a leftist and a faithful Muslim at the same time.<sup>82</sup> In fact, the leftist HDP was successful in winning the support of conservative tribal leaders and its entire clans who used to support the AKP. A crucial tool was the

Democratic Society Congress (DTK) created in 2007 as an umbrella organization for Kurdish political and civic groups, which used the traditional arbitration mechanisms in the region to attract those conservative tribes. Nevertheless, HDP's success was also a result of the broad disappointment of those tribes with the AKP policies in recent years. Particularly expectations with regard to the peace process were not fulfilled and the government's stance on Kobane alienated many Kurds.<sup>83</sup> Even Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat, a Kurdish co-founder of the AKP and until 2008 even its co-chairman joined the HDP as chief of one of the biggest Kurdish clans. Firat made it clear that until 2011 he had seen the AKP as an opportunity for the Kurds because of its policies and the acknowledgment that the Kurdish issue did exist. Firat resigned after Erdoğan had allegedly told him that a people without a state (i.e. the Kurds) do not need their own language.<sup>84</sup> On a quest to become a nationwide party appealing to voters beyond its traditional Kurdish base, the HDP fielded several minority candidates for the election race 2015 - Armenians, Yezidi, Syriacs, Roma and Alevi. With regard to the latter, the HDP was able to entice several prominent representatives of that community like Turgut Oker, the head of the Confederation of European Alevi Unions.<sup>85</sup> In the HDP manifesto the Alevi are the only group besides the Kurds that is explicitly mentioned, namely in the context of bringing peace to Turkey.<sup>86</sup>

The presence of many Alevis in the HDP, including the party's chairwoman at that time, Sabahat Tuncel, led to allegations in Turkish media that the party was founded by Öcalan to get the Alevi votes.<sup>87</sup>

One of the major points of the HDP manifesto is the struggle for gender equality. The party describes the position of women in Turkey's present society as marked by economic discrimination and "being subjected to violence, while some become the victims of sexual assault, harassment, rapes and honor crimes."<sup>88</sup> Consequently, the HDP aspires to "implement positive discrimination policies until the day women and men are viewed as equals in this country."<sup>89</sup> The

female co-chairperson of the HDP, Figen Yüksekdağ, argued in an interview with Al-Monitor in 2015 that the women's strength within the party was also a historical result of the armed Kurdish liberation movement: "As hundreds of women became martyrs in the process, it strengthened women's position in Kurdish society. [...] We see the remnants of this history in today's HDP."<sup>90</sup> As one of the results the HDP has co-chairs of both sexes for all representative levels.<sup>91</sup>

While the party "struggle[s] against the male-dominated order in the social, economic, cultural and politics mediums of life" it also "raise[s] the voice of the LGBTQ individuals against hate crimes, xenophobia, murders and violence against the LGBTQ community."<sup>92</sup> In line with its goals, the HDP upon its founding in 2013 allocated a 10 percent quota for LGBT individuals beside the 50 percent quota for women. As a result of the 2015 parliamentary elections 40 percent of the HDP's 80 new MPs are women, the highest proportion of any party. HDP candidates included Armenians, Yezidi and Assyrians alongside Kurds. And the HDP had the only openly gay candidate in the country.<sup>93</sup> Despite the fact that the HDP parliamentary club would encompass 32 women the party deemed it an important shortcoming since the goal was the equal representation.<sup>94</sup>

The HDP also dedicates particular attention to ecologic issues. Beside opposing the exploitation of nature for economic profit, since "[w]e are not the masters of nature", the HDP even concedes that "forests, birds, flowers and the bugs of this planet have their rights too, as the nature has its own balance and order in place."<sup>95</sup> Given Turkey's level of economic development as well its industrial policy, the HDP manifesto with regard to environment protection may be astonishing. It has much in common with the spirit and the demands of Green Parties in western countries, clearly pointed out by the solidarity statements from European leftist parties and particularly Green parties.

The predecessor of the HDP - the Peace and Democracy Party -

BDP was running in the 2011 parliamentary elections by supporting individual candidates in those provinces populated by ethnic Kurds. Beside the AK-Party, the BDP was seen as the other clear winner of the 2011 general elections by increasing both its share of the popular vote and the number of its seats in parliament, which it almost doubled. This was also due to “its best-coordinated and most effective campaign since the Kurdish nationalist movement founded its first legal political party in 1990.”<sup>96</sup> It performed best in the south-east, winning 52 percent of the votes in these provinces compared to its national average of 6.5 percent. The provinces of Hakkari with almost 80 percent, Sirnak with 72.6 percent, Diyarbakir with 61.6 percent and Mardin with 61 percent were the strongholds of the BDP. At least in metropolitan provinces like Adana (7.9 percent) and Istanbul (5.4 percent) the party was also capable of garnering notable amounts of votes.<sup>97</sup> The BDP gained 36 MPs and knew how to distinguish itself as a pro-Kurdish party while at the same time attracting new voters by introducing progressive issues and candidates. Beyond the Kurdish regions, where the party did especially well, it even won seats in Istanbul and Adana. Apart from 11 female deputies, Erol Dora was the first Christian to win a seat in parliament in 50 years.

During the 2014 local elections, the HDP ran a parallel, complementary campaign with the BDP. However, it received few votes (averaging 4 percent) in western Turkey while the BDP made gains and expanded its municipal power in Kurdish populated areas in Turkey.<sup>99</sup> The expectation of a substantial increase in their votes as a by-product of the Peace Process between the PKK and the Turkish authorities did not come into effect. However, the BDP/HDP coalition increased its share from 5.7 percent in 2009 to 6.5 percent in 2014.<sup>100</sup> The comparison of the results of the municipal elections 2009 and 2014 corroborates the hypothesis that the main contenders of the Kurdish votes in the South-east are the BDP/HDP, respectively their predecessors like the Democratic Society Party (DTP), and the AK-Party. In some “Kurdish” constituencies the BDP (the HDP was running in Turkish urban centers) managed to enlarge

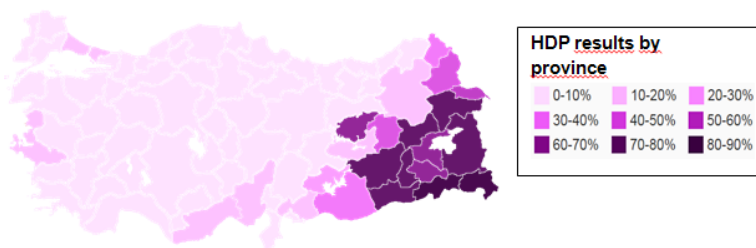
its electorate to the disadvantage of the AKP, in other areas the opposite was the case. In Sirnak, for instance, the BDP increased its share from 53.7 percent to 60.8 percent, whereas the AKP declined from 42.6 percent to only 29 percent. In contrast, the BDP lost almost 17 percent in Hakkari - but still garnered 63.5 percent - whereas the AKP's share grew from 15.1 percent to 26.3 percent.<sup>101</sup>

According to a public opinion survey - conducted by "KONDA" in 2014 - 42 percent of ethnic Kurds supported the AKP, which is exactly the same share as amongst ethnic Turks, whereas 32 percent of ethnic Kurds affiliated themselves with the BDP and 7 percent with the HDP. Also social and cultural indicators underscored the competition between BDP/HDP and AKP. Religious conservatives generated 43 percent of the AKP voters and 35 percent of the BDP voters - both rates are above the Turkish average of 29 percent.<sup>102</sup>

Just a few months after the local elections, the presidential elections marked a turning point for the BDP/HDP, who had already envisaged its merger at that point. In the shadow of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's fulminant victory, Selahattin Demirtaş, the candidate of HDP nearly doubled his party's vote. Breaking a taboo by winning the support of the people on the western side of the country, Demirtaş received the support of 9.8 percent of the country's electorate, compared with the BDP/HDP 6 percent success in the March local elections. In Izmir he gained 8 percent, in Istanbul more than 9 percent and even in Ankara 3.5 percent - a surge compared to the meager 1 percent for the HDP/BDP in the capital's local elections.<sup>103</sup> The strategy to forge a new opposition force essentially relied on two blocs: the Kurdish legal political movement and the Turkish left - liberal and socialist - united within the HDP as an umbrella party. Making deliberate efforts to distance himself from his party's single-issue agenda, Demirtaş addressed all Turks.<sup>104</sup> Demirtaş was the sole Turkish politician to rival Erdoğan's rhetorical skills and won praise for his statesman-like response to a bomb attack on a party rally that killed two people just two days before the polls.<sup>105</sup> Demirtaş's charisma was also a key

factor of HDP's successful performance in the June 2015 elections. Demirtaş's success contributed to HDP's decision to take the risk of challenging the ten percent hurdle for entering parliament as a single party in the 2015 elections.

It was not only the successful strategy of the HDP to expand its political base to the left and liberal orientated Turks in urban centers, but also the plan of the ruling AKP to transform Turkey into a presidential system. And finally, it was due to a sort of "tactical reticence" of the secular opposition party CHP, which contributed to the HDP passing the threshold by winning 13 percent of the votes. Pro-AKP sentiment among the Kurds waned amid a series of disappointments: the stalled peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the uninvestigated Roboski/Uludere tragedy in late December 2011, in which government airstrikes killed 34 Kurdish civilians mistaken for PKK militants and the AKP's unwillingness to take decisive action to assist the Kurds in Kobani.<sup>106</sup> Presumably the most severe blow was Erdoğan's statement in March 2015 claiming that Turkey did "not have any Kurdish problem" and arguing that Kurds have equal rights in the country. HDP's Demirtaş retorted smartly by raising the question: "If there is no Kurdish question, why is the peace process still continuing?"<sup>107</sup> The Republican People's Party (CHP) chairman, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, expressed his hope that the HDP would pass the ten percent threshold and refrained from actively discouraging CHP voters from swinging to the HDP. The CHP has suggested that around 3.5 percent of their own voters lent strategic "anti-Erdoğan" votes to the HDP as a bulwark against a hyper-presidency.<sup>108</sup>



General Elections 2015 – HDP results<sup>109</sup>

Despite a polarized and occasionally violent election campaign and despite the ten percent threshold, which international institutions like the OSCE or the Council of Europe deemed a limitation to political pluralism<sup>110</sup>, the HDP managed to garner 13.1 percent of the popular vote winning 80 of the 550 seats in the Turkish parliament.<sup>111</sup> As expected, the HDP entrance into parliament thwarted the ruling AK-Party's aspiration for a constitutional majority; the AKP lost even its absolute (50 percent) majority.

### **HÜDA-PAR - The Free Cause Party**

The Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi – Hûda-Par) was established in December 2012, with a focus on Islamic values and greater rights for Turkey's 14 million Sunni Kurds.<sup>112</sup> Its' abbreviated and commonly used name "Hûda-Par", has a subtle double meaning: Huda is a Persian word, used both in Turkish and Kurdish, meaning „God.“ Therefore, "Hûda-Par" also means the "Party of God" - just like Hizbullah in Arabic. Indeed, Hûda-Par is mostly seen as a successor of the Sunni Islamist Kurdish Hizbullah, the obscure and cruel organization of the 1990s, which has in fact no historical connection to the Lebanese Hizbullah. Hûda-Par is the final phase of the evolution of the armed Islamist Kurdish movement since the beginning of 2000s.<sup>113</sup> Hûda-Par has denied any link to the Kurdish - also called Turkish - Hizbullah. However, it is widely acknowledged that the party enjoys a similar group of sympathizers to those of Hizbullah, which was involved in terrorist activities in the 1990s.<sup>114</sup> Though the Kurdish Hezbollah is Sunni, its establishment in 1979 was heavily influenced by the Islamic Revolution and it was very close to the Iranian government in the 1990s.<sup>115</sup> Hizbullah received funding from Tehran and members of the organization went to Iran in the 1980s for training.<sup>116</sup> Beside the Iranian revolution, the development of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Kurdish branch, the violent events in Hama (Syria) in 1982 and global Islamic revivalism directly impacted on the formation of the Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey.<sup>117</sup>

The Kurdish Hizbullah started to become a mass movement in



the mid-1980s, creating strongholds in urban centers of northern Kurdistan. In the early 1990s Hizbullah took up arms and clashed with the PKK,<sup>118</sup> killing several hundred people in the process. Hizbullah also turned on Islamist groups that were not a part of it<sup>119</sup> as well as against Sufi Kurdish networks and a group of Kurdish businessmen.<sup>120</sup> It also abducted, interrogated and even murdered those who had left the movement.<sup>121</sup>

In January 2000 the Turkish Police dismantled the Kurdish Hizbullah, which was accused of aspiring to establish an Islamic state.<sup>122</sup> Shortly after PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan had been captured in 1999, the leader of Hizbullah, Hüseyin Veliöğlu, was killed in a police raid in Istanbul in 2000. The police captured the group's archives and many weapons, while arresting around 4.000 of its members.<sup>123</sup>

In 2003, as a reaction to the prohibition, supporters of the Kurdish Hizbullah established the "Mustazaflar ile Dayanışma Derneği", the "Association of Solidarity with the Oppressed" - short "Mustazaf-Der" - operating offices in Diyarbakir, Istanbul, Mersin, Konya and Adana.<sup>124</sup> Under the new leadership of Isa Altsoy, the organization moved from violence to establishing grassroots support. According to files confiscated by the Turkish police, Hizbullah continued with approximately 20.000 sympathizers. Not only PKK-members, but also 950 Kurdish Hizbullah militants were released. Most of them returned to the organization either in Turkey or in Europe.<sup>125</sup> However, Mustazaf-Der was finally forbidden in May 2012 by the Supreme Court on grounds of "acting in concordance with the objectives of the Hezbollah terror organization".<sup>126</sup> Already in 2010 the court in Diyarbakır rendered a verdict in that sense arguing that Mustazaf-Der was aiming to establish the Shari'a.<sup>127</sup>

On May 27 2012, thousands of people gathered in the center of Diyarbakir to protest the court verdict that lead to the closure of Mustazaf-Der. The Kurdish Hizbullah used the May 27 demonstration

to test their organizational abilities before announcing the establishment of a political party.<sup>128</sup> Whereas the Mustazaf-Der administration had the tendency to continue their civil society activities, its ban accelerated the decision to form a political organization. The General President of Mustazaf-Der, Hüseyin Yılmaz, concluded that community and political issues of the country could not be sufficiently addressed as a foundation: “[The] court verdict that closed our foundation accelerated us to go towards a political entity.”<sup>129</sup> One of Hüda-Par’s prominent figures, Sıdkı Zilan, a lawyer whose clients included members of Hizbullah, denied institutional links to Hizbullah, but believes that “there will be people fancying us from the AKP (Justice and Development Party) [...], the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) and the Hizbullah community”.<sup>130</sup> Sait Şahin, one of the Party’s key figures, conceded that the Free Cause Party’s grassroots support mainly stems from the Hizbullah community. Still, he said, that it would be wrong to conclude that the Hüda-Par is the continuation of Hizbullah, for many people with different Islamic identities work within the party. Yet, the main and fed source is common: Koran and tradition.<sup>131</sup>

Like the Kurdish Hizbullah, Hüda-Par shares sympathy for Iran. For instance Hüseyin Yılmaz, the party’s deputy chairman, was saying that Hüda-Par respects the Iranian revolution. Moreover, the party leaders also maintain contacts with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>132</sup> Hüda-Par’s emergence could be seen as part of the newly liberal atmosphere in the country’s south-eastern, mainly Kurdish, provinces.<sup>133</sup> According to Zilan, it was decided to establish a conservative, Islamic-oriented party because there are currently no political parties representing the Islamic community amongst Turkey’s four Kurdish parties, namely the BDP, the Rights and Liberties Party (HAK-PAR), the Participatory Democracy Party (KADEP) and the Freedom and Socialism Party (ÖSP). “Naturally, there [is] a need for an establishment that will both give voice to the Islamic solution and support the Kurdish and the Kurdistan front”, he added<sup>134</sup>, arguing that none of these Kurdish parties have an Islamic affiliation, but are

secular and leftist, for which half of the Kurdish people do not vote. Instead, conservative Kurds vote for Islamic Turkish parties, such as the Saadet Partisi (SP – Felicity Party), Halkın Sesi Partisi (HAS Parti – People’s Voice Party) and above all the AKP. Hence these voting patterns show the true potential for an Islamic Kurdish Party.<sup>135</sup>

The political relationship between the Hûda-Par and the ruling AKP seems to be ambivalent. At a first glance, the rivalry concerning the Kurdish religious voters, in particular the Sunnis, seems obvious. However, distinct strategic interests on both sides have turned them into de facto allies. As Hûda-Par has strong links with the Kurdish Hizbullah it is an enemy of both, the PKK and the HDP. Hûda-Par in fact equates the PKK and the HDP - a conclusion that can be easily drawn from the scathing statements by Hûda-Par officials and the violence between supporters of the two political camps. Thus to the AKP Hûda-Par is more of an ally than an opponent, weakening the HDP by attracting Kurdish votes. When Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınc paid a visit to Hûda-Par during the 2015 election campaign he said that the HDP was not the sole representative of the Kurdish people but that other parties would represent the Kurds, if the PKK threat ceased to exist. Arınc stressed: “The program of the Free Cause Party, through which devout Kurdish friends engage in politics, is extremely important. This party has a lot to say both, about the country’s problems and the settlement issue.”<sup>136</sup>

Hûda-Par emphasizes both Islam and Kurdish identity, but what makes Hûda-Par distinct is its eagerness to organize and perform political activities only in Eastern parts of Turkey.<sup>137</sup> On the eve of the 2015 parliamentary elections Sait Şahin, running as an independent candidate, said: “We want to ask for support, in order to be the voice of Islam in Parliament.”<sup>138</sup> Zekeriya Yapıcıoğlu, the candidate for Diyarbakir in the 2015 parliamentary elections said that they had started their journey in order to fill the “Islamic opposition gap”<sup>139</sup> in parliament. He argued that “citizens were trapped between two parties before Hûda-Par was established”<sup>140</sup> hinting at the AK-Party

and the BDP/HDP as the main contesters of the Kurdish votes. He was, however, staunchly advocating conservative Islamic positions.<sup>141</sup> Asked about the Shari'a rule, Hüseyin Yılmaz, Hüda-Par's deputy chairman, responded: "We are Muslims before all else, but we will take note of the people's wishes (...) And the people will no doubt cleave to Allah's path."<sup>142</sup> Sait Şahin, spokesperson and one of the founders of Hüda-Par, framed the party's core values as follows: "brotherhood, solidarity and peace in the society; and justice in the state" adding that "[a]s the state sanctified itself it waged war to the values of the society. This lays the ground for our entire social problems beginning with the Kurdish problem which has caused major suffering."<sup>143</sup> And he concludes on how Hüda-Par would implement its goals: "We either ensure justice by coming to power local and general political posts, or push the rulers to provide justice by using the power of politics."<sup>144</sup>

Hüda-Par, like its Kurdish rival HDP and previously the BDP, has been advocating the abrogation of the ten percent threshold for parliamentary elections as well as the fostering of local self-government. Moreover, the Hüda-Par has championed the recognition of the Kurds as a minority and their language to be stipulated by the Turkish constitution. However, it supports a stronger role of religion in society and<sup>145</sup> before the general elections the demands became fiercer and more specific: The Kurds must be viewed as one of Turkey's two constituent peoples, with Kurdish to become the second official language. Schools, barracks or streets bearing the names of perpetrators of oppression and discrimination should be renamed immediately while original Kurdish names of settlements must be restituted. It must be officially recognized that Kurdish scholars, especially Sheikh Said, were persecuted and the state must apologize to the entire Kurdish people.<sup>146</sup> The cases of disappearances and unsolved murders, which number in the thousands, should be resolved in rigorous investigations and the perpetrators held accountable.<sup>147</sup> The party also advocates the lifting of restrictions on the freedom of religion that would end the headscarf ban. They also demand that adultery be criminalized and religious marriages

officially recognized. With respect to the economic sphere Hûda-Par favors an end to interest rates in banking as well as no taxation on minimum wages in addition to free water, electricity and gas for the poor.<sup>148</sup> According to Hûda-Par, substantial investments are needed to ensure that the underdeveloped regions attain the economic standing of western provinces - these regions should enjoy affirmative action for that matter.<sup>149</sup>

Considering the fact that the Kurdish people mainly live in four countries the party favors a regional approach that would enable people to pass state borders more easily. For instance the Van provincial chairman of Hûda-Par, Rasim Saygin, told a group of EU-embassies' representatives that, „[c]lose relatives were forced to live in different countries because of the borders drawn on the maps. We want the borders drawn to be symbolic in solution process. People should be able to travel just with their ID cards as it is in Europe.“<sup>150</sup> Moreover, Hûda-Par's program also includes measures for the Kurdish diaspora: Kurds overseas should be offered the same assistance as ethnic Turks. Furthermore political amnesty for those who had to flee the country and social reintegration measures for political prisoners.<sup>151</sup>

Hûda-Par has its strongholds in the south-eastern parts of Turkey, where the Kurdish population is rural, conservative and religious. Hûda-Par, like the Kurdish Hizbullah, has been successful in mobilizing mass demonstrations, though doubts remain that all of them are sympathizers or voters. In January 2015, for instance, 100.000 people participated in a rally organized by Hûda-Par in Diyarbakir to protest the satirical French magazine Charlie Hebdo, which was the target of a deadly attack for its cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>152</sup> In contrast to the successful, religiously motivated public gatherings, Hûda-Par's election results were rather modest. In the municipal polls in 2014 it received nationwide only 0.19 percent. Yet it garnered 7.8 percent in Batman and 4.3 percent in Diyarbakir, proving to be a force to be reckoned with.<sup>153</sup>

Beyond municipalities in Diyarbakir, Batman and Mardin Huda-Par did exceedingly well in the mayoral race in the Korkut district, Muş province, where its candidate earned 40.1 percent against the AKP winner's 53.6 percent.<sup>154</sup> In the 2015 parliamentary elections Huda-Par hoped to enter parliament by supporting independent candidates for whom the ten percent threshold does not apply. However, none of its nine candidates made the race.

*Walter J. Fend is a country analyst at the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum in Vienna.*

- 1 Lipset, Seymour M. and Rokkan, Stein (1967): Party Systems and Voter Alignments, New York: Free Press, <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~mishler/LipsetRokkan.pdf>, accessed 28.7.2015
- 2 Mardin, Şerif (1973): Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?, No. 1, , pp. 169-190
- 3 Mardin, *ibid.*
- 4 Gunter, Michael M. (2014): Turkey, Kemalism, and the "Deep State", in: Romano, David/ Gurses, Mehmet (eds.), Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East - Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.17
- 5 Lipset, Seymour M. and Rokkan, Stein (1967): Party Systems and Voter Alignments, New York: Free Press, <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~mishler/LipsetRokkan.pdf>, accessed 28.7.2015
- 6 Mardin, *ibid.*
- 7 Mardin, *ibid.*
- 8 Güney, Aylin (2002): The People's Democracy Party, in: Turkish Studies 3 (1), pp.122-137, [http://www.google.de/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=6&ved=0CEMG FjAFahUKEwioLP2-HGAhVGvBQKHwJXDGU&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpocast.zirve.edu.tr%2Fgroups%2Fconomicsandadministrativescience s%2Fwiki%2Fff77d%2Fattachments%2F9cd42%2FW3-G%25C3%25BCney.pdf&ei=LioVeKqCcb4UuKusagG&usq=AFQjCNGw6NH1Ni6PEJWNXrdmtM\\_ziWUG9A](http://www.google.de/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=6&ved=0CEMG FjAFahUKEwioLP2-HGAhVGvBQKHwJXDGU&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpocast.zirve.edu.tr%2Fgroups%2Fconomicsandadministrativescience s%2Fwiki%2Fff77d%2Fattachments%2F9cd42%2FW3-G%25C3%25BCney.pdf&ei=LioVeKqCcb4UuKusagG&usq=AFQjCNGw6NH1Ni6PEJWNXrdmtM_ziWUG9A), accessed 17.7.2015
- 9 Güney, *ibid.*
- 10 Celep Ödül (2014): Can the Kurdish Left Contribute to Turkey's Democratization? In: Insight Turkey 16 (3), pp. 165-180, <http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/can-the-kurdish.pdf>, accessed 17.7.2015
- 11 Celep, *ibid.*
- 12 Hamit Bozarslan (2012): Between integration, autonomization and radicalization. Hamit Bozarslan on the Kurdish Movement and the Turkish Left, in: European Journal of Turkish Studies, 14, <http://ejts.revues.org/4663>, accessed 17.7.2015
- 13 Celep, *ibid.*
- 14 Müller, Mark (1996): Nationalism and the Rule of Law in Turkey: The Elimination of Kurdish Representation During the 1990s. In: Olson, Robert (ed.): The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, p.177
- 15 Vanly, Ismet Cherif (1986): Kurdistan und die Kurden, Bd. 2, Göttingen/Wien: Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, p. 64
- 16 Satana, Nil S. (2012): The Kurdish Issue in June 2011 Elections: Continuity or Change in Turkey's Democratization? In: Turkish Studies, 13:2, p.169-189, <http://yoksis.bilkent.edu.tr/pdf/files/10.1080-14683849.2012.686575.pdf>, accessed 21.7.2015
- 17 Watts, Nicole F. (2010): Activists in Office - Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey, Seattle/ London: University of Washington Press, p.52
- 18 Originally established in the eighties by the Turkish state aimed to act as a local militia in the fight against the insurgents of the PKK, they became notorious for violating human rights and being involved in illicit activities.
- 19 Celep, *ibid.*
- 20 Güney, Aylin (2002): The People's Democracy Party, in: Turkish Studies 3 (1), pp.122-137; see also: Celep Ödül (2014): Can the Kurdish Left Contribute to Turkey's Democratization? In: Insight Turkey 16 (3), pp. 165-180, <http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/can-the-kurdish.pdf>, accessed 17.7.2015
- 21 The International Journal of Human Rights (2000): Case of Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP) v. Turkey, Vol.4, Issue 1, p.166f
- 22 Celep Ödül (2014): Can the Kurdish Left Contribute to Turkey's Democratization? In: Insight Turkey 16 (3), pp. 165-180, <http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/can-the-kurdish.pdf>, accessed 17.7.2015; see also:., <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13642980008406867?journalCode=fjhr20>, accessed 25.6.2015
- 23 Celep, *ibid.*
- 24 Watts, *ibid.*, p.69
- 25 Müller, Mark (1996): Nationalism and the Rule of Law in Turkey: The Elimination of Kurdish

- Representation During the 1990s. In: Olson, Robert (ed.): The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, p.188
- 26 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): History of kurdisch political parties in Turkey, <http://en.hdpeurope.eu/histoire-des-partis-politiques-en-turquie/>, accessed 1.6.2015; see also: Güney, Aylin (2002): The People's Democracy Party, in: Turkish Studies 3 (1), pp.122-137; see also: Müller, Mark (1996): Nationalism and the Rule of Law in Turkey: The Elimination of Kurdish Representation During the 1990s. In: Olson, Robert (ed.): The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, p.188
- 27 Eight years later, in December 2002 the European Court of Human Rights rendered a judgment that the prohibition of DEP was contrary to Article 11 (freedom of assembly and association) of the European Convention.
- 28 Müller, *ibid.*, p.188f.
- 29 Watts, *ibid.*, p. 69f.
- 30 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): History of kurdisch political parties in Turkey, <http://en.hdpeurope.eu/histoire-des-partis-politiques-en-turquie/>, accessed 1.6.2015
- 31 Satana, Nil S. (2012): The Kurdish Issue in June 2011 Elections: Continuity or Change in Turkey's Democratization? In: Turkish Studies, 13:2, p.169-189, <http://yoksis.bilkent.edu.tr/pdf/files/10.1080-14683849.2012.686575.pdf>, accessed 21.7.2015
- 32 Bozarslan, Hamit (1996): Turkey's Elections and the Kurds, in: Middle East Report, Vol.26, No. 199., pp. 16–19
- 33 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): History of kurdisch political parties in Turkey, <http://en.hdpeurope.eu/histoire-des-partis-politiques-en-turquie/>, accessed 1.6.2015
- 34 BBC News (14.3.2003): Turkey's Kurd party ban criticized, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2850601.stm>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 35 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): History of kurdisch political parties in Turkey, <http://en.hdpeurope.eu/histoire-des-partis-politiques-en-turquie/>, accessed 1.6.2015; see also: Satana, Nil S. (2012): The Kurdish Issue in June 2011 Elections: Continuity or Change in Turkey's Democratization? In: Turkish Studies, 13:2, p.169-189, <http://yoksis.bilkent.edu.tr/pdf/files/10.1080-14683849.2012.686575.pdf>, accessed 21.7.2015
- 36 Çarkoğlu, Ali (2002): The Rise of the New Generation Pro-Islamists in Turkey: The Justice and Development Party Phenomenon in the November 2002 Elections in Turkey, in: South European Society and Politics, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 123–156, [http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/380/1/The\\_rise\\_of\\_the\\_new.pdf](http://research.sabanciuniv.edu/380/1/The_rise_of_the_new.pdf), accessed 21.7.2015
- 37 Hürriyet Daily News (18.8.2005): DEHAP dissolved, joins Zana's movement, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=dehap-dissolved-joins-zana8217s-movement-2005-08-18>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 38 Watts, Nicole F. (2010): Activists in Office - Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey, Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, p. 69f.; see also: Hürriyet Daily News (18.8.2005): DEHAP dissolved, joins Zana's movement, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=dehap-dissolved-joins-zana8217s-movement-2005-08-18>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 39 The Economist (18.8.2005): Peace be unto you. The Turkish prime minister paves the way for a deal with the Kurds, <http://www.economist.com/node/4300168>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 40 Polat, Rabia Karakaya (2008): The AKP and the Kurdish Issue: What Went Wrong? In: SETA Policy Brief, No. 14 (May 2008), <http://arsiv.setav.org/Ups/dosya/7317.pdf>, accessed 21.7.2015
- 41 Polat,*ibid.*
- 42 Hürriyet Daily News (26.8.2005): Eight DEHAP executives sent to court, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=eight-dehap-executives-sent-to-court-2005-08-26>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 43 Today's Zaman (17.6.2005): DEHAP Supports Call on PKK to 'Lay Down Weapons', [http://www.todayszaman.com/politics\\_dehap-supports-call-on-pkk-to-lay-down-weapons\\_20774.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/politics_dehap-supports-call-on-pkk-to-lay-down-weapons_20774.html), accessed 20.7.2015.



- 44 Hürriyet Daily News (18.8.2005): DEHAP dissolved, joins Zana's movement, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=dehap-dissolved-joins-zana8217s-movement-2005-08-18>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 45 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): History of kurdisch political parties in Turkey, <http://en.hdpeurope.eu/histoire-des-partis-politiques-en-turquie/>, accessed 1.6.2015, see also: Gül, Akdağ Arıkan (2015): Ethnicity and Elections in Turkey. Party Politics and the Mobilization of Swing Voters, New York: Routledge, p.33
- 46 Gül, Akdağ Arıkan (2015): Ethnicity and Elections in Turkey. Party Politics and the Mobilization of Swing Voters, New York: Routledge, p.32f.
- 47 Human Rights Watch (11.12.2009): Turkey: Kurdish Party Banned. Order to Close Down Democratic Society Party Shows Need for Constitutional Reform, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/12/11/turkey-kurdish-party-banned>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 48 BBC News (11.12.2009): Turkish top court bans pro-Kurdish party, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8408903.stm>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 49 United States Department of State (11.3.2010): 2009 Human Rights Report: Turkey, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eur/136062.htm>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 50 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): History of kurdisch political parties in Turkey, <http://en.hdpeurope.eu/histoire-des-partis-politiques-en-turquie/>, accessed 1.6.2015
- 51 Today's Zaman (12.6.2011): AK Party wins by landslide, fails to secure majority for new constitution, [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_ak-party-wins-by-landslide-fails-to-secure-majority-for-new-constitution\\_247049.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_ak-party-wins-by-landslide-fails-to-secure-majority-for-new-constitution_247049.html), accessed 20.7.2015
- 52 OSCE/ODIHR, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (31.10.2011): Republic of Turkey, Parliamentary Elections 12 June 2011, OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Report, Warsaw, p.15, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/84588?download=true>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 53 Gül, ibid., p.34
- 54 Bengio, Ofra (1.2013): The Kurdish challenge to the Turkish Nation-State, in: Ortadoğu Analiz, Vol. 5, Issue 49, p.69-78, [https://www.academia.edu/2589545/The\\_Kurdish\\_Challenge\\_to\\_the\\_Turkish\\_Nation-State](https://www.academia.edu/2589545/The_Kurdish_Challenge_to_the_Turkish_Nation-State), accessed 20.7.2015
- 55 Brookings. Taşpınar, Ömer (17.6.2015): Kurds will be the agent of change in Turkish politics, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/06/17-kurds-change-turkish-politics-taspinar>, accessed 29.7.2015
- 56 All parties, but Hûda-Par, are successors of the previous ones. Not included are the ÖZEP, Özgürlük ve Eşitlik Partisi/ Freedom and Equality Party and the ÖZDEP, Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi/Freedom and Democracy Party which served as tactical, transitional entities. Also not mentioned is the DBP- Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi/Democratic Regions Party, which is the BDP-successor under the HDP umbrella confined to activities within present local administrative bodies. Yet, the Islamist Hûda-Par was included due to its regional relevance. Finally, some marginal, legal Kurdish parties like the HAK-PAR or KADEP are not quoted. Sources: Celep Ödül (2014): Can the Kurdish Left Contribute to Turkey's Democratization? In: Insight Turkey 16 (3), pp. 165-180; Watts, Nicole F. (2010): Activists in Office. Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey, Seattle/London: University of Washington Press; Seufert, Günter (2012): Ethnien und Ethnizität: Die Kurden und andere Minderheiten. In: Steinbach, Udo (ed.): Länderbericht Türkei, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, p.247f.
- 57 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi. Selahattin Demirtaş (7.6.2015): A Part of Our Co-Chair Selahattin Demirtaş's Victory Speech, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/2015/06/07/a-part-of-our-co-chair-selahattin-demirtass-victory-speech/>, accessed 14.7.2015
- 58 The Kurdistan Tribune (21.4.2014): 'BDP has solution to all Turkey's problems, but that's not understood': Sebahat Tuncel on BDP-HDP merger, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/bdp-has-solution-all-turkeys-problems-but-that-was-not-understood-sebahat-tuncel-on-bdphdp-merger/>, accessed 3.6.2015; see also: Rudaw. Caglayan, Selin (6.11.2013): New Pro-Kurdish Party in Turkey Hopes to Unite Opposition, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True>, accessed 17.6.2015
- 59 Al Monitor. Cengiz, Orhan Kemal (31.10.2013) New Kurdish Party Could Impact Local Turkish Elections, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/new-kurdish-party-could->

- impact-turkey-elections.html#ixzz3dJcFEAsb, accessed 17.6.2015
- 60 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (10.10.2014): Demokratische Partei der Völker/  
Partei für Frieden und Demokratie (BDP/HDP), [http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/  
tuerkei/188973/hdp-bdp](http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/tuerkei/188973/hdp-bdp), accessed 16.6.2015
- 61 Rudaw. Caglayan, Selin (6.11.2013): New Pro-Kurdish Party in Turkey Hopes to Unite  
Opposition, [http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/  
turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True](http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True), accessed 17.6.2015
- 62 The Kurdistan Tribune (21.4.2014): 'BDP has solution to all Turkey's problems, but that's  
not understood': Sebahat Tuncel on BDP-HDP merger, [http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/  
bdp-has-solution-all-turkeys-problems-but-that-was-not-understood-sebahat-tuncel-on-  
bdphdp-merger/](http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/bdp-has-solution-all-turkeys-problems-but-that-was-not-understood-sebahat-tuncel-on-bdphdp-merger/), accessed 3.6.2015; see also: Rudaw. Caglayan, Selin (6.11.2013): New  
Pro-Kurdish Party in Turkey Hopes to Unite Opposition, [http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/  
turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True](http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True), accessed 17.6.2015
- 63 Rudaw. Caglayan, Selin (6.11.2013): New Pro-Kurdish Party in Turkey Hopes to Unite  
Opposition, [http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/  
turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True](http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True), accessed 17.6.2015; see also: Al Monitor.  
Cengiz, Orhan Kemal (31.10.2013) New Kurdish Party Could Impact Local Turkish Elections,  
[http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/new-kurdish-party-could-impact-  
turkey-elections.html#ixzz3dJcFEAsb](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/new-kurdish-party-could-impact-turkey-elections.html#ixzz3dJcFEAsb), accessed 17.6.2015
- 64 Turkish Policy Quarterly. Demirtaş, Selahattin (2015): The Middle East, the Kurdish Peace  
Process in Turkey, and Radical Democracy, Vol.13, No.4, p.28
- 65 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): HDP – Who Are We?,  
<https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 66 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): Demirtaş - Call For a New  
Life, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/call-for-a-new-life/>, accessed 16.6.2015
- 67 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): HDP – Who Are We?,  
<https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 The Daily Star (Lebanon) (8.6.2015): Turkey ruling party weighs options after election blow,  
[https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-08/301060-turkey-ruling-party-  
weighs-options-after-election-blow.ashx](https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-08/301060-turkey-ruling-party-weighs-options-after-election-blow.ashx), accessed 10.6.2015
- 75 Nationalia. Forniès, David (5.6.2015): Turkey's and Kurdistan's political future linked to  
HDP's result, <http://www.nationalia.info/en/news/2168>, accessed 10.6.2015
- 76 Foreign Policy. Kenar, Ceren (4.6.2015): Erdogan's Kurdish Chickens Are Coming Home to  
Roost, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/erdogan-turkey-elections-kurds-akp-hdp-  
executive-power/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/erdogan-turkey-elections-kurds-akp-hdp-executive-power/), accessed 10.6.2015
- 77 Rudaw. Caglayan, Selin (6.11.2013): New Pro-Kurdish Party in Turkey Hopes to Unite  
Opposition, [http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/  
turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True](http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True), accessed 17.6.2015
- 78 The HDP statute requires two chairpersons, one male and one female, at the top of the  
party. In contrast the Turkish law does not envisage such a structure.
- 79 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi, Central Executive Committee  
(31.5.2015): Gezi is the Democratic Future of Turkey, [https://hdpenglish.wordpress.  
com/2015/06/01/gezi-is-the-democratic-future-of-turkey/](https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/2015/06/01/gezi-is-the-democratic-future-of-turkey/), accessed 25.6.2015; see also:  
Foreign Policy. Kenar, Ceren (4.6.2015): Erdogan's Kurdish Chickens Are Coming Home to  
Roost, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/erdogan-turkey-elections-kurds-akp-hdp-  
executive-power/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/erdogan-turkey-elections-kurds-akp-hdp-executive-power/), accessed 10.6.2015
- 80 Ibid..
- 81 Foreign Affairs. Ozcelik Burcu (4.5.2015): Turkey's Other Kurds - Between the Islamists and  
a Hard Place, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-05-04/turkeys-other-  
kurds](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-05-04/turkeys-other-kurds), accessed 16.6.2015
- 82 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada. Ozcelik, Burcu (11.6.2015): What the  
HDP Success Means for Turkey, <http://carnegieendowment>.

org/sada/2015/06/11/what-hdp-success-means-for-turkey/  
i9q1?mkt\_3RkMMJWWf9wsRojvanKZKXonjHpfsX76egoWKSg38431  
UFwdcjkPmjri1YYCTsN0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D, accessed  
16.7.2015

- 83 Al Monitor. Taştekin, Fehim (20.5.2015): Kurds abandon AKP, [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkey-pious-kurds-abandon-akp-in-droves-hdp.html?utm\\_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm\\_campaign=009ca58ef4-May\\_21\\_2015&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_28264b27a0-009ca58ef4-102453981](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/turkey-pious-kurds-abandon-akp-in-droves-hdp.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm_campaign=009ca58ef4-May_21_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-009ca58ef4-102453981), accessed 16.6.2015
- 84 Wiener Zeitung. Nordhausen, Frank (5.6.2015): Von Erdogan-Euphorie kaum eine Spur, [http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/europa/europastaaten/755613\\_Von-Erdogan-Euphorie-kaum-eine-Spur.html](http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/europa/europastaaten/755613_Von-Erdogan-Euphorie-kaum-eine-Spur.html), accessed 16.6.2015
- 85 Al Monitor. Taştekin, Fehim (10.4.2015): Turkey's minorities join race for parliament, [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/turkeys-minorities-join-race-for-parliament.html?utm\\_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm\\_campaign=9484e77095-April\\_13\\_2015&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_28264b27a0-9484e77095-102453981](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/turkeys-minorities-join-race-for-parliament.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+%5BEnglish%5D&utm_campaign=9484e77095-April_13_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-9484e77095-102453981), accessed 14.4.2015
- 86 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): HDP – Who Are We?, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 87 Rudaw. Caglayan, Selin (6.11.2013): New Pro-Kurdish Party in Turkey Hopes to Unite Opposition, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/06112013?keyword=&isArchive=True>, accessed 17.6.2015
- 88 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): HDP – Who Are We?, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Al Monitor (25.3.2015): Kurdish women's movement reshapes Turkish politics, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/turkey-women-in-middle-east-figen-yuksekdag.html#ixzz3frZiRoBk>, accessed 14.7.2015
- 91 Al Monitor (25.3.2015), *ibid.*
- 92 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): HDP – Who Are We?, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 93 The Kurdistan Tribune. Karem, Harem (8.6.2015): HDP Forms a Bridge Between East and West Turkey, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/hdp-forms-a-bridge-between-east-and-west-turkey/>, accessed 17.6.2015
- 94 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (14.6.2015): HDP Party Assembly Resolution About the General Elections, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/2015/06/14/hdp-party-assembly-resolution-about-the-general-elections/>, accessed 25.6.2015
- 95 Peoples' Democratic Party/Halkların Demokratik Partisi (no date): HDP – Who Are We?, <https://hdpenglish.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 96 MERIA Journal - Middle East Review of International Affairs. Esen, Berk/ Ciddi, Sinan (27.10.2011): Turkey's 2011 elections: an emerging dominant party system? <http://www.rubincenter.org/2011/10/turkey%E2%80%99s-2011-elections-an-emerging-dominant-party-system/>, accessed 14.7.2015
- 97 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Cagaptay, Soner; Arifagaoglu, Hale, e.a. (6.2011): Turkey's New Political Landscape: Implications of the 2011 Elections, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote15.pdf>, accessed 14.7.2015
- 98 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (6.2011): The Turkish Election – Results and Next Steps, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/usa/08291.pdf>, accessed 14.7.2015
- 99 The Kurdistan Tribune (21.4.2014): 'BDP has solution to all Turkey's problems, but that's not understood': Sebahat Tuncel on BDP-HDP merger, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/bdp-has-solution-all-turkeys-problems-but-that-was-not-understood-sebahat-tuncel-on-bdphdp-merger/>, accessed 3.6.2015
- 100 Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey (Research Turkey). Şener, Abdülatif (5.2014): The Analysis of 2014 Local Elections of Turkey, <http://researchturkey.org/the-analysis-of-2014-local-elections-of-turkey/>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 101 Kurdistan National Congress (no date): Turkey Local Election Results 30 .3. 2014, [https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/knk-dossier\\_turkey-local](https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/knk-dossier_turkey-local)

- elections-doc.pdf, accessed 15.7.2015
- 102 KONDA (16.4.2014): 30 Mart Yerel Seçimler Sonrası Sandık ve Seçmen Analizi, [http://konda.com.tr/tr/raporlar/KONDA\\_30Mart2014\\_YerelSecimAnalizi.pdf](http://konda.com.tr/tr/raporlar/KONDA_30Mart2014_YerelSecimAnalizi.pdf), accessed 15.7.2015
- 103 Al Monitor. Daloglu, Tulin (10.8.2014): Turkish opposition remains in denial of its failed strategies, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/daloglu-presidential-elections-erdogan-opposition-denial.html#ixzz3fxvfoDL4>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 104 Bridging Europe. Gisselbrecht, Tania (2014): The HDP, the Future of Turkish Opposition? [http://www.bridgingeurope.net/uploads/8/1/7/1/8171506/hdp\\_working\\_paper\\_gisselbrecht\\_august.pdf](http://www.bridgingeurope.net/uploads/8/1/7/1/8171506/hdp_working_paper_gisselbrecht_august.pdf), accessed 15.7.2015
- 105 The Guardian (8.6.2015): Turkey election 2015: Kurdish Obama is the country's bright new star, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/08/turkey-election-2015-kurdish-obama-is-the-countrys-bright-new-star#img-1>, accessed 17.7.2015
- 106 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada. Ozcelik, Burcu (11.6.2015): What the HDP Success Means for Turkey, [http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2015/06/11/what-hdp-success-means-for-turkey/i9q1?mkt\\_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRojvanKZKXonjHfFsX76egoWKSg38431UFwdcjKpmjr1YYctNs0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2015/06/11/what-hdp-success-means-for-turkey/i9q1?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRojvanKZKXonjHfFsX76egoWKSg38431UFwdcjKpmjr1YYctNs0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D), accessed 16 July 2015
- 107 Hürriyet Daily News (17.3.2015): Erdoğan reiterates denial of Kurdish problem in Turkey, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/erdogan-reiterates-denial-of-kurdish-problem-in-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nID=79819&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 16 July 2015
- 108 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada. Ozcelik, Burcu (11.6.2015): What the HDP Success Means for Turkey, [http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2015/06/11/what-hdp-success-means-for-turkey/i9q1?mkt\\_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRojvanKZKXonjHfFsX76egoWKSg38431UFwdcjKpmjr1YYctNs0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2015/06/11/what-hdp-success-means-for-turkey/i9q1?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRojvanKZKXonjHfFsX76egoWKSg38431UFwdcjKpmjr1YYctNs0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D), accessed 16.7.2015
- 109 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish\\_general\\_election,\\_2015#/media/File:Turkish\\_general\\_election\\_HDP\\_votes\\_by\\_province.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_general_election,_2015#/media/File:Turkish_general_election_HDP_votes_by_province.png), accessed 31 July 2015
- 110 It was by far the HDP who was mostly affected by violent attacks. On 18 May, two bombs exploded at HDP branch offices in Adana and Mersin. On 4 June, in Erzurum, 38 persons were injured during a targeted disruption to the HDP rally. On 5 June, two bombs exploded at the HDP's rally in Diyarbakir; three people died and over 100 were injured. Reference was made to this as well to the threshold by a joint statement of the OSCE/ODHIR, the OSCE-PA and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the aftermath of the elections; see: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/162671?download=true>, accessed 16 July 2015.
- 111 Daily Sabah (18.6.2015): Turkey's Supreme Election Board announces definite results, <http://www.dailysabah.com/elections/2015/06/18/turkeys-supreme-election-board-announces-definite-results>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 112 The Economist (23.11.2013): Huda-Par's emergence. An Islamist party for Turkey's Kurds, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21590595-islamist-party-turkeys-kurds-huda-pars-emergence>, accessed.6.11. 2015
- 113 Al-Monitor. Gursel, Kadri (23.12.2012): New 'Party of God' Will Divide Kurdish, Turkish Islamists, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/hizbullah-turkey-islamist.html>, accessed 11.6.2015
- 114 Today's Zaman. Albayrak, Aydın (2.5.2015): Hüda-Par to hinder ruling party's chances of success in elections, [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_huda-par-to-hinder-ruling-party-s-chances-of-success-in-elections\\_379571.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_huda-par-to-hinder-ruling-party-s-chances-of-success-in-elections_379571.html), accessed 12.6.2015
- 115 Al-Monitor. Gursel, Kadri (23.12.2012): New 'Party of God' Will Divide Kurdish, Turkish Islamists, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/hizbullah-turkey-islamist.html>, accessed 11.6.2015
- 116 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Policywatch. Cagaptay, Soner; Uslu, Emrullah, (25.1.2005): Hizbullah in Turkey Revives: Al-Qaeda's Bridge between Europe and Iraq? No.946, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizbullah-in-turkey-revives-al-qaedas-bridge-between-europe-and-iraq>, 12.6.2015
- 117 Gürbüz, Mustafa (2013): Revitalization of Kurdish Islamic Sphere and Revival of Hizbullah in Turkey. In: Bilgin, Fevzi/Sarhan, Ali (eds.): Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question, New York et alia: Lexington, p.167
- 118 The Kurdish Globe. Akgönül, Mehmed Sabri (4.6.2012): PKK, AKP and Kurdish Hezbollah:

- New process of political competition in north Kurdistan, <https://www.kurdishglobe.net/article/7723E877898EAF512A852DC405C72265/PKK-AKP-and-Kurdish-Hezbollah-New-process-of-political-competition-in-north-Kurdistan.html>, 12.6.2015
- 119 International Relations and Security Network (ISN). Jenkins, Gareth (15.6.2010): A New Front in the PKK Insurgency, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=117499>, 15.6.2015; see also: Al-Monitor. Gursel, Kadri (23.12.2012): New ‚Party of God‘ Will Divide Kurdish, Turkish Islamists, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/hizbullah-turkey-islamist.html>, accessed 11.6.2015
- 120 DTF – Demokratisches Türkeiforum (13.4.2013): Wird Hizbullah wieder aktiv? [http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/Wird\\_Hizbullah\\_wieder\\_aktiv%3F](http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/Wird_Hizbullah_wieder_aktiv%3F), accessed 10.4.2015
- 121 Gürbüz, Mustafa (2013), *ibid.*, p.168
- 122 Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (10.10.2014): Partei der gerechten Sache (Hüda Par). Hür Dava Partisi, <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/tuerkei/190439/hueda-par>, 11.6. 2015
- 123 Foreign Policy Journal. Raufoglu, Alakbar (31.1.2013): Turkey: Islamist Kurds enter politics to divide AKP, BDP electorate in the Southeast, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2013/01/31/turkey-islamist-kurds-enter-politics-to-divide-akp-bdp-electorate-in-the-southeast/>, accessed 12.6.2015
- 124 DTF – Demokratisches Türkeiforum (13.4.2013): Wird Hizbullah wieder aktiv? [http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/Wird\\_Hizbullah\\_wieder\\_aktiv%3F](http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/Wird_Hizbullah_wieder_aktiv%3F), accessed 10.4.2015
- 125 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Cagaptay, Soner; Uslu, Emrullah, (25.1.2005): Hizballah in Turkey Revives: Al-Qaeda’s Bridge between Europe and Iraq? Policywatch No.946, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-in-turkey-revives-al-qaedas-bridge-between-europe-and-iraq>, 12.6.2015
- 126 Al-Monitor. Gursel, Kadri (23.12.2012): New ‚Party of God‘ Will Divide Kurdish, Turkish Islamists, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/hizbullah-turkey-islamist.html>, accessed 11.6.2015
- 127 DTF – Demokratisches Türkeiforum (13.4.2013): Wird Hizbullah wieder aktiv? [http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/Wird\\_Hizbullah\\_wieder\\_aktiv%3F](http://www.tuerkeiforum.net/Wird_Hizbullah_wieder_aktiv%3F), accessed 10.4.2015
- 128 Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor. Uslu, Emrullah (15.6.2015): Once Feared Kurdish Hizbullah Making Transition to Politics in Turkey, 10 Issue, No. 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews%5Bany\\_of\\_the\\_words%5D=Hizbullah&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39491&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=f080c7ba679482df273119070bdc8c18](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=Hizbullah&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39491&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=f080c7ba679482df273119070bdc8c18), accessed 15.6.2015
- 129 Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor. Uslu, Emrullah (15.6.2015): Once Feared Kurdish Hizbullah Making Transition to Politics in Turkey, 10 Issue, No. 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews%5Bany\\_of\\_the\\_words%5D=Hizbullah&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39491&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=f080c7ba679482df273119070bdc8c18](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=Hizbullah&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39491&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=f080c7ba679482df273119070bdc8c18), accessed 15.6.2015
- 130 Hürriyet Daily News (8.5.2012): New Islamist Kurdish party to enter politics, <http://www.hurriyetsdailynews.com/new-islamist-kurdish-party-to-enter-politics.aspx?pageID=238&nID=20190&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 27.3.2015
- 131 Şahin, Sait (5.2.2015): interviewed by Firat Erez. Huda-Par: the other Kurds. TurkeyAgenda, <http://www.turkeyagenda.com/huda-par-the-other-kurds-1937.html>, accessed 12.6.6.2015
- 132 Al-Monitor. Sibel Utku Bila (7.4.2013): Islamist Kurdish Group Seeks Role in Southeast Turkey, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/originals/2013/04/free-cause-party-kurdish-islamist-group-huda-par.html>, accessed 11.6.2015
- 133 The Economist (23.11.2013): Huda-Par’s emergence. An Islamist party for Turkey’s Kurds, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21590595-islamist-party-turkeys-kurds-huda-pars-emergence>, accessed 11.6. 2015
- 134 Hürriyet Daily News (8.5.2012): New Islamist Kurdish party to enter politics, <http://www.hurriyetsdailynews.com/new-islamist-kurdish-party-to-enter-politics.aspx?pageID=238&nID=20190&NewsCatID=338>, accessed 27.3.2015
- 135 Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor. Uslu, Emrullah (15.6.2015): Once Feared Kurdish Hizbullah Making Transition to Politics in Turkey, 10 Issue, No. 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bswords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae)

- 3e&tx\_ttnews%5Bany\_of\_the\_words%5D=Hizbullah&tx\_ttnews%5Btt\_news%5D=39491&tx\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=f080c7ba679482df273119070bdc8c18, accessed 15.6.2015
- 136 Al Monitor. Taştekin, Fehim (7.1.2015): Turkey's AKP pits Kurd against Kurd, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/turkey-islamic-kurds-against-islamist-party.html>, accessed 28 July 2015
- 137 Today's Zaman. Miroğlu, Orhan (26.12.2014): Pro-independence and pro-federation Kurdish parties, [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/orhan-miroglu/newsDetail\\_openPrintPage.action?newsId=368100](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/orhan-miroglu/newsDetail_openPrintPage.action?newsId=368100), accessed 27.3.2015
- 138 ILKHA (22.5.2015): 'We want to ask for support, in order to be the voice of İslam in Parliament', <http://www.en.ilkha.com/haber/30/we-want-to-ask-for-support-in-order-to-be-the-voice-of-islam-in-parliament/>, accessed 15 Juni 2015
- 139 ILKHA (27.5.2015): Yapicioglu: We have started our journey to fill 'The Islamic opposition' gap, <http://www.en.ilkha.com/haber/32/yapicioglu-we-have-started-our-journey-to-fill-the-islamic-opposition-gap/>, accessed 10.6.2015
- 140 ILKHA (27.5.2015); *ibid*
- 141 ILKHA (27.5.2015); *ibid*.
- 142 The Economist (23.11.2013): Huda-Par's emergence. An Islamist party for Turkey's Kurds, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21590595-islamist-party-turkeys-kurds-huda-pars-emergence>, accessed 11.6. 2015
- 143 Şahin, Sait (5.2.2015): interviewed by Firat Erez. Huda-Par: the other Kurds. TurkeyAgenda, <http://www.turkeyagenda.com/huda-par-the-other-kurds-1937.html>, accessed 12.6.2015
- 144 Şahin, Sait (5.2.2015), *ibid*.
- 145 Foreign Policy Journal. Raufoglu, Alakbar (31.1.2013): Turkey: Islamist Kurds enter politics to divide AKP, BDP electorate in the Southeast, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2013/01/31/turkey-islamist-kurds-enter-politics-to-divide-akp-bdp-electorate-in-the-southeast/>, accessed 12.6.2015; see also: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (10.10.2014): Partei der gerechten Sache (Hüda Par). Hür Dava Partisi, <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/tuerkei/190439/hueda-par>, 11.6. 2015
- 146 Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Türkei. Aktan, Irfan (26.3.2015): Kurdish organizations outside of PKK are displeased with the process, <http://tr.boell.org/de/node/2211>, accessed 15.6.2015
- 147 Foreign Policy Journal. Raufoglu, Alakbar (31.1.2013): Turkey: Islamist Kurds enter politics to divide AKP, BDP electorate in the Southeast, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2013/01/31/turkey-islamist-kurds-enter-politics-to-divide-akp-bdp-electorate-in-the-southeast/>, accessed 12.6.2015; see also: Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Türkei. Aktan, Irfan (26.3.2015): Kurdish organizations outside of PKK are displeased with the process, <http://tr.boell.org/de/node/2211>, accessed 15.6.2015
- 148 Foreign Policy Journal. Raufoglu, Alakbar (31.1.2013): Turkey: Islamist Kurds enter politics to divide AKP, BDP electorate in the Southeast, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2013/01/31/turkey-islamist-kurds-enter-politics-to-divide-akp-bdp-electorate-in-the-southeast/>, accessed 12.6.2015
- 149 Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Türkei. Aktan, Irfan (26.3.2015): Kurdish organizations outside of PKK are displeased with the process, <http://tr.boell.org/de/node/2211>, accessed 15.6.2015
- 150 ILKHA (23.5.2015): Undersecretaries of European Embassies visited the HUDA-PAR, <http://www.en.ilkha.com/haber/31/undersecretaries-of-european-embassies-visited-the-huda-par/>, accessed 1.6.2015
- 151 Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Türkei. Aktan, Irfan (26.3.2015): Kurdish organizations outside of PKK are displeased with the process, <http://tr.boell.org/de/node/2211>, accessed 15.6.2015
- 152 Today's Zaman. Albayrak, Aydın (2.5.2015): Hüda-Par to hinder ruling party's chances of success in elections, [http://www.todayszaman.com/national\\_huda-par-to-hinder-ruling-party-chances-of-success-in-elections\\_379571.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/national_huda-par-to-hinder-ruling-party-chances-of-success-in-elections_379571.html), accessed 12.6.2015
- 153 Al-Monitor. Taştekin, Fehim (7.1.2015): Turkey's AKP pits Kurd against Kurd, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/turkey-islamic-kurds-against-islamist-party.html>, accessed 15.6.2015; see also: Today's Zaman. Albayrak, Aydın (2.5.2015): Hüda-Par to hinder ruling party's chances of success in elections, <http://www.todayszaman.com/>

national\_huda-par-to-hinder-ruling-partys-chances-of-success-in-elections\_379571.html,  
accessed 12.6.2015

<sup>154</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Cagaptay, Soner (25.5.2015): Can Erdogan Stay at the Helm? Policy Notes. No.25, [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote25\\_Cagaptay3.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote25_Cagaptay3.pdf), accessed 12.6.2015

# **The changing faces of the PKK**

*Walter Posch*

Research on the banned 'Kurdistan Workers Party' (PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*) has always been more about advocacy rather than accuracy. This holds true for almost any phase of the organization's history, from its roots in Turkey's left wing extremism of the 1970s to the great *serhildan* uprising from 1986-1999, for the time of its restructuring in 2002 until recently. And it also holds true for both kinds of authors, supporters and contenders of the PKK likewise. This paper tries to deal impartially with two aspects of the organization: its ideology and its organizational structure. It is mainly based on a critical reading of the PKK's program, internal regulations and the works of Abdullah Öcalan. Current affairs, political and military operations, are only dealt with cursorily in order to clarify points and to check to what extend the PKK is able to actually realize its visions and plans.

## **The KCK-Agreement**

After the temporary loss of Syrian support and the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and the Turkish army's military successes against the PKK the organization retreated to their hideouts in the Qandil mountains on Iraqi territory. Down there it underwent a painful process of structural reorganization and ideological clarification. Just how hard this process was can be seen on the number of prominent cadres who left: among them were such renowned fighters like Hüseyin Topgüder, Nizamettin Taş, Osman Öcalan, Hıdır Sarıkaya and many others. The organization had to cope with the lack of moral and spirit, a result of its leader's imprisonment and the behavior at court, but it also had to take the changed international and strategic environment into consideration, which was increasingly hard to be reconciled with the PKK's simplistic anti-imperialist ideology.



In a way the changing names of the PKK<sup>1</sup> reflect the insecurity the organization underwent in the years from 2000 to 2004: in 2002 the PKK disbanded itself and took the name 'Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress' (KADEK, Kongreya Azadiya Demokratika Kurdistan) indicating the importance of democratic structures such as the party's general congress vis-a-vis the classic leadership authoritarianism. Two years later in 2004 Öcalan had the name changed to '(Con-)Federation of Societies of Kurdistan' (KKK, Koma Komalên Kurdistan) which stresses pan-kurdish positions whilst addressing the diversity of the societies in Kurdistan. For reasons unknown KKK was renamed to '(Con-)Federation of Communities of Kurdistan' (KCK, Koma Civakên Kurdistan) only after a few months had passed. It was under this name that the new program was proclaimed, the 'KCK Agreement' (KCK Sözlüşmesi). The use of this term is revealing because what Öcalan has in mind is some kind of a contract social unlike the PKK manifesto, the organization's original charter. The exact date of publication is unclear, however it has a preface written by Abdullah Öcalan dated 20 March 2005. This means the text must have been around and debated in inner circles between 2003 and 2005.

The agreement was written in Turkish, the organization's language. A decade later Arabic and Persian versions were published, but none in Kurdish. The content of their texts differs in many points because they refer to their different Iranian and Syrian political contexts. But the gist of the document concerning the KCK System and its ideology remains the same. A pdf version of the KCK-Agreement was published on the homepage of a certain Azad Badiki whose website is both fan-site and sourcebook of the PKK. He published the most complete version of the KCK-Agreement with a cover sheet sporting the KCK logo. This version includes a preface from the pen of Öcalan and another person, written a little later which elaborates on the previous preface. Another version without prefaces was published and analyzed by the renowned Turkish think tank Ankara Strateji.<sup>2</sup>

The text of the KCK-Agreement falls into two uneven parts: two prefaces plus the - short - first part, dealing predominantly with ideology and the historical setting and the rest detailing the structure of the organization. But the second part too is full of ideological statements and explanations. Öcalan's authorship is beyond doubt, but it is unclear whether he wrote all articles on his own or just reorganized the existing structure. Although stating the contrary, the text reads like the constitution of a state soon to be created. It contains 46 Articles (madde) divided in 13 parts (bölüm). Öcalan's prefaces can therefore be read as preambles of a potential constitution.

Although attempting to promote a democratic future for all Kurds, the paper is deeply rooted in the tradition of Middle Eastern authoritarianism, be it Kemalist, Baathist, nationalist, or oriental-socialist. And of course it cannot betray the organization's roots as a resistance movement, as the following analyses of its ideology and structure will show.

## **Ideology**

Writing about the PKK and its ideology usually runs along two extreme positions. For instance Akkaya and Jongerden<sup>3</sup> view the Agreement as a 'new radical democratic' concept, focus on the Kurdish struggle and ignore or downplay the many problematic elements of the text. On the opposite site, authors like Sezer or Türköne<sup>4</sup> settle their case by analyzing KCK's Soviet like structures and radical ideology. They focus on the agreement's antidemocratic elements, whilst conveniently glossing over the fact that NATO member Turkey has never been a beacon of democracy itself and it was the situation in Turkish-Kurdistan that gave birth to the PKK. This said the KCK/PKK is still an underground movement and therefore not very democratic, a fact liberal authors like Baskın Oran succinctly pointed out.<sup>5</sup>

According to article 36 the PKK is ‘the KCK’s ideological power’ but the PKK is not a classic party aiming for power but ‘an ideological, moral and organizational entity,’ which is responsible to keep the leadership’s (i.e. Öcalan’s) ideology and philosophy alive and it is within these ideological confines that any action and activity of the KCK takes place.

### **Communist heritage „kurdisized’**

Born from Turkish left-wing extremism KCK/PKK keeps communist traditions alive. For instance, Öcalan postulates in article 4I of the Agreement the KCK being an alternative to ‘globalized imperialism.’ Symbolism too is revealing, only sickle and hammer disappeared but the red star sometimes in combination with the yellow Kurdish sun remains the main emblem for all branches and elements of the organization. Generally, PKK/KCK followers avoid the use the national Kurdish flag (red-white-green with sun), because it is identified with the ‘reactionary’ self-rule of the Kurdish nationalists in northern Iraq. However, Kurdishness cannot be ignored as it is widely assumed to be the main motivation for the bulk of its fighters. Article 4h is the only constructive and politically workable article of the whole KCK agreement, as he advocates a peaceful solution of the Kurdish issue and demands language education on every level.

In order to avoid nationalism (milliyetçilik) but to keep Kurdishness Öcalan embraces ‚protochronism’<sup>6</sup> by insinuating that Kurds have been close to communism or communardism (after the Commune de Paris 1870/71) from times immemorial anyway. At one point he states the Kurdish clans and tribes have resisted state centralization for centuries by ‘relying on the communal democratic organization of the natural society’ (Agreement, p. 2-7) which is absurd given the undemocratic nature of tribalism and the PKK’s generations-long fight against it. At another place (Agreement, p. 4) he explains:

*‘As you know the word Kom is a word with Arian roots. Most likely the words communism (komünizm) and commune (komün) trace*

*back to the same root. So the word Kom in Kurdish means some kind of commune (Komün).'*

This rather stretched historic-linguistic argument mixes neatly with more racist forms. In the course of the fight around Kobani in 2014 a certain Ezgi Demirsu published an article in the party organ *Yeni Özgür Politika* defining the fight as an 'Arian-Semitic struggle' between Kurds and Arabs.<sup>7</sup>

Communist patterns of thinking prevail of course in those parts of the agreement dealing with the economy. Article 4i postulates 'securing the transition from a metastasizing and profit based economy towards a communard economy based on user value and redistribution' as the main economic principle. This is repeated in articles 8f and 35-2 of the Agreement. Article 7m allows property rights and private economic initiative provided they would not result in 'status diversity'. The organization rather thin-skinned rejects any critique put forward by Kurdish businessmen on its romantic economic position.

### **Ecology and Feminism**

Kurdish activists in Europe imparted patterns of modern ecological and feminist (or 'green') thinking to the KCK. This said there is not much writing about ecological issues to be found in the works of Öcalan in general and when it appears in the Agreement (cf. article 11) its use remains very often unclear. At one point (Agreement, p.6) he insists on an ecological revolution and article 9e reads everybody is 'free to live in an eco-community (eko topluluk) and to live a life according to the ecological balance.' Articles 10f and g oblige everybody to contribute to environmental protection. This seems to be a follow up to what is ongoing in Turkey's Kurdish society anyway, because ecological activism is part of the political action of the local population in southeastern Anatolia and wholeheartedly supported by KCK. Targets of eco-activism are among other forms of protest against Turkish dam projects but also man made desertification

mostly due to ecocide such as forest burning practiced by the army.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important contributions of the PKK/KCK concerns the role of women in society. The organization stands firmly in the socialist tradition of gender equality (for instance Agreement articles 4c and 4d), because ‘the level of freedom in a society is connected to the level of freedom women enjoy in that society’ and ‘without fighting the dominant male ideology morale and culture no neither true democratization nor the creation of a free socialist life is possible.’ (Agreement, p. 6). Öcalan regularly addresses women’s day (8th March) and one of Öcalan’s texts is entitled ‘To kill the Male is the basic Duty of Socialism’. Furthermore, the Agreements’ article 12a orders ‘dual presidencies’ (eş başkanlık) and women quotas for decision making bodies for almost all of its leadership positions. For many of the female fighters joining to the militia is a double act defying the oppression exerted by the Turkish state and family patriarchy likewise.<sup>9</sup>

### **KCK or the Con-Federalism of Democratic Societies in Kurdistan**

The whole Agreement centers on the term ‘Koma Civakên Kurdistan’ (lit. Union of Societies of Kurdistan), which Öcalan himself translates - or interprets - as ‘Con-federalism of the Democratic Society of Kurdistan’ (Kürdistan Demokratik Toplum Konfederalizm, cf. Agreement, p. 4). In order to understand this concept one has to analyze Öcalan’s understanding of democracy and con-federalism.

### **Rejection of the nation-state**

The strict rejection of the nation state (ulus-devlet) is a point of departure for Öcalan’s concept of democracy and his idea for a regional solution. The arguments put forward are classical Marxism: according to the Agreement (p. 2) the nation state is the result of the industrial revolution and became ‘the biggest obstacle for a progressive society, democracy and freedom.’ This is because the nation state’s sole function is to implement capitalism (p.7). Needless to say, the nation state Öcalan has in mind and reflects upon is the

Turkey he knew, and his analysis of world affairs mirrors the radical semi-intellectualism of the Turkish left from a bygone era.

For instance, Öcalan thinks of Israel to be the quintessential nation state and post-Ottoman Turkey proofed its identity as a nation state by being the first country to diplomatically recognize Israel.<sup>10</sup> According to Öcalan, Israel ‘absolutely’ needs Kurdish nationalism in order to keep weak nation states in the region. And it finds its supporters among the Kurds namely ‘the old feudal-tribal upper class layers on their way becoming a bourgeoisie.’<sup>11</sup> By this he means the influential Barzani family in Iraqi Kurdistan. Öcalan’s explanations are not necessarily anti-Semitic as they lack the usual anti-Semitic venom of other Middle Eastern leaders, rather they should be read as concession to the Syrian regime’s regional policy, which is the PKK’s old sponsor. This said, official media outlets of the PKK/KCK also publish bizarre conspiracy theories about Israel, such as the opinion the Jewish state would be an active supporter of the Islamic State for reasons of common Semitic roots between Hebrews and Arabs.<sup>12</sup>

### **Radical democracy**

Öcalan follows classic Marxist patterns as he postulates a correlation between nation-state and national bourgeoisie. Therefore he concludes that representative democracy is not able to answer the longing for freedom and justice of the people. Instead of bourgeois democracy the Agreement (article 2) advocates a bottom up approach namely ‘a participatory democracy on every level.’ ‘My understanding of democracy’ he writes ‘is not that of individual democracy (birey demokrasisi) but of collective democracy (topluluk demokrasisi)’ (Agreement, p. 4) or radical democracy (article 4a). In this democracy everybody ‘has to be a komün’ - meaning to be part of one of the branches of KCK. According to - article 10h - everybody is obliged to follow the duty of democratic participation in ‘organized form’ to the political life because ‘democratic participation, initiative and collectivism are core principles’ (article 44c). Common membership means common values and the same political views, dissent of

course must not exist as 'everybody has to embrace the moral of the free and democratic society' according to article 10k.

Given Öcalan's ideological roots and his commitment to collectivism and his abhorrence of individual freedom one has to read the PKK/KCK version of 'democracy' as nothing else but Soviet style collectivist 'people's democracy', that is exactly the opposite of how democracy is understood in democratic societies. The organization's closeness to radical left wing groups in Turkey such as the Party of the Revolutionary Liberation Front - Movement (DHKPC) or the Maoist Turkish Toilers Liberation Army (TİKKO), as well as to left wing extremist circles in Europe and elsewhere confirm this impression.

### **Con-federalism**

Understanding Öcalan's interpretation of konfederalizm is a tricky endeavor. To begin with he does not refer to a con-federation in the sense confederated countries or states. At the same time it is not clear what exactly he means as he usually uses konfederalizm - con-federalism - but apparently means confederation (konfederasyon) and occasionally uses konfederatif (confederative) as a noun. In any case he borrowed the term from the New Yorker eco-anarchist and eccentric Murray Bookchin, a marginal figure in political philosophy.

Typical for revolutionary projects, KCK aims to be of global value relieving all mankind, consequently the ultimate aim of KCK is nothing less but utopian, namely the creation of a 'global democratic confederation' leaving the system of nation states behind (Agreement, p. 3). A necessary step towards this aim is the erection of a 'con-federalism of democratic societies' in the Middle East, taking Kurdistan as a starting point. This confederalism would ignore state borders, does not aim to erect a state system but 'a democratic system for a people without a state.' The Kurds of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria would bring in their own federations (federasyon) and form an overarching 'con-federalism' which is not to be a state!<sup>13</sup> According to Öcalan once the nation states would recognize the rights of the

Kurds, the Kurds too would recognize the sovereign rights of these nation states. Finally he imagines a hierarchy of legal systems: the EU-law, nation state law and 'democratic confederal law' (konfederal democratic hukuk, Agreement, p. 3, 7.) Realistically such a system would only have a chance for implementation if Turkey would join the EU at a future date. But then the third layer would be equal to the provincial level. Hence Öcalan has the provincial administration in the Kurdish region in mind, where he would implement the 'democratic confederal law.' Logically the only possible way to do so is via the 'democratic society con-federalism' that is nothing but the KCK system. In other words it is not a negotiated autonomy status Öcalan is interested to implement, but rather the nation states should accept the establishment of KCK/PKK rule in all Kurdish populated areas. Subsequent actions of the KCK/PKK in Syria and Turkey in the years from 2012 onwards confirm this view.

### **Quasi-state and sole representation of the Kurdish People**

Its rejection of the nation state and the KCK's explicit claim not to aim at the creation of a state (articles 2, 4a) notwithstanding, KCK acts almost as a nation state. For instance according to article 5 of the Agreement everybody in Kurdistan is a 'compatriot' (yurttaş) a term by which KCK tries to avoid the legal Turkish term 'citizen' (vatandaş). This subtle difference however gets lost in the Persian version (which uses shahrvand, 'citizen') and thus reveals the text's real intention. The term 'compatriot' relates first to all Kurds in the four parts of Kurdistan but according to article 18 also to the Kurds in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The KCK's quasi-citizenship entitles to rights and obliges to certain duties typically associated with citizenship. The most important are articles 10c and 31a-c concerning military service, or article 10j stipulating the obligation to return to the homeland. Perhaps even more important is article 10i, the duty to pay taxes. Many Kurds in Europe and in Turkey pay voluntarily but many others don't. Borders between organized crime and the KCK/PKK often get blurred because the organization doesn't shy away to employ criminal strongmen to levy these taxes.



Very often, this causes problems between the organization and European state authorities.

The agreement leaves no doubt that KCK /PKK is thought to be the one and only representative of the Kurdish people. Says Öcalan:

*'... I am convinced that I have won a new philosophy and (political) system of life (yaşam felsefesi ve sistemi) for our people. To be its creator is a great honor for me. I am calling all of our people to democratically organize, to unite and to start self rule under the flag which sports the red star in yellow sun on green ground, I do express (my willingness) to hold up this banner in honor and to continue my leadership duties as I did until now so successfully (...)' (Agreement, p. 3)*

The organization justifies its exclusive role in article 45, where the claim is made that only KCK 'takes the real intention of the people in all parts of Kurdistan seriously.' Other Kurdish organizations criticize the PKK/KCK for its intolerance and reckless demeanor towards political competitors and the KCK's totalitarian sides. The organization deals mercilessly with dissenters, especially those who founded the Kurdistan Patriotic Democrats' Party (PWD).<sup>14</sup> In general the KCK/PKK rejects critique without any argument by simply stating that other Kurdish organizations are either insincere or government stooges anyway. Therefore no meaningful exchange of views can exist with liberal Kurds of the Law and Freedom Party (HAK-PAR)<sup>15</sup> or with the radical Islamists of the Party of the Free Cause (Hüda Par).<sup>16</sup>

Following its exclusive logic, the role of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq has to be belittled or downplayed. 'Even if there are some developments in Southern Kurdistan' the agreement's article 4a reads, it is the KCK which is able to create a 'society of Kurdistan according to the principles of gender freedom and an ecologically backed democratic organization.' The most important competition is therefore with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of

Iraq KDP, which also has branches in Turkey, Iran and Syria. The KDP too claims to represent all other Kurds worldwide but has more experience in coalition building and cooperation with other Kurdish organizations and parties. Fueled by the great animosities between party leaders Abdullah Öcalan and Massud Barzani both sides have clashed in the past. One of the first activities the PYD, the PKK/KCK's branch in Syria was to close down and to restrict the political space for Barzani's followers among the Syrian Kurds. In Iran too, the followers of Öcalan would not cooperate with long-established Iranian-Kurdish groups such as Komala or KDP-Iran. Rather they expect others to join KCK either in form of 'people's fronts' or similar to the GDR's 'block parties' that is to formally stay independent but to become politically totally dependent and controlled by KCK.

### **The organization of the KCK**

The KCK system does not pose too many problems for analysts as it is easily comparable with other Third-World resistance movements from the 1950s to 1980s, such as the Algerian FLN. The organization has a simple pyramidal structure (see for instance Agreement, p. 4 point 4 and article 2), headed by Öcalan, who is always referred to as 'the leader' (önder, rêber) or the 'leadership' (önderlik, rêberi), and who according to article 11 'represents the people on every level' and is therefore the final authority for arbitration and decision making (son karar mercii) in all vital questions. Öcalan's writings are obligatory readings, and he thinks of himself as a philosopher, historian and sociologist.

### **Civilian Structures**

KCK is a typical cadre based organization which secures internal cohesion and discipline with a legal system of its own (articles 27-30). In a way KCK wants to square the circle - it wants to become some kind of an umbrella organization for all Kurds and to remain a strict cadre organization simultaneously. To put it simpler, the organizational structures unite features of a political party with a

nation state. It is therefore thought to be established on four levels:

- (a) general or pan-kurdish,
- (b) parts (parça) of Kurdistan (i.e. Iran/rojhilat, Iraq/başur, Turkey/bakur, Syria/rojawa),
- (c) provinces and regions,
- (d) communities and cells.

A series of police and intelligence operations against alleged members of the KCK system inside Turkey started in 2009 and lasted (at least) until 2012.<sup>17</sup> This enabled Turkish authorities to unravel the better part of the underground network and to reconstruct KCK's organizational charts and chain of command. With few exceptions the published charts<sup>18</sup> correlate with the structure described in the KCK-Agreement.

The following KCK institutions relate to the general Kurdish level: the leadership (that is Öcalan, article 11), Kongra-Gel, the Executive Council, and the Area Centers. The 'Executive Council' (yürütme konseyi, articles 13a-h) is the organizational core of the whole KCK-system. Its members are elected by the Kongra-Gel and confirmed by Öcalan. The Executive Council's chairman has a two terms limit for reelection but one finds the same eligible members, all of them 'old comrades' from the times of the PKK's creation, Sabri Ok, Cemil Bayık, Duran Kalkan, Murat Karayılan, and Mustafa Karasu (Kalkan and Karasu are of Turkish not Kurdish origin). In recent years other important figures like Bêse Xozat and Bahôz Erdal emerged too but it is the aforementioned group which ultimately counts. The Executive Council runs day-to-day business and coordinates 'all organizations, institutions, areas of responsibilities and committees' (article 13b). Among them are the so called Area (of responsibility) Centers (alan merkezleri) such as: ideology, politics, social issues, popular defense and economy. At the same level one finds the Leadership Committee (önderlik komitesi) tasked with the publication and dissemination of the thoughts and ideology of Abdullah Öcalan (article 14/6) and the

High Electoral Council (yüksek seçim kurulu article 15). In general elected and cadre institutions can be differentiated.

### **Elections and Parliaments**

'Kongra-Gel' is designed, according to article 12 of the agreement, as a parliament that collectively includes all Kurds and is headed by the 'Presidential Council' (Başkanlık Divanı article 12a). In reality, though, it is regarded as the PKK's parliament and functions, in some way, as members' general assembly: its most important function lies in the election of its own presidential council, the executive council and its leadership. In addition, it confirms the 'Supreme People's Court' and the 'Electoral Commission' (article 12g). There is an elected parliament foreseen for the four parts of Kurdistan (parça): the 'People's Assembly' (Halk Meclisi articles 16-19). The Assembly votes for the own 'democratic-ecological society's executive'; the executive and the assembly itself are obliged to report separately to the executive council (article 16, 17). Thus, there is a doubled duty to report to the next higher level.

The realization of the overall system was entrusted to the KCK's Turkey coordination group, which carries out its duties as 'Turkey's Assembly' of the KCK (KCK-Türkiye Meclisi) since 2006. In the course of the mass incarceration during the KCK-trials, the Turkish authorities crushed the KCK/TM in the years 2009-2010. The 'Congress for a Democratic Society' (Demokratik Toplum Kongresi, DTK) took its place and assumed many of its functions, albeit in a slightly different form.<sup>19</sup> Its main focus is, apparently, the construction of the KCK system. A similar umbrella organization concerned with the construction of the KCK in Syria is the 'Movement for a Democratic Society' (Tevgera Civaka Demokratik, TEV-DEM).<sup>20</sup> There, in Syria, a 'National Assembly for West-Kurdistan' (Meclisa/Encûmana Gela Rojavayê Kurdistan, M/EGRK) exists, which is the only functioning KCK parliament. The parliament for east-Kurdistan, namely Encumana Gela Rojhilata Kurdistan (EGRK) for Iran is probably inactive. As for 'abroad', namely outside Kurdistan (EU and CIS), it is only prescribed

in a general fashion that a similar body should be organized, but without any details given. The role of a European Kurdish parliament is often adopted by the 'Kurdistan National Congress' (Kongreya Neteweyîya Kurdistanê, KNK). The congress was established in 1999 as a successor of the 'Kurdish Parliament in Exile' and raises the claim of being an aggregate-Kurdish Parliament<sup>21</sup> that, of course, is dominated by the PKK or the KCK. In reality, the KNK functions as an umbrella organization of different cultural associations. Nonetheless, it has different left and even Islamist political parties among its members but important Kurdish parties like the KDP and the PUK do not participate. Alternatively and independently from KCK a (pan-)Kurdish National Congress' (Kongreya Neteweyê Kurd) was established in summer 2013 in Erbil. After a showdown with the Iraqi Kurds - namely the KDP and PUK - the Kurdistan National Congress would participate at the Kurdish National Congress but only as an observer.<sup>22</sup>

On the lower levels, the same organizational structures seem to repeat themselves: There are 'provincial assemblies' (eyalet-bölge meclisleri, article 20) and a correspondent executive (article 21). Only half of the members of the provincial assembly are elected; the rest is chosen by specific KCK-bodies according to a quota system. The 'Assembly of the Free Society' (özgür toplum meclisleri, article 22) is active on city and city quarter level. Its delegates are, according to article 23, elected by the members of the komün and the civil society as well as the 'democratic oriented members' (read: sympathizers of the KCK) of the legal community councils. The free society also provides for an executive (article 24). Here, the KCK assumes and substitutes the functions of a normal party, which, in Turkey, must have led to a competition with the legal representation of the Kurds. This would explain the dissolution of the 'Democratic Peoples Party' DEHAP and its re-establishment as the 'Democratic Society Party' DTP which did not hold any organizational elements on the communal level.<sup>23</sup> In other words, on the grassroots level KCK does not want any competition including from pro-Kurdish legal parties.

A core element of the KCK is the komün, which is often misunderstood as the 'commune' as in community. The komün is, according to Article 24, the 'organized state of the people on the street and in the village'. At this point, Öcalan explains that everybody must belong to a komün and express himself through it. Principally, they are local 'cells' with compulsory membership for all Kurds. On this level, elections and an executive committee with similar reporting obligations to the next higher level exist.

### **Area Centres (alan merkezleri)**

The main organizational functions of the KCK are coordinated and led via so called 'Area Centres' (alan merkezleri, article 14) whereby 'area' refers to 'area of responsibility'. They form the real party- and guerrilla apparatus of the organization and serve the Executive Council as executive bodies (article 13e). Area Centres fulfill different functions, and every area centre has different committees at its disposal. For instance, the 'press committee' of the area centre 'Ideology' would control the press according to article 14/1c of the agreement and the 'education and enlightenment committee' is - inter alia - responsible for research and training of cadres (article 14/1a).

The Politics Area Centre is of central importance and consists of the committees for foreign relations, minorities and religious groups, legal questions, politics, and the local ecological leadership committee (Article 14/2 a-e). The political committee is, among others, entrusted with the 'development of political groups in the ideological framework of the KCK' as well as strategic partnerships. In addition: the role of other parties, associations and trade unions that are laid out in articles 39-42. These, similar to the bloc parties in the former GDR, are not allowed to run against the KCK system and are subject to the local 'political-ecological leadership committee'.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to assign the 'Democratic Establishment Unit' (Demokratik Kuruluş Birliği) which, on the one hand, is represented as a party

and, on the other hand, appears as a military unit.

It is easier to map the regional parties of the KCK/PKK such as the 'Party of the Democratic Solution' established in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2002 (Partiya Çaresariya Demokratika Kurdistan, PÇDK), the 'Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan' established in Iran in 2003 (Partiy Jîne Azadiya Kurdistan, PJAK) and the 'Democratic Unity Party' also established in 2003 (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratik – Demokratik Birlik Partisi, PYD) in Syria. These three parties are subsumed under the 'ecological-regional leadership committee' in the politics area centre and are, therefore, led by the executive committee. It is very striking that there is no organizational dependency to the pro-Kurdish parties of Turkey (DEHAP, DTP, BPD, HDP); these are, apparently, not belonging to the KCK structure, although quite evidently they share much of the common pool of sympathizers.

In the 'Social Affairs' Area Centre' the social committee takes care of the bereaved of fallen fighters (article 14/3a). Article 14/3f namely the 'Coordination of the Youth's Confederation' coordinates KCK's youth organizations. Youth- and Women's organizations are, according to articles 37 and 38 'separately and autonomously' (özgün ve özerk) organized which means: with their own names and symbols and a parallel chain of command. The 'Federation of Kurdistan's Democratic Youth' (Komalên Civanên Demokratika Kurdistan, KCD) is represented at all levels of the KCK. In the parts of Kurdistan (parça) and beyond, different youth organizations are active, such as the 'Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement' (Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi YDGH) in Turkey, the 'Democratic Youth Movement' (Tevgera Civanên Demokrat TCD) in Iran, the 'Mesopotamian Youth Movement' in Iraq (Tevgera Civanên Mezopotamiya, TCM), the 'Free Youth Movement' (Tevgera Civanên Azad TCA) in Syria and the 'Union of Students from Kurdistan' (Yekitiya Xwendekarên Kurdistan, YXK) in Europe respectively. Here, the Syrian TCA has become more and more important but never as important as the YDGH or the European YXK.

Obviously, there have been changes in the 'Free Women's Union' (YJA Yekitiya Jinên Azad), which accordance with Article 14/3(g) should be part of the Social Area Centre. This said the organizational charts as re-constructed by Zaman and Milliye newspapers show the existence of an Area Centre for women.<sup>25</sup> Given the overwhelming importance of women and women issues for KCK such a step would only be logical. According to article 37, the Women's Party (Partiya Jinên Azadiyen Kurdistan, PAJK) and the female fighters of the YJA-Star are also subordinated under the 'Federation of the Noble Women' (Koma Jinên Bilind, KJB).

### **Military structures: The Guerilla**

In the course of the big crisis of 2002, the 'People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan' (Artêşa Rizgariya Gelê Kurdistan, ARGK) was dissolved and renamed as 'People's Protection Forces' (Hêzên Parastina Gel/Halk Savunma Güçleri, HPG). The change of name which dispensed the term 'army' corresponds with the PKK's general use of languages, which, today, speaks instead of (kurdish) serhildan – revolt – of (turkish) meşru savunma – self-defense, legitimate defense. Thereby, the organization solved the contradiction between continuity of the own military wing and official peace policy, at least linguistically. Given KCK's insistence on maintaining the military structures described below, one has to conclude that disbanding the guerrilla has never been an option for the group in Qandil.

Several articles of the Agreement regulate the use of force. The existence of compulsory military service according to articles 10c and 31a-c has already been mentioned. Article 32 'occurrence of the legitimate case of defense' (meşru savunma savaşı hali) defines the parameters to pick and rely on arms: (a) when the state (=Turkey) does not use the chance for a democratic (=pro PKK) peace solution; (b) attacks the KCK-system or the leadership (=Öcalan), and (c) when the discrimination against Kurds, the assimilation policy and the economic underdevelopment persist. It is unclear whether all or



only some of these points must take place until a 'legitimate case of defense' occurs. The decision for war and peace should be taken by Kongra-Gel with the absolute majority; in case it is unable to meet, then other institutions would make this decision together with the Executive Council – namely Qandil (Article 33). This stands in contrast to Öcalan's alleged omnipotence whose one and only card in the political game is to promote a peace policy.

Troop strength: In 2012, the number of fighters was estimated to be between 6.000 and 6.500, which means that the HPG must have recruited 150 fighters per year in order to keep up with its level of casualties.<sup>26</sup> In the 1990s, fighters were mostly recruited from the Turkish Kurdish regions and, in part, from Syria. Since 2003, however, an increasing number of volunteers from Iran and Iraq have been added. In 2013, before Öcalan's order to retreat from Turkey approximately 1.400 fighters were believed to having been active in Turkish frontier provinces to Iraq.<sup>27</sup> The situation in Syria and the events in Iraq in the summer of 2014, lead to a stream of fighters from different milieus, among them members of radical left student associations in Turkey as well as Kurds from Europe and religious minorities such as the Êzidis. There are no serious estimates concerning the overall troop strength. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the number of fighters has reached its past peak under serhildan of 30.000 to 50.000 militiamen.

### **HPG – Organization**

The HPG is, according to Article 43 of the KCK-Manifest, an autonomous form of organization and coordinates its activities with the other KCK bodies through the Area Centre People's Defense. This center was created in summer of 2013 after the unification of the 'Command Headquarters' (ana karargh komutanlığı) with the 'People's Defense Committee' (halk savunma komitesi). Thus the designated structure described in the Treaty's Article 14/3 takes form for the first time. HPG possess a General Command and its own Conference (HPG-meclisi 41 persons) which is the highest decision-

making body.<sup>28</sup> The members of the 11-person Command Council (komuta konseyi) are confirmed by the Executive's Presidium (Article 43 of the KCK-Agreement). In reality, the same persons who are found in the political leadership hold command functions.

### **Wing Commands**

The 'Wing Commands' (kol komutanlıklar) are composed of many elements of the HPG. The most important ones are:

- (1) 'Free Women's Units-STAR' (Yekîneyên Jinên Azad-Star, YJA-Star), whose representatives codetermine on all hierarchical Command levels of the HPG (see HPG-Regulation, 5/A 1-10). In most areas, both male and female units act parallel to each other.
- (2) 'Special forces' (özel kuvvetler; HPG Regulation, 5/B) are headed by the Executive Council directly. They comprise of experienced HPG members. Protection of high cadres and other strategic and tactical duties as well as intelligence and counter-intelligence measures fall under their competencies. Thus, they became instrumentalized in the internal power struggle.
- (3) In February 2014, the HPG decided to create the 'Self-defense forces' (Öz Savunma Güçleri, HPG Regulation, 5/C). According to article 23 of the KCK-Agreement, the areas of self-defense (öz savunma alanları) are organized in cells on the communal level which brings the former milis of the PKK back to mind. They constitute the local armed element of the KCK and are recruited, primarily, by the YDGH.
- (4) The 'Areas of Operation' (alanlar) are divided into the zones (saha) 'North' and 'South'. These, in turn, are divided into several provinces. The 'Defense area Medya (Savunma Alanı)' is of great importance. It is located in the Qandil mountains, south of the Şemdinli province in the Iraqi territories. There the entire critical infrastructure of HPG/KCK is found.
- (5) This includes the Head Quarter's Command where,

according to Point 5 of the HPG leadership regulations the usual high-level administrative and staff functions are dislocated, namely human resources, the archive, the secret/intelligence service and education, logistics, communications, public relations, academies and schools, etc.

Thus, the HPG carries out the overall military leadership as well as educational- and logistical responsibilities. As a result, all armed units are integrated in the HPG while retaining their own head quarters (ana karargahî).

(c) Dislocated forces: HRK/YRK, YPG and YDGH, DKB

Around 2002-3 Öcalan understood one point of US foreign policy in the region better than most western analysts: the consequences of the weakening of powerful nation states like Iraq. Anticipating a future American war against the Islamic Republic of Iran, he initiated the creation of several militias paralleling existing or soon to be created PKK-aligned parties in the region, such as PYD and PJAK.

The first new militia to be created was the 'Defence Forces of Eastern Kurdistan (Hêzên Parastina Rojhilata Kurdistan, HRK). Recruited primarily from Iranian Kurds it was originally used as an additional security detail for headquarters in Qandil. Yet they were quick to start smaller military operations and skirmishes in Iran. By 2010 they had acquired enough military sophistication to challenge Iranian units head-on and to establish intelligence networks outside of Kurdistan proper, even in ethnically hostile areas in Iran. Obviously KCK tried to attack Iran using HRK whose activities the media generally ascribed to PJAK whilst at the same time keeping channels of communication from Qandil to Tehran open. But Tehran would not be fooled and reacted quickly and decisively by attacking HPG and DBK units directly.<sup>29</sup> Within a year the Iranians had another success, Iranian agents detained a high rank leader of the KCK - according

to rumors Murat Karayılan - but instead of sending him to Turkey they negotiated a truce.<sup>30</sup> After further mediation by the Kurdistan regional government PJAK and HRK retreated from Iranian territory and hostilities ceased, at least for a while.

In May-June 2014 PJAK held its fourth Party Congress, where it decided to implement the KCK system on local levels in Iran. This decision was obviously inspired by the big media traction and the sympathies the battle of Kobani had among Kurds and secular leftists in Iran. For this purpose the KCK-Agreement was translated into Persian and published as KODAR (Komala Demokratika Rojhilat) Agreement.<sup>31</sup> Another decision was to restructure the HRK as 'Defense Units for Eastern Kurdistan' YRK (Yekinên Parastina Rojhilata Kurdistan) and to establish 'Women Defense Units' (HPJ, Hêzên Parastina Jine), of neither credible numbers of their fighters can be obtained. In April 2015 PJAK and YRK tried to benefit from riots in Sanandaj and Mahabad and took to the arms. Tehran acted expectedly and once again attacked HPG headquarters in Qandil.<sup>32</sup> Hostilities ceased initially but flared up in summer 2015. However divided and hostile to other Kurdish parties PJAK weakens itself by trying to force all Iranian Kurds to join the KODAR (i.e. KCK) system and fighting the Iranian military whereby it enjoys only lukewarm support from HPG. This indicates weak command and control on behalf of the HPG's wing command over the YRK. Future development will show whether HPG uses YRK just as means to pressure Tehran or whether it will put its full military capacities behind their Iranian-Kurdish brethren.

Perhaps the best example of how KCK looks in practice is Syria. Here returning HPG fighters and ARGK veterans would create the military 'Self Defense Units' (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). Their existence was made public in 2008 and must have been tolerated by the Baathist regime. Both PYD and YPG deny being in cahoots with the government in Damascus, a claim many independent minded Syrian Kurds find spurious. Indeed even in cities like

Kobani or Qamishly regime forces and structures co-exist with PYD-YPG structures.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless PYD/YPG controlled areas in Syria established themselves as Rojava and started building up a relatively weak administration on their own. The creation of police units – the so called asayish forces was part of it.

Turkish media, sympathetic to the PKK/KCK, lauded Rojava as the role model for the KCK system to be implemented in Turkey. This included also the creation of self-defense (öz savunma) and police (asayish) forces. By late 2013 the YDGH clashed already with Islamic fundamentalists in Turkey's Kurdish southeast. The situation got worse when YDGH started to set up check points, create the asaysish, build self defense forces and radical fundamentalists resisted. Theoretically at least the self proclaimed self defense forces are to be led by the HPG via its Wing Command. Dynamics in place however are difficult to control. Whilst HDP politicians did their utmost to convince YDGH to lay down weapons or at least to restrain their violence, counter violence from the Islamists and government forces would escalate in summer 2015. Hence part of the blame for the escalation in and around Cizre in September 2015 has to be put at YDGH and the KCK leadership incapability to control adventurous and irresponsible elements in their own ranks.

*Walter Posch is a senior researcher at the National Defense Academy in Vienna.*

- 1 The following after the overview <https://rojbas2.wordpress.com/pkdden-kckye/>  
2 <[http://ankarastrateji.org/\\_files/11102011152912-YLB6Z.pdf](http://ankarastrateji.org/_files/11102011152912-YLB6Z.pdf)>
- 3 Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, 'Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy,' in: *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14/2012, pp. 2-16.
- 4 Tayfun Sezer, 'Manifesto'dan KCK-Sözleşmesine PKK/KCK'da Söylem,' in *Uluslararası Güvenlik ve Terörizm Dergisi*, 3.1 2012, p. 41-65; Mümtaz'er Türköne, 'What Sort of Organization is the KCK?' *Today's Zaman*, 23 October 2010.
- 5 Baskın Oran, 'KCK Sözleşmesi ve Olayı,' in *Idem, Türk Dış Politikası. Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne, Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, (vol III 2001-2012) İstanbul 2013, p. 748.
- 6 'Protochronism' had its bloom under communist rule in Rumania, in a nutshell it says that Rumanians have been living in a communist like society in prehistoric times. See Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, 'Fascism et Communism en Roumanie', in Henry Rousso (ed), *Stalinisme et nazisme. Histoire et mémoire compares*, Paris 1999 (pp. 201-245, here p. 215).
- 7 Ezgi Demirsu, 'Aryen-Semitik kültür çatışması,' *Yeni Özgür Politika*, 22. August 2014.
- 8 Joost Jongerden (et al.), 'Environmental destruction as a counter-insurgency measure in the Kurdistan region of Turkey,' *Geoforum* 2008, pp. 1-12.
- 9 Ann Kathrin Seidel, 'Am Berg der Amazonen,' *Zenith*, 01/2014, pp. 38-47.
- 10 Abdullah Öcalan, 'Ortaodguda Modernite savaşları,' *Serxwebun* 34/400 April 2015; <<http://www.serxwebun.org/index.php?sys=naverok&id=421>>
- 11 '„Komplo ve tafsiye planlarını boşa çıkardıık....,' *Serxwebun*, June 2014, p. 8.
- 12 Demirsu, art. cit.
- 13 All Preceding quotes are from the Agreement p. 2, points 6 and 7.
- 14 <[www.pwdnerin.com](http://www.pwdnerin.com)>
- 15 <<http://www.hakpar.org.tr/root/>>
- 16 <<http://hudapar.org/>>
- 17 See 'KCK-Operasyonları,' in Baskın Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası. Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne, Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, (vol III 2001-2012) İstanbul 2013, pp. 747-750.
- 18 Gamze Polat, 'PKK Kendi Devlet Sistemine Kurmuş: İşte KCK'nın yapılanma şeması,' *Zaman*, 14.4.2009.
- 19 <<http://demokratiktoplumkongresi.com/>>
- 20 <<http://tev-dem.com/>>
- 21 Nazlan Ertan, 'Kurdish Parliament in Exile Dissolves Itself to Join National Congress,' *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 September 1999.
- 22 Kamal Chomani, 'Kurdish National Congress Seeks Unity among Divisions,' *Al-Monitor*, 8 August 2013.
- 23 Selahettin Demirtaş 'Die Regierung weiß genau, was und wer die KCKler sind,' 17 February 2012, published at <<http://civaka-azad.org/die-regierung-weiss-genau-was-und-wer-die-kckler-sind/>>.
- 24 < <http://medya.zaman.com.tr/2009/04/14/yapilanma2.jpg> >
- 25 <<http://medya.zaman.com.tr/2009/04/14/yapilanma2.jpg>> 'Terör Örgütünün Türkiye Meclisi Yapılanması,' *Milliyet*, 28 May 2009.
- 26 'Şu anda dağda kaç PKKlı var?' *Haber Vaktim*, 11 February 2012.
- 27 'Türkiye'de hangi ilde kaç PKKlı terörist var?' *Haber7*, 23 March 2013.
- 28 In 2005 a paper entitled 'General leadership regulation of the HPG' (HPG genel yönetmeliği) was published, ever since this site has been blocked: <[www.hezenparastin.com/tr/hpg/hpg\\_yontemlik.html](http://www.hezenparastin.com/tr/hpg/hpg_yontemlik.html)>.
- 29 See the following press statement of the executive council: 'KCK yürütme Konseyi Başkanlığı' 24 August 2010 <<http://pkkonline.com/tr/index.php?sys=article&artID=529>>.
- 30 See Bayram Sinkaya, 'Rationalization of Turkey-Iran relations,' *Insight Turkey*, 14/2 2012, pp. 137-156.
- 31 The text of this agreement is no longer available at the internet, I am grateful to Mr Sherveen Taheri for providing me a copy.
- 32 'Iranian army shells PKK and PJAK bases in Kandil,' *Kurdish Daily News*, April 2015.
- 33 See Raniah Salloum, 'Wiederaufbau in Syrien: Die guten Deutschen von Kobane,' *Spiegel Online*, 13 June 2015.



# **Kurdish political parties in Syria**

*Sabina Catar*

The Kurdish community in Syria consists of approximately 2 million people (10 per cent of the overall pre-war population<sup>1</sup>). The main Kurdish areas are located along the border with Turkey and the Kurdish areas of Northern Iraq. Among the cities with a sizeable Kurdish community the Kurdish minority of Aleppo is of particular relevance. In addition to the Kurdish speaking people there are many Syrians of Kurdish descent who have been “arabised”. Kurds in Syria have experienced – similar to Kurds elsewhere in the region – governmental efforts to weaken or – at times - even erase Kurdish identity over the past few decades.

The Syrian Kurdish political scene differs from other Kurdish communities as it has been traditionally very heterogenic. Cases of more or less open cooperation between the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and the Syrian regime contribute to the general mistrust many Syrian opposition groups harbour towards the PYD and other Kurdish groups. Demands - e.g. for Kurdish cultural rights and autonomy in a “new Syria” - are often regarded as a danger to the unity of Syria, although this unity currently only exists in theory as many rebel groups exercise some sort of de facto “autonomy” in their areas of control. Transnational expansion by the “Islamic State” from Iraq to Syria and the shrinking area under control of Bashar al-Assad<sup>2</sup> also challenge the notion of Syria as a state.

Currently, the PYD cooperates with other groups that also fight against the “Islamic State” (IS/ISIS). However, alliances among rebel groups in the Syrian war can be quite fragile and local short-term cooperation can contradict the general line of a group. As Thomas Schmidinger points out neither militias nor parties are the sole unofficial actors in Syria: “Shadow diplomacy” and “shadow economy”



by (important) families and tribes<sup>3</sup> influence local developments, for instance an agreement on a ceasefire.

Outside support has become an important factor, not just for the Assad government but also for its adversaries. Clientelistic relations between Middle Eastern states and armed groups or political factions in another country have a longstanding tradition. Syria itself used to have its own net of clientele groups (e.g. the PKK until 1998 and various Palestinian groups) until war dynamics transformed Assad to a mere recipient of Iranian and Russian support (of various forms such as financial and military aid) and military assistance by the Lebanese Hizbollah. The latter used to profit from Syrian support for many years until the roles were reversed when Syrian troops started to lose ground in the course of the conflict.

Another defining feature of the contemporary Kurdish history in Syria is that many important events (e.g. the protests in Qamishli in 2004) and Kurdish organisations, especially the PYD, have been subject to contradicting assessments. This opacity is mainly due to the authoritarian nature of governance in Syria, which has forced political life underground and also used clandestine co-optation, networks of informers and intelligence surveillance to maintain control.

In case of the PYD the organisation itself has strong incentives to play its cards close while at the same time its adversaries have also strong interests to paint an unfavourable picture of the PYD. This article cannot discuss more than some common interpretations. It cannot claim to discuss contradicting claims assessing PYD politics or events of contemporary Kurdish history in Syria in depth. Moreover, it is common especially for wars with identity based features (in case of Syria sectarian aspects and in case of Kurds ethnicity as well) that communities develop diverging narratives and interpretations of events based on their experiences in the war and before. When it comes to the Kurdish areas narratives vary greatly not even between

communities but even within a community.

As the traditional opacity of Kurdish politics is also increased by the ongoing war in Syria it will be up to future historical research to give better insights in fateful events for Kurds and for whole of Syria. Similar to what Clausewitz called the “fog of war” during battle, Syria researchers struggle to catch up with events and they have to revise their accounts of the war in Syria continuously in the light of more or less reliable information flows (and information gaps). Hence, some aspects of this article have to be regarded as snapshots that will require revision sooner or later in the light of new information.

### **The Syrian government(s) and the Kurds**

From 1961 to 2000 a succession of military officers was ruling the country. Only Bashar al-Assad inherited his position from his father Hafiz al-Assad who had come to power in 1970 via a military coup d'état and died in 2000. Since 1963 all rulers have established their versions of the ideology of the Baath party as the only official ideology. The Baath Party propagates its vision of Arab socialism and nationalism. All of the rulers since 1961 have been putting pressure on the Kurds in a varying degree to give up their Kurdish identity, including Kurdish names, language and culture.

Succeeding in the Syrian public sector usually meant to avoid being perceived as Kurd, even if people knew that one was Kurdish. Despite this pressure some Kurds made even career<sup>4</sup> in the military.

A case in point is also the Grand Mufti Ahmad Kuftaro (1921-2004), the leader of a branch of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi Order<sup>5</sup>. As Jordi Tejel points out, the co-optation of specifically Kurdish religious figures was a way of creating the perception to “court Islam”<sup>6</sup>, as the majority of Kurds are Sunnis. Kuftaro supported the separation of state and religion which was the official regime line and he also served as unofficial liaison between the government and the Kurds.

Moreover, he and his Sufi branch propagated a modern Islam as an alternative to more conservative movements that were hostile towards the Alawite dominated Baath rule.<sup>7</sup>

This long-time Kurdish involvement in leading moderate Sunni religious organisations and the idea of keeping religion out of politics has also a genuine base among many Kurds (not only in Syria)<sup>8</sup>. However, now the so called “Islamic State” (IS) is not only targeting moderate Sunni Islam (whether Arab, Kurdish or other) but also Kurdish culture (or any culture - given the IS prohibition of any cultural activities and its hostility to art) which includes, for example, celebrating “Newroz”, an ancient spring festival.

However, the early cases of co-option coincided with governmental measures to “arabise” the Kurds and their territories especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Among the measures was an ad hoc plebiscite in al-Hassakah province in 1962, causing the withdrawal of citizenship of 120.000 Kurds<sup>9</sup> who could not meet the criteria in time. Until 2011 the number of stateless Kurds increased to 300.000 as the statelessness was “inherited” by following generations. Systematic dispossession of property and socioeconomic prospects hit especially the stateless. In addition, the government settled new Arab tribes<sup>10</sup>) in the Kurdish areas where beside Kurds also Arab tribal communities, especially the Shammar, were living.

Thomas Schmidinger reports that in the 1970s Assad tolerated low-key activities by Kurdish parties to some degree in the underground while at the same time placing informers in the parties. In a number of cases people found out who these informers were and some of the parties relations to the regime were more intensive. This caused Kurds to mistrust these Kurdish parties. In fact, the degree of cooperation between the parties and the regime remains unknown. The Kurdish parties were forced to observe “red lines but during the rule of Hafiz al-Assad these “red lines” were subject to constant change: If the parties failed to recognise these changes in time their leaders were

imprisoned and tortured to coerce them into submission.<sup>11</sup>

The prohibition, respectively restriction, of various forms of expression of Kurdish cultural life became a feature of Kurdish life in Syria. However, while several of the measures against Kurds in Syria are reminiscent of the Arabisation campaign in Iraq, the role and level of violence was less pronounced than in Iraq: There were no open guerrilla wars between Kurdish organisations and government forces and no atrocities comparable to the scale of the “Anfal Campaign” in Iraq. However, jail, torture and at times death sentences for any opponent of the regime have been features of Baath rule in Syria. But the Kurds were the only ethnic group who was confronted with severe prohibitions of various forms of cultural expression.

Moreover, Hafiz al-Assad (ruling from 1970 to 2000) demonstrated his iron grip on the country on other occasions – peaking in the crackdown on the Hama uprising<sup>12</sup> in 1982 during which 10.000–30.000 people died and whole parts of Hama were demolished by Syrian armed forces. Hafiz al-Assad and later his son Bashar intensified the intelligence surveillance of the population – including a large number of informers (a part of them was coerced). Under Bashar al-Assad the net became especially tight in the Kurdish areas from 2004 onwards. Surveillance was so intensive that public sources outside Syria offered estimations of the number of informers and of the number of people one intelligence officer was assigned to monitor.

Hafiz al-Assad took also care to offer broad segments of Syrian population – including Arab Sunni majority and Kurdish Syrian citizens (the stateless Kurds lost out) some sort of socioeconomic stability as “authoritarian bargain”<sup>13</sup>. However, as Tyma Kraitt points out, this stability unravelled under Bashar al-Assad due to increasing socioeconomic disparities that led to the intensification of repression and corruption.<sup>14</sup>

All this kept the lid on any Syrian opposition including the Kurds from 1982 to 2011. The only exception was the outburst of Kurdish popular discontent in 2004<sup>15</sup> that spread from Qamishli to all major Kurdish areas and caused a violent backlash by the authorities.

Since the 1960s Syrian governments have been regarding Kurdish national sentiments as a threat, although Kurdish parties usually limited their demands to cultural rights and Kurdish concerns pertaining to “Arabisation” policies; they never demanded independence. In contrast to Turkey, Iran and Iraq Syria was spared a guerrilla war. Analysts<sup>16</sup> often reasoned that forces would be too vulnerable, as the landscape is rather flat in contrast to the mountainous territory available for retreat in other Kurdish areas.

In the 1990s relations between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran were anything but cordial except for the Syrian-Iranian alliance. However, when it came to the Kurdish question all four states agreed in a treaty to fight Kurdish autonomy or any secessionist aspirations.

However, as in case of Turkey, Iran and Iraq Syria’s distrust of her own Kurdish population did not prevent Hafiz al-Assad from using the Kurds in neighbouring countries for foreign policy purposes. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s he offered vital support to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party)<sup>17</sup> in Turkey. This included, for example, training camps in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon where Syrian troops were holding territory at the time. Moreover, Syria encouraged Syrian Kurds to join the PKK as a kind of safety valve to keep the most troublesome Kurdish nationalists busy in enemy territory – i.e. Turkey.

As Schmidinger points out, the PKK was attractive to young Kurds as they were disillusioned about the older Kurdish parties’ abilities to accomplish changes. In the 1990s until 1998 the PKK held considerable influence in Syria challenging the supremacy of state structures especially in the Kurd Dagh region. But nonetheless, Assad loosened the reign on Kurdish political participation a little

as he felt secure in his grip of power. He allowed some Kurdish political activists of the PKK and other Kurdish parties to candidate for the Syrian parliament as independents. From 1993 onwards the Yekîti Party (and its subsequent off-shoots) under Ismail Ammo who opposed the accommodating demeanour of the older parties, developed a more offensive style of action.<sup>18</sup>

However in 1998, as Human Rights Watch reports, Hafiz al-Assad dropped the PKK and PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan in favour of better relations with Turkey. Now Syrian PKK members could face jail in Syria.<sup>19</sup>

### **The ascendance of PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Democrat - Democratic Union Party)**

Nonetheless, in 2003 former PKK-members founded the PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Democrat - Democratic Union Party) as sister party of the PKK. Despite a robust structure PYD experienced a split in its first year of existence and it was also confronted with strong repression by the state.<sup>20</sup> The type of relationship between PKK and PYD has been increasingly subject to debate among analysts<sup>21</sup> since the PYD ascendance to power after 2011.

The overall situation and the fragmentation of Kurdish opposition did not favour a unified stance among Kurdish parties during the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad. If there had been more unity, it might have provoked an even more intense suppression. Under Bashar al-Assad a cat and mouse play with jailing and freeing certain segments of opposition activists (e.g. prominent Arab secular figures and rather low ranking Kurdish activists – Islamists were a different matter) kept Syrians guessing where the new “red lines” were now that used to be quite clear (though still changeable) under Hafiz al-Assad. According to some reports higher ranking Kurdish party activists stood a better chance to be less often imprisoned than their low ranking peers – another subtle wedge between Kurds. However,

the leaders were still given to understand to keep a low profile and encourage this low-key behaviour among Kurds.

But after the outburst of Kurdish discontent in the aftermath of the Qamishli incident in 2004, young Kurds founded new movements as they perceived the traditional Kurdish parties as too accommodating to the authorities; the most important movement according to Thomas Schmidinger was the TCK (Tevgera Azadiya Kurdistan) founded by boys and girls aged 13 to 16. In 2008 they started armed action and group members claim to have killed 120 members of the police intelligence. Despite a harsh crackdown by the security forces some of the group survived and participated in the 2011 protests in the Kurdish areas.<sup>22</sup>

By December 2011 KurdWatch listed 14 Kurdish parties<sup>23</sup> – quite many compared to the size of the Kurdish population. 11 of those organisations originated from the Kurdish Democratic Party – Syria (KDP-S)<sup>24</sup>. This fragmentation might be at least partly due to the continuous infiltration by the intelligence services<sup>25</sup> in order to weaken the parties by keeping them busy with political in-fighting.

In 2011 the PYD had the highest number of members jailed by the regime and their sentences were usually longer than those of members of other parties. Moreover, they were undergoing “systematic torture” as KurdWatch points out<sup>26</sup>.

But in the course of the uprising since March 2011 and its transformation to war, the position of PYD changed within short time. On 16 December 2011 the PYD proclaimed the Popular Council of Western Kurdistan (Meclisa Gel a Rojavayê Kurdistanê)<sup>27</sup> which it described as alliance. But in reality it is the umbrella organisation of all PYD-affiliated groups including its women’s organisation and its civil-society group.

The leadership of PYD consists of one chairwoman, Aysa Abdullah,

and one chairman Salih Muslim (Muhammad).<sup>28</sup> This is exceptional in comparison to other Kurdish parties and Syrian opposition parties in general.

Gunes and Lowe explain the rapid PYD rise to power:

Among the specific factors behind this rise are the PYD's greater discipline, organization and strategic planning in comparison with the older, fissiparous Kurdish parties. The PYD's links to the PKK also give it a distinct ideology and access to training, experience, fighters and arms. By the summer of 2012, as Syria collapsed into warring factions and fiefdoms, the PYD moved decisively to assert control over three pockets of territory with majority Kurdish populations in the north of the country: Jazira, Kobane and Afrin. By late 2013/early 2014 the PYD had styled these as cantons of local administration under the collective name Rojava ('West') to represent Western Kurdistan, and had held elections to local assemblies. While the PYD stresses its commitment to political pluralism and to agreements with other Kurdish parties, it is clear that Rojava is a PYD experiment in autonomous government.<sup>29</sup>

In November 2013 PYD declared the autonomy of the areas under its control:

The Democratic Union Party [PYD - Partiya Yekitiya Democrat], the most powerful Kurdish faction in Syria, declared self-rule in November 2013 over the territory it controls in the northeast of the country. The announcement further complicated the civil war in Syria, and presents a complex problem for neighboring Turkey and the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq.

[..]

Leaders of the Democratic Union Party<sup>30</sup> denied that transitional self-government for Kurds was part of an effort to establish a separate, autonomous Syrian Kurdish state. They said



self-government would merely be temporary.<sup>31</sup>

The circumstances under which PYD gained control of the Kurdish areas in 2012 are still subject to debate and questions<sup>32</sup>:

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces withdrew from Syrian Kurdish regions on Turkey's border in mid-2012, allowing the Democratic Union Party [PYD] to take control of much of the area. Some Kurdish activists accuse the PYD of collaborating with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. [...] Though it has been hostile to the Assad government, the PYD militants have been keen to keep other rebel groups out of Kurdish towns.<sup>33</sup>

These somewhat contradictory descriptions are quite typical of the difficulty to interpret YPG actions, motives and goals. Instances in summer 2015 pointed once again in both directions – rivalry and rapprochement to the Assad regime.

The YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel = YPG, Kurdish People's Protection Unit) is according to [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org) (and other sources) the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD and YPG are regarded by Turkey and parts of the FSA (Free Syrian Army) as being de facto part of the PKK. The YPG itself put its number as high as 50.000 by mid-2014 while independent sources estimate its troop strength at 30.000.<sup>34</sup>

On 25 July 2015, for example, the YPG and the Syrian army clashed concerning a clinic building in al-Hassakah<sup>35</sup> while on the next day an interview with the PYD-leader Salih Muslim Mohammad was published in which he envisages the YPG as integrating in a reformed Syrian army<sup>36</sup>.

Salih Muslim, the co-chairman of PYD, stresses that the YPG was founded by the PYD, but that it is not a party militia as PYD rejects the notion of party militia and favours unified security forces and a

unified army. According to him the establishment of the YPG was necessary.<sup>37</sup>

According to [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org) the YPG was established by the PYD as reaction of the violent crackdown on thousands of PYD-members and sympathizers including arrest and torture after the Qamishli uprising in 2004. The YPG describes itself as protector from Assad and from Salafist groups:

[...] by 2014 the YPG's leadership was trying to position itself as a pan-ethnic organization that was the defender of all of the region's communities—both from the al-Assad government and the Salafi-jihadi organizations that are trying to impose an Islamic state on Syria. YPG leaders also insist that the organization is a-political and subsumes itself under the Supreme Kurdish Committee, which includes the PYD and the umbrella organization the Kurdish National Council (KNC) that is close to KRG President Massoud Barzani.

[..]

The YPG describes itself as „a national legitimate, multi-ethnic and multi-nationality military institution of sons and daughters of the components of the region, the Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Assyrians, Turkoman and Armenians, who adopt the right of legitimate self-defence in accordance with international laws. YPG's mission is to protect Western Kurdistan and all its ethnic, national, and religious components, and to provide security and safety to citizens wherever they are; to deter any military force aimed at de-stabilizing civil peace and stability; it pledges to defend the gains and the values of freedom and social democracy, and the legitimate aspirations of the Kurdish and Syrian people in their revolution against dictatorship and the forces of terror and darkness.<sup>38</sup>

The female fighters have their own organisation – YGJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê or the Women's Protection Units)<sup>39</sup>.

Apart from performing self-defence duty, both men and women can join the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or the People's Protection Units) and the YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê or the Women's Protection Units) respectively on a voluntary basis, however there have been reports of cases of forced recruitment. Although one finds persons from non-Kurdish groups of Christians and Arabs, Kurds comprise the majority of the YPG.<sup>40</sup>

The YPJ is quite frequently subsumed under the term YPG in media coverage although Western and some Middle Eastern media tend to show quite often pictures of female fighters when photos are needed to represent the PYD or YPG.

Women also participate actively in battle as [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org) points out:

No other ethnic or religious group in Syria's brutal two-and-half year civil war has fielded so many female fighters. Twenty percent of the Kurdish warriors grouped together in the People's Protection Units are women. And Kurdish women - in increasing numbers - joined internal security and police units tasked with maintaining law and order, guarding checkpoints and strategic buildings from jihadists and radical Islamists. Female recruits for either frontline YPG groups or internal security units go through a month's basic training - normally at a camp in the town of Afrin. Female Kurdish fighters ignite fear into Islamic State militants, who believe that they'll go straight to hell if they are killed by a woman.<sup>41</sup>

According to [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org) the YPG admits only that "[...] a few [recruits] who are under the legal age did join on a voluntary basis under the pressure of circumstances, and through the neglect of some, although they were not allowed to participate in military operations or to stay near active battle".<sup>42</sup> However, allegations by reliable sources report forced recruitment of under-age boys and girls and the participation of minors in combat<sup>43</sup> while there have

also been some reports of PYD measures against the recruitment of minors due to international criticism.

When in 2013 armed violence broke out in North Eastern Syria, YPG units fought against regime forces and rebels. However, since late 2013 success in combat was accompanied with increasing incidents of jihadist car and suicide bombings. In August 2014 YPG helped with evacuating Jesidis from Mount Sinjar in Iraq. When YPG proved unable to stop the IS offensive against Kobane, it received important – albeit late – assistance by airstrikes against the IS from the US and her allies. On 28 September 2014 the FSA (Free Syrian Army) and YPG made public that they would cooperate in their fight against Islamic State.<sup>44</sup>

Globalsecurity.org commented on the armament of YPG:

Irregular armed forces have to rely on their ingenuity to arm themselves. And while rifles and mortars can be bought on the black market, getting hold of tanks or armored fighting vehicles can be a bit tricky. People's Protection Units are mostly armed with small arms, with some heavier weapons such as mortars and rocket launchers, pickup trucks turned into mobile gun turrets and an occasional piece of artillery. The up-armored cars and tracked vehicles may look like cast-offs from Tatooine desert scenes of Star Wars or Mad Max and the Thunderdome, but with proper employment they may be no less efficient in battle than the early tanks of the Great War were on European battlefields.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, outside the PYD core-areas the affiliated militia Jabhat al-Akrad/Enîya Kurdan is active – for example, in the Kurdish quarters of Aleppo. It used to be a battalion of the FSA until it was excluded due to the conflict between the FSA and YPG. Moreover, the Christian Suroye militia and armed groups with members from the Arab tribes of the Shammar and Sharabiyya (while others of the Sharabiyya support the regime or IS) cooperate with YPG.<sup>46</sup>

However, Globalsecurity.org also describes YPG suppression of inner-Kurdish dissent:

Many Kurds do not object to YPG's repressive tactics because some are afraid. Others are silent because a lot of Kurds have the opinion that being persecuted by Kurds is better than being persecuted by Arabs. The YPG militias have earned a reputation for destroying community centers, civil society offices and headquarters of the political opposition in the region, said Savelsberg. In June 2014 armed YPG forces attacked a street demonstration in Amuda, killing six activists and wounding dozens more, drawing international protest.<sup>47</sup>

KurdWatch regularly chronicles human rights abuses against opponents of the PYD.<sup>48</sup> However, this also indicates that not all Kurds put up with PYD dominance.

According to Thomas Schmidinger PYD continued its domination by proclaiming the three cantons Efrin, Kobani and Cizîrê unilaterally in January 2014. Only the PYD, a few individuals and two tiny Kurdish parties participate in the administration of the three cantons.<sup>49</sup> The relations to the Kurdish National Council,<sup>50</sup> which includes all the Kurdish parties opposing PYD, is an erratic one: PYD pledges of cooperation that never quite materialize, phases of complete refusal and reconciliation efforts oscillate.

On paper PYD proclaims inclusion of other communities living in the mainly Kurdish areas:

Kobani is the third Kurdish city of Syria and was the first Kurdish city to be liberated from the Assad regime on July 19, 2012. Kobani is also the center of one of the three cantons (with Afrin and Cizre) that established themselves in „democratic autonomous regions“ from a confederation of „Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmen, Armenian and Chechen“ as

stated in the Preamble of the Rojava's (name of western or Syrian Kurdistan) Charter. Experiences of self-administrations in these regions are very interesting, particularly regarding the rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities. Some contradictions nevertheless exist, especially regarding the authoritarianism of the PYD forces.<sup>51</sup>

But since 2011 PYD seemed to be rather adept in dominating Syrian Kurdistan rather than spreading a sense of inclusion. However, the PYD and YPG also enjoy support and popularity among Kurds for a variety of reasons:

The success of the jihadists (and accompanying threat to Kurds' safety) has pushed Syrian Kurds to support the PYD, which not only offers security but also access to services and employment. Support for the YPG militia is probably even greater than for the PYD, because the former provides the only viable protection for Kurds living in the north of Syria. Moreover, the YPG's success in defending Kobane has enhanced its legitimacy.<sup>52</sup>

Hence, matters of democracy might be questions asked only later – if "Rojava" survives its test of fire in a hostile environment.

### **Participation in the political process**

There are no Kurdish parties that are officially recognised by the Syrian government. Syria has a parliament, elections are held and there are official parties (the Baath Party being the dominant one while the other parties are only independent in theory).

But Syria is anything but a democracy:

- The pyramid of power

The real power lies with Bashar al-Assad, his relatives and his cronies (including some Sunnis) with the Baath Party as their political

instrument. Hafiz al-Assad had established a pyramid of power with himself on top, his family and relatives as well as other loyal individuals, in second line and then broadened the pyramid first to his tribe al-Kalbiya, then other Alawites and then all the religious and ethnic minorities except for the Kurds. Arab Sunnis and the Kurds were at the bottom of the pyramid.

- The networks

Both – Hafiz al-Assad and then Bashar al-Assad – kept relying very much on their own Alawite sect (whose situation is far more complex than it is possible to discuss here) and especially their own tribe al-Kalbiya for core functions such as high ranking positions in the armed forces to remain in power. But the Assad rule has also relied very much on intricate networks and alliances of interests and fear across sectarian lines, the Baath Party, the use of force and the instrumentalisation of fear (such as nowadays of so called “Islamic State”). Fear (and opportunities for enrichment via corruption (supplemented by additional enrichment activities available in times of war) are important as well.

- The “authoritarian bargain”

It suffices for the purpose of this article to mention that Bashar al-Assad cultivated certain segments of Arab Sunnis (especially the wealthier ones and the upper middle class early in his rule) in addition to the religious minorities as his broader support and power base. This “authoritarian bargain” worked differently than under Hafiz al-Assad as the example of the rural Syria shows. Hafiz al-Assad had taken care in his early years of power to improve the situation of rural communities as part of his “authoritarian bargain” to tighten his grip on power. In contrast, under his son’s rule rural Syria drifted in a major socioeconomic crisis in the second half of 2000s when a long drought exacerbated by governmental mismanagement drove a significant ratio of the rural population - Arab and Kurd – into urban

slums as they had lost their livelihood – increasing popular discontent that boiled over in 2011.

These days Bashar Assad's new commodities he can trade for support among the people remaining under his control are fear of the rebels (especially the Islamist extremists), (rather limited) protection capabilities and new opportunities for corruption. Similar to his father Bashar al-Assad has also co-opted and coerced<sup>53</sup> at times the religious minorities so that they could not perceive any alternative to his rule. But in his case this policy has been really put to an existential test for his power – and the minorities. Terrorist Islamist groups such as Islamic state and al-Nusra Front reinforce the fears of the religious minorities – and the Kurds. This also helps to deepen the divide between the minorities and Arab Sunnis who bear the brunt both of regime force and extremist rule. Opposition members among the minorities quite often face pressure to keep silent and inactive or face pressure by their own community<sup>54</sup>. At the same time weariness of shouldering a disproportionate burden of the war when it comes to (fallen) pro-regime fighters is weighing down even on loyalists among the religious and ethnic minorities.

But Kurds (and ironically the Alawites – an issue too complex to explore in this article) were never part of this picture in the same way as the other minorities who were allowed to keep their identities in contrast to the pressure put on the Kurds. Bashar Assad made overtures to them too late and even those came with hitches. He offered the stateless Kurds registered in the al-Hassakah Foreigners' Registry (the so called "Ajanib" meaning "foreigners") the opportunity to apply for Syrian citizenship. The stateless Kurds, called "Maktoumeen", who have been even worse off than the Ajanib were not offered anything. However, as the application for citizenship also meant for men being drafted to military service amidst the conflict, many Kurds refrained from applying, quit the application process or fled from regime held territories.



The PYD might be at times somewhat of a silent strategic partner to the regime because of currently overlapping interests. But it also empowers Kurds in their national aspirations that run counter to the position of the regime, as the PYD created the first Kurdish entity on Syrian ground and offers Kurds protection (as long they are not political dissenters<sup>55</sup>) and a sense of being master of their own destiny.

At the end of the day the PYD has become a major political actor in Syria due to its military force, the YPG, and thanks to an existential fight of the Kurdish people that unites them for the time being against the threat of the Islamic State. But the image of a dubious outsider within the Syrian opposition remains due to the part-time cooperation with the regime and its open cooperation with the US forces in fighting IS.

The PYD managed to side-line and suppress other Kurdish parties. Cooperation, quarrels and reconciliation attempts (often brokered by Massoud Barzani) alternate. General tensions and frequent abuses by the PYD<sup>56</sup> cast doubts on its interpretation of democracy, a term that is even part of its name. Moreover, it has so far failed in building sustainable relations to major Syrian opposition organisations and armed groups even given the caveat that the extent of influence of the exiled political opposition groups inside Syria is open to debate. The common enemy Islamic State might prod PYD and the armed Arab groups to cooperate on the battlefield. The question is whether this is a stepping stone for more and sustainable cooperation or a convenient way of ensuring survival when facing an overwhelming force. It could also be just another intermezzo in the struggle for power in Syria as the YPG already had to fend off other rebel groups in the past before they had to focus on the IS advance. This does not exclude contradictory local cooperation between forces that fight each other in general but not on occasions when imminent interests prevail.

The FSA-YPG relations are a case in point for war dynamics in Syria. The FSA is especially important to PYD since otherwise the scene is currently dominated by Islamist alliances and groups including downright extremist groups such as the al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and so called Islamic State:

As instability in northern Syria worsened – amid a rise in fighting that involved the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and jihadist groups – the YPG began engaging militarily in the defence of Kurdish towns and villages. The YPG and the FSA share interests in opposing the jihadists, and are both long-term enemies of the Ba’athist regime, but they remain suspicious of one another. The two groups have cooperated at times, and have clashed militarily at others, depending on local circumstances and the broader dynamics of the war.<sup>57</sup>

Although the PYD officially acknowledge the other ethnic and religious communities,<sup>58</sup> its relations to these communities are fraught with complications. Communal fragmentation and precarious balances of power between several actors in the cities of al-Hassakah and Qamishli<sup>59</sup> illustrate this and are sort of microcosms of split Syrian society constitutes a microcosm of Syrian society. Even the Arab population in the PYD-held areas is roughly split in supporters of the regime, the “Islamic State” and those rather siding with PYD. The Arab settlers (from the Sharabiyya) tend rather to support the regime or the IS. But as mentioned before there are also Sharabiyya members fighting with YPG. The established local Arab community (such as members of the powerful Shammar tribe/confederation) has usually had a far more cooperative relationship with the PYD. The Christian communities are not a homogenous block either when it comes to attitudes towards the regime and the PYD<sup>60</sup>. So the inhabitants of “Rojava” have neither a unifying stand on the regime nor on the most pressing threat, the so called “Islamic State”.

Due the numerous enemies of the PYD and the on-going war it is often unclear what is behind the allegations of “ethnic cleansing” in

which the YPG purportedly targets Arabs in the course of offensives against the “Islamic State”.

An “autonomous region” – whether it might aspire to be a sovereign state as PYD critics allege or not – needs to interact with neighbouring states or territories and with actors within Syria. In this respect, “Western Kurdistan’s” prospects<sup>61</sup> are currently quite bleak as its strategic value cannot offset its political isolation within Syria and the region:

- The Turkey factor:

Turkey is hostile towards the establishment of a “Western Kurdistan” entity. The Turkish offence against the PKK (designated as terror organisation not only by Turkey) also puts the PYD under significant pressure in various ways and also make any political rapprochement between these two uneasy neighbours rather unlikely for the time being. The few Turkish operations against the Islamic State cannot outweigh that. One scenario could be that PYD emancipates itself from PKK - out of sheer self-interest to survive in the politically and militarily hostile environment. This might help to improve relations with European states (and potential allies) but it is doubtful whether such a development could impact Turkish policies. However, upcoming elections in Turkey in autumn 2015 could trigger new developments or even intensify the current Turkish policy.

- The Kurdistan Regional Government (North Iraq), especially KDP and its leader Massoud Barzani

The powerful KDP in North Iraq and especially its leader Massoud Barzani regard the PYD as a competitor to the KRG as leading Kurdish entity, a disturbance to KRG-relations with Turkey and an ideological and political challenge to KDP influence. Ever since the YPG involvement in the Sinjar region and the Kobane battle, the necessity to cooperate militarily is evident for both sides while the

political competition intensified, with PYD scoring points of sympathy among Iraqi Kurds (i.e. Jesidis).

- Bashar al-Assad

Assad has been losing ground and holds only a third of the Syrian territory. Whatever the relationship with the weakened Syrian regime is, it is anything but reliable as Assad might withdraw from his troops from the last positions in al-Hassakah anytime. He does not have the manpower, the money or the military equipment to compensate its absence on the ground unless the recent increasing Russian military presence initiates a change. When it comes to sponsoring Syria herself is very much dependent on her sponsor Iran, Iranian supported (Lebanese) Hizbollah and on Russian backup in terms of weapons and diplomacy. Then the PYD and the regime will be of far less importance to each other. However, it might also prompt the PYD to clarify its position towards Assad.

The PYD would be completely wedged between Turkey, Arab rebel groups, a small stretch of border with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq and a long front line with the Islamic State. The “safe haven” (if it is realised as Turkey envisages it) would prevent the YPG from being able connect its main territory with the Afrin enclave. This would be a major strategic disadvantage not only towards Turkey but also concerning its position towards other rebel groups that might be allowed to move into the “safe haven” and towards the so called Islamic State.

- The Coalition against “Islamic State” and especially USA:

The USA is torn between its core interest to keep his ally Turkey happy as Turkey is not only a major NATO member but also a front line state to the turmoil in Syria and Iraq and to the regional challenger Iran. In military and strategic terms it has to offer a lot in comparison to other partners of the coalition in the region<sup>62</sup>.

Despite considerations for Turkey's interests the US forces as the major coalition component have relied very much on the YPG as allied force on the ground in Syria in the fight against the so called Islamic State since late 2014. As no member of the coalition against the Islamic State is keen to put boots on the ground, except for selected Special Forces operations if necessary, the coalition has to rely on armed local groups. But only a few fit the desired ideological description of the US or other Western states – except for the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish organisations.

The only example to the contrary in Syria has been the PYD and its armed wing YPG. It might neither be as democratic as it purports and its relations to the PKK might be stronger than it admits, but right now it certainly has got ideological and military appeal to the US and Europe (despite its links to PKK which is classified as a terror organisation by various states). It conjures the picture of the fight of David against Goliath (the latter being Islamic State) and it certainly won considerable prestige among Kurds and the international community through the victory in Kobane and the assistance in evacuating Jesidis from Mount Sinjar (whether this was really a heroic feat and the role of the Iraqi Peshmerga in the evacuation are still questions up for debate). Its ideology is secular (although critics sometimes call the PKK a sect) and as a bonus to Western audiences it even has a full-fledged female combat unit which underscores its ideological difference to other armed groups in the region<sup>63</sup>. However, this image and the ideology behind it as well as its efforts to establish a Kurdish entity do not endear the PYD to any of the more influential Arab coalition members who prefer to support Arab Islamist groups.

- Lack of strong state support

So far the PYD has failed to find a reliable and potent state sponsor that also provides diplomatic backup unless one is convinced of an alliance of the PYD with Assad. This independence from an obvious

state sponsor might give the PYD more independence if it were not for its isolation and its vulnerability to anti-Kurdish state positions in the region.

Political participation is indeed a core issue – within “Rojava”, within Syria and within in the Middle Eastern context - although military aspects still dominate. PYD is still quite politically isolated also due to its own policies.

The war in Syria, or rather the war in Syria and Iraq, has turned the situation into a Gordian Knot, so that many scenarios seem to be possible except that peace will come any time soon. In some respect the Kurds of Syria have become empowered during the last few years, but they also depend very much on the military strength of the YPG and the political decisions of the PYD for their protection. Hence, the Kurds in Syria remain very vulnerable to the political and military turmoil that is embroiling Syria but also Iraq. Once again Kurds have to fight for their future.

*Sabina Catar is a country analyst at the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum in Vienna.*

- <sup>1</sup> Even prior to 2011 only estimations exist – hence numbers vary according to source and since the inception of the conflict also Kurds fled the country in great numbers. For the estimation of two million Syrian Kurds see: KurdWatch (December 2011): Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956–2011, KurdWatch Report 8: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf); accessed on 25 August 2015
- <sup>2</sup> Ironically one of the few clients left to the regime is the SSNP – Syrian Social Nationalist Party which purports to support the creation of a Greater Syrian albeit quite on a different ideological base than the so called Islamic State (IS). The IS used to call itself for some time “Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria”.
- Moreover, the Baath ideology of the regime in Syria (but also in Iraq under Saddam Hussein) used to have Arab nationalism as an important ideological component.
- <sup>3</sup> Schmidinger, Thomas (2014): *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan – Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava* (Mandelbaum: Vienna), p. 129-130
- <sup>4</sup> Tejel, Jordi (2011): *Syria’s Kurds. History, politics and society* (Routledge: London/New York; 2009 1st ed.) p. 65-66
- <sup>5</sup> The Sufi order Naqshbandiyya in Syria is not to be confused with the so called Naqshbandiyya organisation in Iraq that cooperates with so called Islamic State.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 65-66
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 65-66
- <sup>8</sup> Currently, popular forms of moderate Sunni Islam and secular Arabs have been losing ground as their way of life is under pressure in areas controlled by extremist Islamist groups that impose their own religious views on the population. The most important of those groups are also of the most extreme types – foremost the so called Islamic State and al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.
- Moreover, the standing of secular minded Syrians and of representatives of moderate currents of Sunni Islam suffer from the fact that the separation of state and religion is the official line of the Assad regime.
- <sup>9</sup> For details see for example:  
KurdWatch.org (March 2010): *Stateless Kurds in Syria. Illegal invaders or victims of a nationalistic policy?*: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_staatenlose\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_staatenlose_en.pdf); accessed on 25 August 2015
- Schmidinger, Thomas (2014): *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan – Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava* (Mandelbaum: Vienna), p. 79
- <sup>10</sup> For details see: *ibid.*, pp. 84-85, 105
- <sup>11</sup> Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, p. 90
- <sup>12</sup> The uprising is named after Hama as it was the centre of the uprising.
- <sup>13</sup> For details on the „authoritarian bargain“ please refer to: Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, p. 89
- <sup>14</sup> Kraitt, Tyma: *Das Scheitern des Damaszener Frühlings – Baschar al-Assads uneingelöste Versprechen*. In: Edlinger, Fritz, Kraitt Tyma (eds.) (2013): *Syrien – Hintergründe, Analysen, Berichte* (Promedia: Vienna) pp. 29-51
- <sup>15</sup> For details and various versions of what exactly happened please refer for example to: KurdWatch (December 2009): *The »Al-Qamishli Uprising« - The beginning of a »new era« for Syrian Kurds?* KurdWatch Report 4: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_qamischli\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_qamischli_en.pdf); accessed on 29 August 2015
- Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, pp. 97-99
- <sup>16</sup> E.g.: KurdWatch (December 2011): *Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956–2011*, KurdWatch Report 8: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf); accessed on 25 August 2015
- Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, pp. 104-105
- <sup>17</sup> Refer for details to: Hochmüller, Wolfgang, *Die PKK in Syrien*. In: Schmidinger, Thomas (ed.) (2011): *Kurdistan im Wandel. Konflikte, Staatlichkeit, Gesellschaft und Religion zwischen Nahem Osten und Diaspora*, pp. 217-224
- <sup>18</sup> Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch*, pp. 93, 97-98
- <sup>19</sup> HRW - Human Rights Watch (February 2009): *Far from Justice: Syria’s Supreme State Security Court*: <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0209webwcover.pdf>; p. 24-25; access on 25 August 2015
- <sup>20</sup> Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, p.109

- 21 For example: [KurdWatch.org](http://KurdWatch.org) (September 2013):What does the Syrian-Kurdish opposition want? Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus and Qandil: [http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch\\_A009\\_en\\_Parteien2.pdf](http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_A009_en_Parteien2.pdf); accessed on 28 August 2015
- 22 For details please refer to: Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, pp. 99-103
- 23 For details on Kurdish parties and their development prior to 2011 please refer for example to KurdWatch publications: *KurdWatch* (December 2011):Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956–2011, *KurdWatch Report 8*: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf); accessed on 25 August 2015  
For a time line detailing the development of the parties refer to: *KurdWatch* (December 2011): *Kurdish parties in Syria, 1957–2011*: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en\\_2.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en_2.pdf);
- 24 *KurdWatch* (December 2011):Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956–2011, *KurdWatch Report 8*: [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf); accessed on 25 August 2015
- 25 For details please refer to: Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, pp. 106-107
- 26 *KurdWatch.org* (September 2013):What does the Syrian-Kurdish opposition want? Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus and Qandil: [http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch\\_A009\\_en\\_Parteien2.pdf](http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_A009_en_Parteien2.pdf); accessed on 28 August 2015
- 27 Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, p. 116
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 178
- 29 Gunes, Cengiz, Lowe Robert (July 2015): *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Research Paper Middle East and North Africa Programme: [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf); accessed on 24 August 2015, pp. 4-5
- 30 Salih Muslim mentions „democratic self-rule“ as goal of PYD. Salih Muslim in an interview on 30 December 2013. In: Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, p. 179
- 31 *GlobalSecurity.org* (undated): *Democratic Union Party [PYD]*: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pyd.htm> ; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 32 For example: Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch*, p. 120
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Globalsecurity* (undated, ca. late 2014): *Kurdish People’s Protection Unit YPG*: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015.
- 35 *KurdWatch* (29.7.2015):*Al-Hasaka: YPG erobert Stadtteil an-Naschwa: Nächste Seite* <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3538&z=de>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 36 *KurdWatch* (8.8.2015): *Brussels: Salih Muslim could imagine the YPG as part of the Syrian army*: <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3516&z=en>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 37 Salih Muslim in an interview on 30 December 2013. In: Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, p. 180
- 38 *Globalsecurity* (undated): *Kurdish People’s Protection Unit YPG*: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 39 *Danish Immigration Service* (26 February 2015): *SYRIA - Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty and Recruitment to the YPG*: <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/991BA1A7-84C6-42A2-BC16-23CE6B5D862C/0/Syriennotat26feb2015.pdf>; accessed on 30 August 2015
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Globalsecurity* (undated): *Kurdish People’s Protection Unit YPG*: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 42 *Globalsecurity* (undated): *Kurdish People’s Protection Unit YPG*: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 43 For up-to-date information on that topic please refer for example to [www.kurdwatch.org](http://www.kurdwatch.org)
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Schmidinger: *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan*, pp. 124, 126
- 47 *Globalsecurity* (undated): *Kurdish People’s Protection Unit YPG*: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- 48 For examples, please refer to [www.kurdwatch.org](http://www.kurdwatch.org)



- <sup>49</sup> Schmidinger: Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan, p. 141
- <sup>50</sup> Despite the versatility of the topic useful analysis can be found for example in: Gunes, Cengiz, Lowe Robert (July 2015): The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East, Research Paper Middle East and North Africa Programme: [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf); accessed on 24 August 2015
- <sup>51</sup> KurdWatch (September 2013): What does the Syrian-Kurdish opposition want? Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus and Qandil: [http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch\\_A009\\_en\\_Parteien2.pdf](http://kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_A009_en_Parteien2.pdf); accessed on 28 August 2015
- <sup>52</sup> GlobalSecurity.org (undated): Democratic Union Party [PYD]: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pyd.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- <sup>53</sup> Gunes, Cengiz, Lowe Robert (July 2015): The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East, Research Paper Middle East and North Africa Programme: [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf); accessed on 24 August 2015, p. 6
- <sup>54</sup> Compare with claims from activists from Salamiyya, the most important city with an Ismaili community: Qantara.de (15.06.2015): Macht und Minderheiten: <http://de.qantara.de/inhalt/buergerkrieg-in-syrien-macht-und-minderheiten>; accessed on 21.8.2015
- The regime also made concerted efforts to apprehend Christian and Alawite opposition activists to signal both communities that dissent is not a viable option for them.
- <sup>55</sup> There have been even allegations against a bishop that he handed opposition activists over to a security service after they had turned to him for help.
- <sup>56</sup> KurdWatch lists numerous allegations of abuse, kidnappings and even targeted killings (e.g. Mishal Tammo). Please refer to this website for up-to-date information: KurdWatch.org: <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pel?cid=156>; accessed on 25 August 2015
- <sup>57</sup> Please refer for example to [www.kurdwatch.org](http://www.kurdwatch.org) for up-to-date information on allegation and current tensions or reconciliation and cooperation efforts.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> GlobalSecurity.org summarises the official position of the PYD towards the other ethnic and religious communities in its areas: "Kobani is also the center of one of the three cantons (with Afrin and Cizre) that established themselves in „democratic autonomous regions“ from a confederation of „Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmen, Armenian and Chechen“ as stated in the Preamble of the Rojava's (name of western or Syrian Kurdistan) Charter. Experiences of self-administrations in these regions are very interesting, particularly regarding the rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities. Some contradictions nevertheless exist, especially regarding the authoritarianism of the PYD forces." GlobalSecurity.org (o.D.): Democratic Union Party [PYD]: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pyd.htm>; accessed on 28 August 2015
- <sup>60</sup> Schmidinger: Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch, pp.129-131, 134-135, 147
- <sup>61</sup> Please refer for examples in al-Hassakah and Qamishli to: Schmidinger: Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan, pp.129-131, 134-135, 147
- <sup>62</sup> For similar analysis of the position PYD takes among other actors of the war in Syria please refer for example to: Gunes, Cengiz, Lowe Robert (July 2015): The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East, Research Paper Middle East and North Africa Programme: [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf); accessed on 24 August 2015
- <sup>63</sup> Jordan is vulnerable in many aspects and its military corresponds to its size. The purchasing power for military equipment of the Gulf States cannot hide weaknesses in military, political and ideological terms that are exposed by the challenges presented by the wars in Syria and Iraq. After all they have treaties with the USA that aim to protect them. Moreover, other conflicts compete for their attention – i.e. Iraq and Yemen.
- However, not only Western media often favour pictures of female Kurdish fighters to represent either the PKK oder the PYD, respectively YPG. Some of the Middle Eastern media also like to show the female fighters. It might also be a way to stress the perception of Kurds as being different from their Arab fellow citizens. The Syrian regime also employs female soldiers and militia fighters but to a much smaller scale and they do not seem to participate in combat. In the early phases of the war when the uprising turned violent, there were some reports of some armed groups training a few female fighters (but not necessarily for combat

but rather for support functions and as symbols of commitment to armed struggle.



# **Kurdish political parties in Iraq**

*Sebastian Bauer*

The Kurds are Iraq's largest ethnic minority who amount to approximately 15-20 percent of the total Iraqi population.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of them are living in the "Kurdistan Autonomous Region" in northern Iraq. However, many of them are living in other parts of Iraq, especially in the so-called disputed territories, above all in Kirkuk. The Kurdistan Autonomous Region consists of the four provinces Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Halabja and is run by the "Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)". The current status as a federal, autonomous region derives from the Iraqi constitution and is based on long standing Kurdish aspirations for statehood.

After the First World War and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire the Treaty of Sèvres contained the plan to found an independent Kurdish state. However, this treaty was never ratified due to the resistance of Turkey and changes in Great Britain's Middle East strategy. Instead, vast Kurdish populated territories were attached to the territory of Iraq which was created by Great Britain in the aftermath of the First World War. Hence, the national sentiments of the Kurdish population were not accepted by the Iraqi leadership. As a consequence, the young Mulla Mustafa Barzani initiated some uprisings in the 1930's. However, as they failed, he had to go into exile. Later he became the icon of the Kurdish autonomy movement and an important member of the Barzani clan, one of the most rebellious Kurdish tribes which participated in resistance movements against Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> Despite his continued absence from Iraq, Barzani was elected as the chairman of the newly founded Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP, also abbreviated DPK) in 1946. At that time Barzani was also very active in the Iranian-Kurdish independence movement where the Iranian Kurds - with the help of the Soviet Union - got the opportunity to form their own republic in Mahabad. However, this

republic turned out to be very short-lived, and so Barzani had to flee to the Soviet Union<sup>3</sup>.

The situation of the Kurds deteriorated during the rule of the Baath party (1968 - 2003) which was marked by aggressive waves of Arabization including the marginalization of the Kurdish people, massacres and forced resettlement. It was accompanied by on and off Kurdish guerilla wars. Only when the Kurds managed to gain a de facto autonomous zone in 1991 they were able to contain the anti-Kurdish policies of Baghdad. In the early years of Baath rule, however, Barzani could report some progress towards Kurdish autonomy:<sup>4</sup> In 1970 he reached an agreement with Saddam Hussein, who was Vice President of Iraq at that time, to establish an autonomous region in northern Iraq.<sup>5</sup> However, this agreement was only partly implemented and eventually collapsed three years later due to an Iranian-Iraqi treaty which prescribed an end to the support of Kurdish groups.<sup>6</sup>

The Kurdish autonomy movement has not only been thwarted by the resistance of regional players, it was further hindered by inner-Kurdish conflicts from the very beginning. The various Kurdish tribes with different cultures and partly different languages were rather fighting for their own benefit than for a common cause. The leading figure Mulla Mustafa Barzani strengthened the Kurdish aspiration for autonomy, but tribalism continued to be an issue. The tribal conflicts were also reflected in party politics. In the mid-1970s the intellectual, more urban wing of the KDP split off to create an umbrella organization for left-leaning Kurdish movements that did not consider themselves appropriately represented by the KDP. This umbrella organization was called Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and was formed in 1975 in Lebanese exile.<sup>7</sup> These two parties, on the one side the KDP - led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani (since 1979 by his son Masoud Barzani) - and on the other side, the PUK - led by Jalal Talabani - would shape the Iraqi-Kurdish policy for the next four decades.<sup>8</sup> During this period the two parties went through intense rivalries and even armed fights allowing the Iraqi government and the neighboring countries Turkey

and Iran to pursue their interests. These regional players, but also western countries, frequently used the animosities between KDP and the PUK for their own purposes, establishing alliances with either of them to reach their own strategic goals against the Iraqi government. At the same time the two parties frequently used these alliances against each other.<sup>9</sup> During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) the Iraqi leadership had supported the KDP-Iran (an Iranian branch of the KDP) against Iran while at the same time Iran had supported the Iraqi KDP against the Baath-Regime in Bagdad.<sup>10</sup> In the final stages of this war – in which Hussein was supported by many western countries – the genocidal “Anfal” campaign of the Iraqi leader resulted in the killing of more than 100,000 Iraqi Kurds between February and September 1988.<sup>11</sup> This genocidal campaign led to greater public attention in the West and put more pressures on Western governments to deal with the Kurdish issue.<sup>12</sup> Following UN-Resolution 688 at the end of the Second Gulf war in 1991, the autonomy movement witnessed a surprising turnaround that was particularly caused by the definition of a “safe haven”, which according to the UN-Resolution would be defined as an UN-protected zone in Iraqi Kurdistan. This zone was established by the US and some European states as a reaction to the mass exodus of refugees from the region<sup>13</sup>, many of them seeking refuge in Europe and the US.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the implementation of the “Safe Haven” may be considered a milestone in the quest for Kurdish independence.<sup>15</sup>

### **KDP and PUK: Fighting within the Safe Haven**

The protected zone in Iraqi Kurdistan, established by the UN, paved the way for a new era for Kurds in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Through the implementation of this “Safe Haven” and the withdrawal of the Iraqi soldiers, the Iraqi-Kurdish region enjoyed a status of internationally accepted autonomy for the first time, and therefore was able to emancipate itself from the Iraqi government. However, this de facto-independence did initially not lead to the creation of a functioning political system within the Kurdish region: Firstly, there was no foreign state that

would have supported the creation of an independent Kurdish state. Secondly, the Kurdish region was marked by poverty at the time. The economic sanctions, initiated by the UN against Iraq, in combination with Saddam Hussein's economic embargo against Iraqi Kurdistan led to an economy of scarcity, high unemployment and bad living conditions. According to estimates approximately 70 percent of the population in the "Safe Haven" were temporarily dependent on humanitarian assistance.<sup>17</sup> Even the political elites in KDP and PUK faced financial distress,<sup>18</sup> and could therefore not focus on efforts to reach autonomy.<sup>19</sup> Thirdly, the huge financial and humanitarian assistance had a problematic side effect. It created a new type of economy, providing those groups with power who had access to the aid supplies. The strengthening of these local groups - many of them deploying their own militias - had a negative impact on the Kurdish population's cohesion.<sup>20</sup> This effect was also noticeable on the level of the political elite, especially as the main area of influence of the KDP was near Turkey giving the KDP an advantage over the PUK, whose power base is located at the Iranian border. This geo-political situation allowed for increased economic exchange between the KDP and Turkey. Thus, the KDP was better positioned to receive aid deliveries as most of the aid arrived via Turkey. Also, they were able to collect more customs on imports and smuggled goods,<sup>21</sup> which were in fact the parties' main source of income. At that time, collecting official taxes in this region marked by poverty and high unemployment was unthinkable.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the PUK soon had much less financial resources than the KDP, leading to massive conflicts between the two parties.<sup>23</sup> It was mainly due to these conflicts that the Kurdish Parties failed to benefit from the "Save Haven" in a way that would have advanced the common interests.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the combined efforts of KDP and PUK eventually succeeded in establishing a Kurdish parliament and holding the first elections in 1992, resulting in an equal distribution of the mandates between both parties. They formed a government - the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) - which eventually failed. The deep

divide between the Barzani camp and the Talabani camp was also based on historical, cultural, linguistic and ideological differences and did not allow any cross-party loyalties.<sup>25</sup> In 1994 the growing discrepancy between the number of seats in the regional parliament and the balance of actual power between the parties - determined through economic and territorial advantages - led to a war with several thousand fatalities. During this war the KDP managed to invade Erbil (Kurdish: Hewler) with the help of the Iraqi army, which had been under PUK control at that time. The KDP also took over Sulaiymaniyah, which the PUK later recaptured with Iranian help (also some parts of Erbil and Kirkuk were eventually recaptured). After a military intervention by Turkey, Great Britain and the US, a ceasefire was declared, leaving Iraqi Kurdistan geographically, politically and socially divided.<sup>26</sup> The two parties established two separate almost identical political and administrative systems. Each of them founded its own Kurdish National Assembly - the KDP in Erbil and the PUK in Sulaiymaniyah.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the strife between KDP and PUK there was an additional inner-Kurdish conflict: The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from Turkey frequently used the bordering regions of Iraqi Kurdistan as a fallback area in their fight against Ankara, leading to Turkish raids and bombings of PKK-positions in northern Iraq. Tensions and even military confrontations between the Iraqi Kurds and the PKK were inevitable.<sup>28</sup> In their fight against the PKK the two Iraqi parties KDP and PUK partly cooperated with Turkey and temporarily even with each other.

### **KDP and PUK: Thawing relations in the Autonomous Region**

Already prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, following George W. Bush's definition of the "axis of evil", the Iraqi-Kurdish parties came to realize that a war against Iraq was becoming more likely. At the time Kurdish parties speculated that in such a case the Kurdish Regional Governments would likely become a key US ally. However, the war



between KDP and PUK in the 1990's had damaged the Iraqi Kurd's standing and reputation. Thus, in order to present themselves as a reliable potential partner, the two rival Kurdish governments started to reform the dual system and took steps towards democratization. Actual changes in the relationship between the two parties became visible after Saddam Hussein was overthrown in April 2003 and the upcoming national elections accelerated the process of cooperation and unification. In order to compete as a strong, unified actor, KDP and PUK formed the Kurdistan List which placed second in the election behind the Shiite party National Iraqi Alliance. This result was a huge step forward in the Iraqi-Kurdish efforts for autonomy and ensured the Kurds a strong position in the Iraqi government. Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK, became Iraqi president, whereas Masoud Barzani, leader of the KDP, was appointed president of the reunified Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).<sup>30</sup> Kurdish politics profited a lot from the changes in the power structures in Iraq following the US-invasion.<sup>31</sup> Kurdistan's status changed within Iraq and in 2005 it was recognized as an autonomous, federal part of Iraq.<sup>32</sup> The KRG started to participate actively in the political processes and in the main institutions in Iraq and also constructively cooperated in the process of creating the new Iraqi constitution which was ratified in 2005.<sup>33</sup> KDP and PUK reached a "strategic agreement" that reaffirmed the 50:50 arrangement regarding governance and resource allocation and stipulated that the administrations and the military agencies should be unified. Furthermore they both signed a unification code in 2006 which brought an official end to the armed conflicts between them.<sup>34</sup> Since then KDP and PUK maintained an extensive cooperation and shared government posts leading to a more or less functioning regional government.<sup>35</sup> Whereas huge parts of Iraq were increasingly sliding into chaos after 2003, the comparatively stable Kurdish autonomous region showed a much better security situation and economic upswing.<sup>36</sup>

However, the increasing influence of the Barzani and Talabani families - in combination with the parties' power sharing agreement -

encouraged the rise of corruption and mismanagement. Long overdue political reforms remained undone, while nepotism within the dual party system continued to grow.<sup>37</sup> The omnipotence of the KDP-PUK-led regional government as well as the abuse of power by politicians was also increasingly criticized by the population of the autonomous region.<sup>38</sup> Especially nepotism within the KDP was a highly discussed issue, when President Masoud Barzani's nephew became the KRG's prime minister. The president's son, Masrour Barzani, became head of the local intelligence service and another son held the position of the commander of the Special Forces.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the KDP has often been criticized for corruption and nepotism with respect to the Barzani family's engagement in large commercial enterprises in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>40</sup> The PUK faced similar accusations; especially because Talabani's two sons as well as his two brothers-in-laws were all holding government positions. This discontent within the Iraqi-Kurdish population would not remain without consequences.<sup>41</sup>

### **Change in the dual political system**

In the elections for the parliament of Iraqi-Kurdistan in July 2009 it became evident that KDP and PUK, who were dividing power among themselves in a quasi-authoritarian manner, were facing serious contenders. Two lists - the Gorran List and the Services and Reform List - represented a new political opposition. Both were running an anti-corruption campaign and were profiting from growing popular frustration over KDPs and PUKs nepotism. The smaller one of the two lists, the Services and Reform List, won about 13 percent of the seats. It was composed of four parties of which the two dominant ones (Kurdistan Islamic Union and Islamic Group in Kurdistan) were Islamist parties, while the other two were small secular socialist parties from Sulaymaniyah. Gorran ("change"), the second list, is also referred to as Change Movement and would challenge KDP and PUK even more in the future. KDP und PUK won about 57 percent of the seats while Gorran won approximately 24 percent.<sup>42</sup> Starting out as a reform faction within the PUK, Gorran - led by Nawshirwan

Mustafa - had splintered off in frustration and was now running its own list.

The success of Gorran lies in the new type of politics it seems to offer. Rather than relying on the keywords “liberation” and “historic experience” - which were the traditional topics of the leading parties - Gorran spoke of reform and criticized corruption and party interference of the established dual political system harshly.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the two leading parties, Gorran does not own large corporations. Its power stems mainly from public support and most of the Gorran voters are younger people from the middle or lower class who see the need for far-reaching reforms in the KRG institutions. Many activists, journalists and writers joined the new party, giving Gorran an intellectual background.<sup>44</sup> Although the new party struggled to make serious electoral inroads into KDP territory which has always been more tribal and traditional, it soon managed to become a serious contender to the more urban and progressive PUK.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, PUK’s ageing leader Talabani had been treated for health problems which negatively affected his political standing.<sup>46</sup> Particularly after 2012, when Talabani suffered a stroke, his party lacked a strong leader and struggled to recover. In the September 2013 elections for the Iraqi-Kurdistan parliament Gorran came in second, pushing the PUK to the third place. KDP took 38 seats in the 111 seat parliament; Gorran won 24 seats, leaving PUK with only 19 seats. This result was a huge success for Gorran and a political disaster for the PUK. So the two ruling parties were no longer able to divide the posts between themselves as they did in the past.

The KDP clearly stated from the beginning that it was seeking a national unity government that would include all forces - a project that proved difficult, due to the power struggle between the PUK and Gorran. The PUK did not want to hand over too many influential posts to the newcomer as it still regarded itself as the historical second power in Iraqi Kurdistan. In June 2014 the formation of a new government was announced, which - due to the various

difficulties during the coalition talks - came as a surprise to most of the observers, but was almost completely overshadowed by the escalating IS crisis.<sup>47</sup> In this government six portfolios were assigned to KDP, five to PUK and another five to Gorran. The two Islamic parties, Kurdistan Islamic Union and Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal), also joined the government, each receiving two portfolios. Nechervan Barzani, a nephew of KRG-President Massoud Barzani, became Prime Minister and Qubad Talabani, a son of Jalal Talabani, became Vice Prime Minister of the new KRG.<sup>48</sup> Gorran was ostensibly given a considerable share of power as the new party's portfolios remarkably included the key ministries of finance and peshmerga (Ministry of Defence). However, the KDP did not regard Gorran as its new strategic partner, especially because Gorran did not have any military or security forces of its own whereas PUK still had its own forces, even if their strength was decreasing. Furthermore, Gorran's share of the KRG's power was largely limited to the level of ministries and did not reach the depth of the KRG's administration. Therefore, Gorran failed to impose operational control over the region's political institutions which were widely staffed with personnel still being loyal to the two older established parties. The KDP, being in a particularly strong position at that point of time, tried to establish itself as the key leader in Kurdish politics, also by taking advantage of PUK's weakness and Gorran's failure to establish itself in the political system.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Gorran's arrival in the political game was followed by renewed disunity within the Iraqi-Kurdish party landscape.<sup>50</sup> Fearing to lose its political weight, the PUK found itself forced to strengthen its alliance with Iran, a move which was harshly criticized by the KDP. The PUK, on the other hand, criticized the KDP for its aspiration to take over Kurdish leadership in general, for trying to bring Gorran under its influence as well as for escalating tensions with Baghdad by addressing delicate issues like oil policy and Kurdish independence. The emergence of the extremist Islamist organization Islamic State (IS) did little to strengthen the cohesion between the parties. Instead, the Kurdish politics became more partisan again, and – because of Gorran's lack of military resources and ability to get involved into war

actions – it also fell back to the dual party system of KDP and PUK, both of them again seeking their fortune in opposing alliance policies, as it had happened so often before in the history of the two parties.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the propagated anti-corruption agenda of Gorran was put on hold because the KRG's focus was now on fighting IS and on trying to gain ground and influence in Kirkuk and other parts within the so called "disputed territories".<sup>52</sup>

### **Kurdish alliance policy in collapsing Iraq**

The KDP's and PUK's partisan attitude is particularly manifested in the security sector. From the very beginning the armed units of KDP and PUK called "Peshmerga" - that were formed to resist the central government in Baghdad - played a very important role in the history of Iraqi-Kurdistan.<sup>53</sup> The Peshmerga - which used guerrilla tactics in the 1980's - transformed into a more regular military forces after the withdrawal of the Iraqi forces from the area of the "Save Haven" in 1991. They were further professionalized by the US after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Still, the two Peshmerga forces were separated from each other, although there have been frequent attempts to unify them in one professional army. In 2009 the KDP and the PUK created the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs whose aim was to centralize administrative tasks and establish joint KDP-PUK brigades commanded by officers graduated from a military academy. However, the new ministry<sup>54</sup> was not able to fulfill its tasks against the partisan politicians due to the lack of political support. Thus when the Iraqi-Kurdish region was confronted with the emergence of IS, the Peshmerga forces were not a unified army at all. Instead of the mentioned academy graduates, senior officers and younger party-affiliated figures were sent to the front lines, thus making the Peshmerga forces on the battlefield competitors rather than allies and leading to severe strategic military mistakes in the fight against IS. The discord between the KDP and the PUK and between their two armed wings intensified due to the delivery of weapons which the Iraqi Kurds started receiving from various countries for their fight

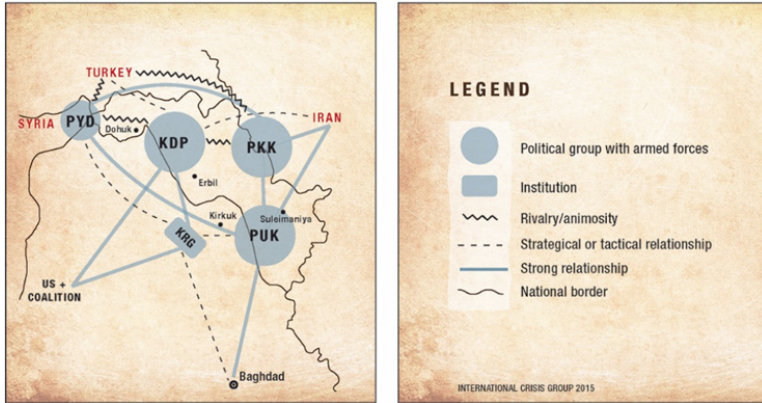
against IS.<sup>55</sup> According to a report by 'The International Crisis Group' from May 2015, the deliveries from the US-led coalition against IS\* are unilateral, mostly uncoordinated and come without strings attached regarding their distribution and use on the front lines. According to the report this practice of the coalition members - each following their own interests and strategies for the region - lead to further inner-Kurdish strife and has far-reaching consequences for regional alliance policies: In August 2014, for example, an initial delivery of Western military aid went directly to the KDP, thus putting the PUK in disadvantage. Later, the weapons were delivered to the KRG with prior approval from Baghdad; this led to an inequitable distribution among the two parties because of the dominant position of the KDP within the KRG. The PUK saw itself pushed towards even greater military reliance on Iran as well as towards an alliance with the PKK, the Kurdish rebel organization in Turkey, and towards an alliance with the Syrian-Kurdish PYD/YPG<sup>56</sup> (which can be regarded as the Syrian wing of the PKK<sup>57</sup>). The weapon deliveries by the coalition and the successes of the Kurds in the fight against IS strengthened the Kurds' military and political influence within Iraq, increasing the potential for conflict between the Kurds and the Iraqi central government in Baghdad.<sup>58</sup> In fact, many Iraqi Kurds consider the IS-crisis as an unprecedented opportunity to gain independence. The Kurdish land grabs in the course of the Peshmerga's advances against IS in the disputed territories intensify the tensions with Baghdad.<sup>59</sup> While the Iran-leaning PUK is gaining popularity in the Shia-dominated Iraqi government, the KDP, which is receiving most of the coalition's weapons, has been alienated.<sup>60</sup> In turn KDP officials have made provocative calls for Kurdish independence as well as for further direct weapon deliveries bypassing the Iraqi government. When taking this into consideration, the coalition's military aid seems to weaken the Iraqi-Kurdish as well as Iraqi national cohesion.<sup>61</sup> In

---

\* The US-led coalition against IS includes states such as Turkey, Great Britain, Germany, France, Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Australia, Netherlands, etc.

Source: (9.10.2014): Who's doing what in the coalition battle against ISIS, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/09/world/meast/isis-coalition-nations/>, accessed 30.7.2015

the course of the fight against IS and the coalition's military aid for the Kurds, broadly speaking, two alliance blocs emerged: On the one hand, the pro-West KDP - allying with the US-led coalition and Turkey - and on the other hand, the Iran-leaning PUK - allying with the PKK, the PYD and Baghdad.<sup>62</sup>



Kurdish political scene 2015<sup>63</sup>

The divide between these two blocs reflects the power struggle between KDP-leader Masoud Barzani and PKK-leader Abdullah Ocalan, who are the two primary poles of Kurdish political power. Barzani, on the one side, is the only Kurdish leader who managed to lead an effectively functioning autonomous region for Kurds. Ocalan, on the other side, has been imprisoned since 1999 and his organization has been declared illegal. Particularly the military achievements of the PKK-associated PYD in Syria, as well as the success of the partially PKK-associated Kurdish party HDP in the June 2015 election for the Turkish Parliament have strengthened the standing of the PKK at the expense of the KDP. The animosities between the PKK and the KDP date back partly to the parties' military confrontations of the past as well as to their ideological roots. The PKK has a Marxist-Leninist history, whereas the KDP is a more tribal and pro-capitalist party.<sup>64</sup> Ocalan and Barzani both aspire to be the icon of the ambitions of the Kurdish people for independence and consider allying with Western players as critical to realizing this goal.

Barzani has a historical advantage in this matter as Great Britain and the US still view international Kurdish politics through a KDP lens. However, the PKK is making up ground as it is increasingly portraying itself as a responsible actor and potential security partner in the region.<sup>65</sup> The competition and animosities between KDP and PKK have a further deteriorating effect on the political atmosphere within the Kurdish autonomous region. Particularly since the KDP is in the regional government together with the PUK, an ally of the PKK, and with Gorran which strongly supports the PKK's position in the media.<sup>66</sup>

Additional tensions between the two Iraqi parties KDP and PUK are stemming from an emerging dispute over the presidency of the KRG area. Masoud Barzani's second executive term expired in 2013, but had been extended for two further years in an agreement between KDP and PUK on the condition that he may no longer run as president. This extension ends in August 2015 and the parliament is debating on whether to extend it for a second term. The KDP wants Barzani to stay in office to avoid a power vacuum in times of crisis. Furthermore, the KDP argues that with Fuad Masum (the successor of Jalal Talabani) the office of the president of Iraq has been given to PUK, thus the KRG presidency should be given to KDP-Barzani.<sup>67</sup> Representatives of the other parties argue that the KDP already holds the post of the KRG prime minister. Hence, the KRG presidential post should go to another party. Some of them state that they will not agree to extend Barzani's tenure,<sup>68</sup> while others will only accept an extension, if the entire KRG structure is overhauled in a way that would ultimately reduce Barzani's authority. However, the KDP refuses to make any far-reaching concessions.

The re-emerging disunity among the Iraqi-Kurdish parties comes at a time of economic crisis and scarce resources within the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan,<sup>69</sup> due to the IS crisis and the waves of refugees who are fleeing from the embattled areas to the severely overcrowded northern Iraq.<sup>70</sup> The practice of the US-led



coalition, the alliance policy of the Kurdish parties as well as KDP's and PUK's "willingness" to fall back into fraternal competition further decreases social peace and hampers the Kurdish peoples' aspiration for independence. This prevents them from taking advantage of a situation which could be seen as an unprecedented opportunity to gain further autonomy.<sup>71</sup>

### **Participation in the political process**

The Kurds in Iraq play an important role in the political process in Iraq. With Fuad Masum Iraq has a Kurdish president and with Hoshjar Sebari a Kurdish Foreign Minister. The Kurdish parties therefore actively participate in the political scene and in the main institutions of the country.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore the Iraqi constitution from 2005 recognizes Iraqi Kurdistan as an autonomous, federal part of Iraq,<sup>73</sup> and since 2009 the region even has its own constitution, giving it far-reaching sovereignty. It provides for its own executive, legislative and judicial authorities as well as its own military units, the Peshmerga. Only issues concerning the Iraqi state, national foreign policy, national defense, or the nation's membership in international organizations are in the competence of the executive authorities of the central government. The extent of this competence is a recurring point of contention between the KRG in Erbil and the central government in Baghdad - especially concerning the handling of Kurdistan's oil industry.<sup>74</sup>

The Kurdish parties KDP, PUK and Gorran - besides other smaller Kurdish parties - are also represented in the Iraqi parliament. Together the Kurdish parties rank in the second place, (far) behind the Shiite parties. The KDP holds 25 seats, the PUK 21 seats and Gorran 9 seats in the 328 seats parliament. The April 2014 elections for the Iraqi parliament provided the former President of Iraq Nouri al-Maliki and his 'State of law Coalition' (winning 92 seats) with even more political power.<sup>75</sup> Maliki, who has been harshly criticized for his authoritarian, pro-Shiite governing style and his inability to

fight IS had to step down after the fall of Mossul to IS due to the pressure from the Kurds, the international community and his own Dawa party. His successor and party colleague Haidar al-Abadi, in power since July 2014, leads a multi-party coalition and now has the task of mending the relationships with the Sunni and the Kurdish population.<sup>76</sup> However, Maliki still has a powerful post within the Dawa party (Deputy Chairman) which caused a lot of skepticism whether Abadi will be able to meet the expectations.<sup>77</sup> He is viewed as a weak president whose policy seems to be increasingly influenced by Maliki and - via Maliki - by Iran.<sup>78</sup> Although the relationship between the Shia-dominated central government and the KRG, having suffered during Maliki's term, was partly repaired, many reasons for discord remain unsolved: Besides the Kurds' complaint that they were not receiving enough weapons from Baghdad for their fight against IS, the main points of contention concern the so called disputed territories, the joint exploitation of the natural resources (oil) and the Kurds' aspiration for independence<sup>79</sup>:

### **Disputed territories**

The disputed areas include the province Kirkuk and parts of the provinces Ninevah, Salah ad-Din and Diyala. The population in these areas was predominantly Kurdish, but during the rule of Saddam Hussein, approximately 100.000 Kurds were displaced by force and Arabs were settled. After Hussein's fall in 2003 the Kurds occupied a significant part of these territories. In 2008 and 2013, when President Maliki questioned the military presence of the Peshmergas in the disputed territories, the conflict threatened to escalate.<sup>80</sup> Since 2014 the Kurds have used the presence of the IS to secure most of the positions originally held by the Iraqi Army - in particular the oil-rich Kirkuk. The "land-grab" of the Kurds leads to increasing tensions between the Kurds on the one side and the Shia dominated Iraqi government, the Shiite militias and Iran on the other side. These tensions are reflecting on the inner-Kurdish strife between KDP and PUK, as the Shia/Iran-leaning PUK wants Kirkuk to be more

independent from Western-leaning KDP-controlled Erbil.<sup>81</sup> According to the new Iraqi constitution from 2005 the status of the territories could be changed by a referendum which would have to be held by the central government. If the majority of the population would vote in favor of it, the disputed areas could join the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. However, the central government has prevented such a referendum since 2007.<sup>82</sup>

### **Political independence**

In the course of the IS crisis the Kurdish calls for an independent state have become more frequent. In summer 2014 the Iraqi government lost control of almost one third of the territory to the IS. This raised doubts amongst Iraqis whether a unified Iraqi state will prevail. Massoud Barzani regards this crisis to be an unprecedented chance to lead the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan towards statehood,<sup>83</sup> and is trying to get political support from the US for that matter.<sup>84</sup> He promised the Iraqi-Kurdish population that sooner or later the independent Kurdistan will become reality and announced that he will hold a referendum on Kurdish independence as soon as the IS crisis is under control.<sup>85</sup> KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, the president's nephew, also made provocative statements concerning the independence issue. He argued that due to the rise of the IS, Iraq is now a failed state and new structures would have to be established.<sup>86</sup> The PUK which is closer to the central government than the KDP criticized the announcements by the Barzanis and states that the KDP calls for independence are creating additional tensions with Baghdad, Teheran and Ankara. Iran, Syria and Turkey are countries with large Kurdish populations and they fear the rise of an overall Kurdish independence movement.<sup>87</sup>

### **The joint exploitation of natural resources**

The Iraqi constitution states that Iraq's natural resources shall be exploited jointly by the central government, the regions and the

provinces. However, there has been a dispute over the utilization rights of oil and natural gas as well as over the license and revenue allocation. A particular bone of contention is Iraq's exploitation of oil within the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. The Kurds complain that they do not get the appropriate share of money they should receive from Baghdad's oil concessions to foreign companies that are exploiting oil in Kurdistan. On the other hand, Baghdad argues that the Autonomous Region is entitled only to a reduced share of the revenues because the KRG has withheld money from its own oil sales<sup>88</sup> as the KRG puts new discovered oil and gas fields on the market by its own.<sup>89</sup> During Maliki's presidency the dispute escalated and led to the Kurdistan Alliance's boycott of the sessions of the Iraqi parliament.<sup>90</sup> In turn, the central government in Baghdad stopped all money transfers to the KRG as a reaction to the finalization of Kurdistan's own pipeline to Turkey in January 2014. At the same time it exerted pressure on potential purchasers not to buy oil from the Iraqi Kurds. In December 2014 the KRG and the central government under the regime of the new president Abadi agreed to a solution regarding the allocation of the oil revenues.<sup>91</sup> However, although this deal which was hailed as a breakthrough in the long-running dispute, did not keep what it promised and both sides frequently accuse each other of violations.<sup>92</sup>

The ongoing budget dispute, the withholding of the money transfers and the Kurds' inability to utilize Kurdistan's oil resources by themselves without getting sanctioned by Baghdad, has been leading to a financial hardship within the KRG<sup>93</sup>. As Iraqi Kurdistan's economy is still based almost solely on oil, the oil dispute between Baghdad and KRG plays a crucial role regarding the aspirations of Iraqi Kurds for political independence.<sup>94</sup>

*Sebastian Bauer is a country analyst at the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum in Vienna.*

- <sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (23.7.2015): The World Factbook – Iraq, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>, accessed 29.7.2015
- <sup>2</sup> Schmidinger, Thomas (2011): Kurdistan im Wandel: Konflikte, Staatlichkeit, Gesellschaft und Religion zwischen Nahem Osten und Diaspora. Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, p. 149-155; also Deschner, Günther (2003): Die Kurden, München: F.A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, p.49
- <sup>3</sup> Schmidinger: p. 149-155.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 149-155
- <sup>5</sup> Wiener Zeitung (11.8.2014): Das irakische Kurdistan seit 1970, [http://www.wienerzeitung.at/dossiers/kurdistan/650750\\_Das-irakische-Kurdistan-seit-1970.html](http://www.wienerzeitung.at/dossiers/kurdistan/650750_Das-irakische-Kurdistan-seit-1970.html), accessed 29.7.2015
- <sup>6</sup> McDowall, David (14.5.2004): A Modern History of the Kurds, Third Edition Paperback, published by I. B. Tauris.
- <sup>7</sup> Schmidinger: p. 149-155; also Wiener Zeitung (11.8.2014): Das irakische Kurdistan seit 1970, [http://www.wienerzeitung.at/dossiers/kurdistan/650750\\_Das-irakische-Kurdistan-seit-1970.html](http://www.wienerzeitung.at/dossiers/kurdistan/650750_Das-irakische-Kurdistan-seit-1970.html), accessed 29.7.2015
- <sup>8</sup> Schmidinger: p. 154-167.
- <sup>9</sup> Schmidinger: p. 154-167; also Strohmeier, Martin; Yalcin-Heckmann, Lale (2010): Die Kurden. Geschichte, Politik, Kultur, 3. Aufl. München: Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, p.137-144
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.155
- <sup>11</sup> Al Jazeera (14.4.2014): Iraq Kurds press states to recognise genocide, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/04/iraq-kurds-press-states-recognise-genocide-anfal-201441371637191288.html>, accessed 31.7.2015
- <sup>12</sup> Schmidinger: p. 155-159
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.159.
- <sup>14</sup> SWP - Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit (5.2015): Der Aufschwung kurdischer Politik. Zur Lage der Kurden in Irak, Syrien und der Türkei, Berlin: Hrg. Günter Seufert, p.9.
- <sup>15</sup> Schmidinger: p. 159.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 159.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 159-162
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.160
- <sup>19</sup> Strohmeier, Martin; Yalcin-Heckmann, Lale (2010): Die Kurden. Geschichte, Politik, Kultur, 3. Aufl. München: Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, p. 138-142.
- <sup>20</sup> Strohmeier: p. 141
- <sup>21</sup> Schmidinger: p.160-161
- <sup>22</sup> Strohmeier: p. 141
- <sup>23</sup> Schmidinger: p. 161
- <sup>24</sup> Strohmeier: p. 137-144; also Schmidinger: p.159-162
- <sup>25</sup> Strohmeier: p. 141
- <sup>26</sup> Schmidinger: p. 161
- <sup>27</sup> Stansfield, Gareth; Ewan Anderson (2003): Iraqi Kurdistan. Political Development and emergent democracy, London: Routledge; New. edizione, p.154
- <sup>28</sup> SWP - Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit (5.2015): Der Aufschwung kurdischer Politik. Zur Lage der Kurden in Irak, Syrien und der Türkei, Berlin: Hrg. Günter Seufert, p.10.
- <sup>29</sup> Strohmeier: p. 142
- <sup>30</sup> Schmidinger: p. 162-163
- <sup>31</sup> Strohmeier: p. 143
- <sup>32</sup> Schmidinger: p. 163
- <sup>33</sup> SWP: p.10.
- <sup>34</sup> Schmidinger: p. 163
- <sup>35</sup> The Daily Star (10.7.2015): As Iraq splinters, Kurds' own unity put on test, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jul-10/305996-as-iraq-splinters-kurds-own-unity-put-to-test.ashx>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>36</sup> SWP: p.9
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid. p.9
- <sup>38</sup> Schmidinger: p. 166

- <sup>39</sup> Global Security (without date): Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/kdp.htm>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>40</sup> Ekurd Daily (5.4.2015): Deputy asks Nechirvan Barzani and Qubad Talabani to run for Kurdistan's presidency and premiership, <http://ekurd.net/nechirvan-barzani-and-qubad-talabani-to-run-for-kurdistans-presidency-preiership-2015-04-05>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>41</sup> Global Security (without date): Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/kdp.htm>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>42</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>43</sup> AlJazeera Center for Studies (23.7.2014): Iraqi Kurds Pull Together in Time of Trouble, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/07/2014723135044457571.htm>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>44</sup> Kurdish Policy Foundation (5.9.2014): The challenges facing Gorran to change, <http://kurdishpolicy.org/2014/09/05/the-challenges-facing-gorran-to-change/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>45</sup> AlJazeera Center for Studies (23.7.2014): Iraqi Kurds Pull Together in Time of Trouble, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/07/2014723135044457571.htm>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group (1.1.2010): Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan: Results and Implications, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/op-eds/elections-in-iraqi-kurdistan-results-and-implications.aspx>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>47</sup> AlJazeera Center for Studies (23.7.2014): Iraqi Kurds Pull Together in Time of Trouble, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/07/2014723135044457571.htm>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>48</sup> Vertretung der Regionalregierung Kurdistan-Irak in Österreich (24.6.2014): Ahtes Kabinett angelobt, <http://www.austria.krg.org/achtes-kabinett-angelobt/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>49</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>50</sup> SWP: p.13
- <sup>51</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Foreign Affairs (14.7.2015): The Peshmerga Regression, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-06-14/peshmerga-regression>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>55</sup> Foreign Affairs (14.7.2015): The Peshmerga Regression, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-06-14/peshmerga-regression>, accessed 30.7.2015; also International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>56</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>57</sup> SWP: p.12
- <sup>58</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>60</sup> Foreign Affairs (14.7.2015): The Peshmerga Regression, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-06-14/peshmerga-regression>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>61</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015

- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.; also Telegraph (5.7.2015): Who are the Kurds? A user's guide to Kurdish politics, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11198326/Who-are-the-Kurds-A-users-guide-to-Kurdish-politics.html>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>63</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>64</sup> The Kurdistan Tribune (11.5.2013): Ocalan v. Barzani: Two contradictory worlds, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2013/ocalan-v-barzani-two-contradictory-worlds/>, accessed 30.7.2015; and "KDP: pro-capitalist party": Telegraph (5.7.2015): Who are the Kurds? A user's guide to Kurdish politics, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11198326/Who-are-the-Kurds-A-users-guide-to-Kurdish-politics.html>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>65</sup> Al Jazeera (15.6.2015): A setback for Kurdish self-rule?, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/06/setback-kurdish-rule-pkk-ocalan-erdogan-150614072310318.html>, accessed 20.7.2015; also The Kurdistan Tribune (11.5.2013): Ocalan v. Barzani: Two contradictory worlds, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2013/ocalan-v-barzani-two-contradictory-worlds/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>66</sup> The Kurdistan Tribune (11.5.2013): Ocalan v. Barzani: Two contradictory worlds, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2013/ocalan-v-barzani-two-contradictory-worlds/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>67</sup> Ekurd Daily (10.6.2015): KDP says Iraqi Kurdistan requires Massoud Barzani to stay in office, <http://ekurd.net/kdp-says-iraqi-kurdistan-requires-massoud-barzani-to-stay-in-office-2015-06-10>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>68</sup> Ekurd Daily (10.6.2015): PUK: We will not repeat the agreement with KDP to extend Barzani's presidency, <http://ekurd.net/we-will-not-repeat-the-agreement-with-kdp-2015-07-10>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>69</sup> Reuters (9.7.2015): As Iraq splinters, Kurds' own unity put to test , <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/09/us-iraq-kurds-presidency-idUSKCN0PJ1U320150709>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>70</sup> The World Bank (12.2.105): The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Needs an Estimated US\$1.4 billion this Year to Stabilize the Economy, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/02/12/kurdistan-region-iraq-stabilize-economy>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>71</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf>, accessed 30.7.2015; and Reuters (9.7.2015): As Iraq splinters, Kurds' own unity put to test, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/09/us-iraq-kurds-presidency-idUSKCN0PJ1U320150709>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>72</sup> SWP: p. 10
- <sup>73</sup> Schmidinger: p. 163
- <sup>74</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (6.2015): Irak - Geschichte & Staat, <http://liportal.giz.de/irak/geschichte-staat/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>75</sup> Institute for the Study of War Iraq Updates (28.7.2015): Iraq Situation Report: July 24 - 27, 2015, <http://iswiraq.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05/final-2014-iraqi-national-elections.html#!/2014/05/final-2014-iraqi-national-elections.html>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>76</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (6.2015): Irak - Geschichte & Staat, <http://liportal.giz.de/irak/geschichte-staat/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>77</sup> SWP: p. 14
- <sup>78</sup> New York Times (28.5.2015): Fall of Ramadi to ISIS Weakens Rule of Iraqi Premier, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/fall-of-ramadi-to-isis-highlights-iraqi-premiers-weakening-authority.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/fall-of-ramadi-to-isis-highlights-iraqi-premiers-weakening-authority.html?_r=0), accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>79</sup> Der Standard (6.5.2015): Kurdenpräsident Barzani in Washington, <http://derstandard.at/2000015392888/Kurdenpraesident-Barzani-in-Washington>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>80</sup> SWP: p. 13
- <sup>81</sup> The Jamestown Foundation (15.5.2015): Kurdish-Shi'a Tensions in Iraq Amid the Struggle Against the Islamic State, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43918&cHash=24b9b5d206f8a2ed3839af1ecc179a90](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43918&cHash=24b9b5d206f8a2ed3839af1ecc179a90),

- accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>82</sup> SWP: p.11
- <sup>83</sup> Reuters (9.7.2015): As Iraq splinters, Kurds' own unity put to test, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/09/us-iraq-kurds-presidency-idUSKCNOPJ1U320150709>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>84</sup> RUDAW (12.3.2015): President Barzani: Kurdish independence delayed, not abandoned, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/120320151>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>85</sup> Washington Times (6.5.2015): Kurdish leader says his people will one day declare independence, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/6/massud-barzani-independence-kurds-is-coming/?page=all#!>, accessed 30.7.2015; also Al Jazeera (7.5.2015): Barzani: Referendum to be held after ISIL defeat <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/05/150507080127279.html>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>86</sup> The Economist (21.2.2015): Ever closer to independence <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21644167-iraqs-kurds-are-independent-all-name-they-must-play-their-cards-cleverly-if-they>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>87</sup> International Crisis Group (12.5.2015): Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Crisis Group, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/158-arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-is-inviting-conflict.pdf), accessed 30.7.2015; also Washington Times (6.5.2015): Kurdish leader says his people will one day declare independence, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/6/massud-barzani-independence-kurds-is-coming/?page=all#!>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>88</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (6.2015): Irak - Geschichte & Staat, <http://liportal.giz.de/irak/geschichte-staat/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>89</sup> SWP: p.10-11
- <sup>90</sup> Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (6.2015): Irak - Geschichte & Staat, <http://liportal.giz.de/irak/geschichte-staat/>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>91</sup> SWP: p.10-11
- <sup>92</sup> The Daily Star (10.6.2015): Baghdad makes \$430 million budget payment to Kurds, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Regional/2015/Jun-10/301320-baghdad-makes-430-million-budget-payment-to-kurds.ashx>, accessed 30.7.2015
- <sup>93</sup> SWP: p.13
- <sup>94</sup> New York Times (25.10.2014): Oil Gives Kurds a Path to Independence, and Conflict With Baghdad, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/world/oil-gives-kurds-a-path-to-independence-and-conflict-with-baghdad.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/world/oil-gives-kurds-a-path-to-independence-and-conflict-with-baghdad.html?_r=0), accessed 30.7.2015





# **Kurdish political parties in Iran**

*Simone Langanger*

Describing Kurdish political parties without referring to the borders drawn during and after World War I (Sykes-Picot Agreement), the Treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne as well as a brief overview of the history of the 20th century would most certainly be insufficient. Therefore, the issue is raised in this chapter but not elaborated as there are numerous publications on the matter.<sup>1</sup>

The Treaty of Sévres provided for the establishment of a sovereign state for the Kurds in Article 64, albeit with many conditions, while the Treaty of Lausanne failed to mention a Kurdish state. Iran was ruled by Reza Khan<sup>2</sup>, who seized power in February 1921 ending the Qajar dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Similar to Mustafa Kemal in Turkey, Reza Khan made an attempt to homogenize the society: “He [Reza Shah] tried to ban the Kurdish language and national dress and destroy tribal and other organizations through a program of executions and deportations.”<sup>4</sup> Most important was the centralization of the state which led to the repression of tribal autonomy and restrictions on nomadism. Evidently, the Kurds were affected by these measures but as enforcing state authority proved difficult the old game of playing off tribes and rivaling leaders against each other was reactivated. Rebellious Kurdish tribes were able to cross the border into Iraq when the pressure of the central government became too strong and vice versa Iraqi Kurds crossed into Iranian territory to avoid British persecution. This led to a situation where Iran used Iraqi Kurds against the Iraqi government, while Iraq supported Kurdish opposition to the Shah.<sup>5</sup> A tactic used more than once in Kurdish history.

The nomadic way of living of many Iranian Kurds created problems for the Iranian state in terms of military service and taxation. Resistance was widespread – especially against disarming the

tribes. Near the borders disarmament was virtually impossible, as tribesmen would store weapons in Iraq and retrieve them when needed. In some cases state authorities used force against the - not only Kurdish - tribes, which included the killing of tribal leaders, resettlement from Kurdistan to other regions of Iran, the confiscation of herds or restrictions of movement. Towards the end of the 1930s the Kurds in Iran were to a great extent subdued. The power of tribal leaders was diminished and freedom of movement was restricted, but tribal structures were not completely eliminated.<sup>6</sup> Although Iran was officially neutral during World War II it maintained close relations to Nazi Germany. After Germany's attack of the Soviet Union parts of Iran were occupied by British and Soviet troops. This led to a loss of authority of the administration in Tehran and Reza Shah abdicated in 1941 in favor of his son Mohammed Reza Shah. Soviet interests mainly focused on Northwest Persia (= South Azerbaijan) with its rich oil reserves. Attempts to gain autonomy in the Iranian region of Azerbaijan were supported by the Soviets and the Communist Party Tudeh was established in 1941. Four years later, in 1945, the Azerbaijan People's Government was built under Soviet protection. One year later the Republic of Kurdistan was established in Mahabad<sup>7</sup> with Soviet support,<sup>8</sup> but did not last for a long time.

## **Developments**

### **Republic of Kurdistan / Republic of Mahabad**

After World War II Iran became the focal point for Kurdish hopes.<sup>9</sup> At the time Iran was occupied by the Soviets in the north and British troops in the south. The small city of Mahabad was situated in a territory formally under Tehran's control but was in fact more or less free from interference by central authorities.<sup>10</sup> These circumstances led to the establishment of Komala-I-Zhian-Kurd (Committee of the Life of Kurdistan) in September 1942<sup>11</sup> by a group of officials, merchants, officers and teachers in a small city called Mahabad.<sup>12</sup>

The Komala was formed by a group of fifteen local citizens, aged

nineteen to fifty, who had sworn an oath to never betray the Kurdish nation and to work for self-government. They represented urban pan-Kurdish nationalism and an alternative to the hitherto predominant tribalism.<sup>13</sup>

In 1946, Moscow encouraged the Kurds to establish their own Kurdish republic but abandoned them a year later for a profitable oil deal with Tehran.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it was the first time in recent history that Kurds managed to establish their own state-like entity even though it was short-lived. The Kurdish national anthem and the Kurdish flag were created and Mulla Mustafa Barzani came to Mahabad and took command over the troops of the republic.<sup>15</sup> A notable figure of this time in Mahabad was Qazi Muhammad, a political and religious leader<sup>16</sup> and a hereditary judge who set up a militia to protect the town from raids by more predatory tribal gangs.<sup>17</sup> Qazi Muhammad was not a founding member of Komala. He joined the group in 1944 despite prior concerns of the Central Committee of Komala that he would take control; a suspicion that proved to be correct as would be revealed later.<sup>18</sup> In 1945 the Komala was renamed in Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) at the behest of the Soviets.<sup>19</sup>

The party's programme consisted of the following points: the Kurds in Iran should have freedom and self-government in the administration of their local affairs and obtain autonomy within the limits of the Iranian state; the Kurdish language should be the medium of education and administration; a provincial council for Kurdistan should be elected to supervise state and social matters; all government officials should be Kurds; revenue collected in Kurdistan should be spent there; the development of the local economy, public health and education; unity and fraternity with the Azerbaijani people; and the establishment of a single law for peasants and notables.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the "Azerbaijani people" it has to be mentioned that

the Soviets also helped with the establishment of the so called Azerbaijan People's Government in the territory of Iranian Azerbaijan. It "...assumed authority for all of eastern (Iranian) Azerbaijan. From the outset it had the trappings of a Soviet-backed regime, including a proclamation of land reform and a secret police force. These events created pressure on Qazi Muhammad to follow suit or risk being outflanked by younger, more militant nationalist elements in Mahabad."<sup>21</sup> Qazi Muhammad proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan<sup>22</sup> and became head of the Republic on 22nd of January 1946.<sup>23</sup> He was dressed in a Soviet-style uniform and a turban when he announced the Republic.<sup>24</sup> This may be perceived as a hint of the promised Soviet military support. But the supply of military equipment was rather half-hearted: "Indeed Soviet material support was much more limited than many Kurds had hoped for: a vital printing press arrived, together with a supply of rifles and pistols but there were no tanks."<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned, the Republic of Mahabad did not last long. The Soviets were in pursuit of oil concessions from Tehran and as soon as they obtained them they left the Azerbaijan People's Government and the Republic of Mahabad to fend for themselves. The city of Mahabad was recaptured by Iranian troops on 27th of December in 1946. Qazi Muhammad and 27 of his fellow soldiers were hanged on 30th of March 1947.<sup>26</sup> The Kurdish dream of autonomy and self-administration came to an abrupt end, but the short-lived republic proofed the ability of the Kurdish people for self-rule and Mahabad became a symbol for these aspirations.

### **Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI / PDKI)**

After the collapse of the Republic of Mahabad, less than a year after its establishment, many KDPI leaders were imprisoned or executed, including Qazi Muhammad, and as a result the KDPI went underground.<sup>27</sup> KDPI's traditional heartland was around Mahabad and Urumiya with a mostly Surani-speaking population.<sup>28</sup> The end of the Republic of Mahabad was a substantial setback for the KDPI.

However, the Kurdish movement in Iran was not dead. Although the situation for the Kurds improved at the end of the 1940s and beginning 1950s under Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, the Kurdish movement was unable to benefit from the situation.<sup>29</sup> In the 1952 parliamentary elections the population of Mahabad voted predominantly for candidates connected to the KDPI, but the election was later declared invalid. After Mosaddeq was overthrown, the repression by the Shah regime intensified considerably and lasted until the Islamic Revolution in 1979.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the KDPI and the Marxist Tudeh Party came under serious pressure and in the 1960s and 1970s both parties were banned and large numbers of their members imprisoned. Marxist ideas influenced KDPI members and, due to the repression in Iran, KDPI had to operate from Iraq. Additionally, 'Mahabad hero' Barzani returned from exile in Moscow and was officially recognized as the Kurdish leader. Iranian Kurds were impressed and as a result abandoned the social-reformist alignment of the KDPI in favor of Barzani's traditionalist-nationalist perspective. It was also Barzani who initiated the fusion of KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq) and KDPI but the alliance did not last long because of factional struggles between leftists and traditionalists. Barzani and his Iranian followers – who represented the traditionalist wing – won and as a result the left wing of the party was excluded at the party congress in 1964<sup>31,32</sup> Meanwhile, Barzani had to fight Baghdad again and was supported by the Shah in this endeavor. The price for this alliance was to put an end to the fight of Iranian Kurds against the Iranian government. Barzani agreed but not all Iranian Kurds followed his decision and continued their struggle against the Shah. 18 months later the uprising was quelled by the Iranian army with support of Barzani's Peshmerga troops. Again Iranian and Iraqi Kurds were played off against each other – as it had happened before when conflicts between Iran and Iraq broke out.<sup>33</sup> The dead KDPI-fighters were celebrated as martyrs and reinvigorated the leftist wing in the Kurdish movement. This fight within the KDPI came to an end in 1971, when Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou became General Secretary of the party<sup>34</sup> during the third conference of the KDPI.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1970s, under the direction of its new leader, respected Kurdish intellectual Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the party joined the uprisings against the Shah. However, soon after Ayatollah Khomeini had seized power in 1979, Khomeini declared what he termed a 'holy war' on the Kurds of Iran. This resulted in the deaths of over 10,000 Kurds.<sup>36</sup>

Ghassemlou remained "in this post until he was assassinated in Vienna in 1989."<sup>37</sup>

On March 6 1975 an agreement between Iraq and Iran was signed in Algeria. Based on this agreement the Iranian regime stopped its support of the Iraqi Kurds, with Iraq then ceding control of the Shatt al-Arab to Iran. As a result of this agreement, Kurdish resistance against Iraq ceased overnight and, by the middle of March, the Kurdish fighters either surrendered to the Iraqi army or took refuge in Iran. In turn, the Iraqi regime restricted the activities of the Iranian KDP in Iraq and forbade the party to publish its journal, Kurdistan, in Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

Most of the Kurds in Iran knew that they could not realize their dream of an independent country at this point in time because five countries (Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria and the Soviet Union) would have to give up parts of their territory.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the KDPI redefined its objectives and found a new slogan:

(...) The right of self-determination for the Kurdish people within the framework of Iran; the struggle against the political, economic, military and cultural influences of imperialism and the establishment of a socialist society "responsive to the specific conditions in our country." Its "strategic slogan" calls for the less distant goal of "autonomy for Iranian Kurdistan within the framework of a democratic Iran."<sup>40</sup>

In the 1970s the KDPI allied with other groups – Islamic or Marxist

– in fighting the Iranian government. The most important of them were Mujahidin-I Islami and the Fida'in-I Khalq.<sup>41</sup> The Kurds joined the uprising against the Shah because they hoped to enforce their rights – especially the right of autonomy in a democratically ruled Iran.<sup>42</sup> At the beginning of the uprising against the Shah KDPI leaders returned from exile or were released from prison. “They built up a strong party organization and – with the help of Kurdish army officers who joined them – created a military organization. The KDPI soon established itself as the Kurdish organization most firmly rooted in the population, especially in the area that had comprised the Mahabad Republic in 1946.”<sup>43</sup> In 1979 Khomeini labeled the KDPI as the “devil’s party”<sup>44</sup>, forcing the KDPI underground again.<sup>45</sup>“In 1980, a split occurred in the party leadership. The pro-Tudeh cadres, following the Tudeh Party’s policy of accommodation [sic!] with Khomeini, clashed with Ghassemlu and broke away. Only small numbers followed them.”<sup>46</sup> It took the Iranian government several years and many casualties to retake control of the Kurdish areas. Negotiations for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question continued but no agreement was reached. The KDPI suggested that if the Iranian government accepts the Kurdish demands for autonomy, the KDPI would join Iranian troops in the fight against Iraq. The suggestion was ignored and attacks against the Kurds were intensified, leading to a retreat of the KDPI to Iraqi territory and to a relocation of their headquarters there in 1983.<sup>47</sup> During the Iran-Iraq war Iraqi Kurds supported Iran, while on the other side the Iranian Kurds – respectively Kurdish organizations – were forced to retreat to Iraqi territory but refused to collaborate with the Iraqi government. They were, however, also dependent on Baghdad in financial and political terms.<sup>48</sup> Another issue was the disunity of the Kurdish parties exemplified by the formation of a new Komala (Komalay Shorshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistani Eran – The Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of the Iranian Kurdistan) and the subsequent fighting between Komala and KDPI in the mid-1980s.<sup>49</sup>

Another fatal blow to the Kurdish movement in Iran was the civil



war between the KDP and Komala that started in 1984. After the split in the KDP following its eighth congress in 1988, the newly emerged KDPI (Revolutionary Leadership) declared a unilateral ceasefire with Komala. However, the war between the KDPI and Komala went on a few years more. The split of the KDPI in 1988 following the eighth party congress divided the leadership of the party into two. Worse was to come. The end of the Iraq-Iran War on August 20, 1988 affected the already unbalanced equation of power between the Iranian government and the Kurds. The assassination in Vienna of the KDPI's leader, Dr. Abd al-Rahman Qasimlu, less than a year after the end of the war on July 13, 1989, showed the determination of the government to silence any opposition to its authority. Qasimlu's assassination, followed only three years later by the assassination of his successor Dr. Sadiq Sharafkandi in Berlin on September 17, 1992, dealt a heavy blow to the KDPI.<sup>50</sup>

With Ghassemlou's death in 1989 the KDPI domination of Kurdish politics ended and nowadays the KDPI is a shadow of its former self.<sup>51</sup> In the 1990s the most important Kurdish achievement was the formation of a de facto autonomous entity which is today called 'Kurdistan Regional Government' (KRG) in Iraqi Kurdistan. Due to the relationship between KRG and the Iranian Regime the Iranian Kurds were prevented from fighting against the Iranian government from Iraqi-Kurdish territory. Additionally, in 1996, the reformist Muhammad Khatami was elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the situation for minorities improved; during this period both political parties – KDPI and Komala – lost popularity. Under Ahmadinejad – he was elected president in 2005 and reelected in 2009 in a strongly disputed election – the situation for Kurds and their political organizations deteriorated again. At the beginning of Ahmadinejad's rule riots against the government took place in Kurdish cities and a young Kurdish activist was killed by Iranian forces in Mahabad.<sup>52</sup>

On 9 July 2005 Iranian forces killed a young Kurdish activist,

Shwane Seyyed Qadir, in Mahabad. The news of his murder and the publication of photographs of his mutilated body gave rise to protests in Mahabad. There were also demonstrations in other Kurdish cities; around twenty were killed by the security forces and hundreds were arrested.<sup>53</sup>

In 2006 the KDPI split up again and both parties insist that they represent the former KDPI and use the name for their newly-created party.<sup>54</sup> According to the self-description on the official Website of the party “the PDKI [KDPI] is a democratic socialist party and (...) a member of the Socialist International (SI). For us, democratic socialism entails the belief that all human beings, whether as individuals or as members of nations, should be free and equal in all spheres of life. The PDKI’s policies on economic, political and social issues are based on these beliefs.”<sup>55</sup> The highest decision making body of the KDPI party structures is the Central Committee. It is elected at the congress – which is held every four years – and consists of 25 permanent members and 10 substitute members. By now, the KDPI had held 15 congresses. Seven members of the Central Committee are elected to the Political Bureau, including the Secretary General. The chairpersons of the Democratic Women’s Union of Iranian Kurdistan, the Democratic Youth Union of Kurdistan and the Democratic Students Union of Kurdistan are automatically members of the Central Committee.<sup>56</sup>

Conclusively, the KDPI is banned in Iran and thus not able to operate there; its headquarters are located in the KRG area and therefore, no attacks are undertaken by the KDPI in Iran. The disunity and discord within the party remains leading to a loss of influence within the Kurdish population.

### **Komala**

Komala - not to be confused with the above mentioned Komala-I-Zhian-Kurd (Committee of the Life of Kurdistan) - was established in Tehran in 1969 as a Marxist Kurdish movement.<sup>57</sup> The Revolutionary

Organization of Toilers of Kurdistan, better known as Komala, consisted of radical intellectuals.<sup>58</sup> The word 'Komala' means 'society' in Kurdish.<sup>59</sup> After the Islamic Revolution it attracted many of the young, educated, urban Kurds because of its radicalism as well as peasants because the group aimed at forming peasant unions<sup>60</sup>. Komala was always more uncompromising than the KDPI and therefore strongly critical of the policies of KDPI.<sup>61</sup> They labeled KDPI leaders as 'bourgeois nationalists', although many of Komala's founders originated from notable families.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the Komala saw itself "as the vanguard of the proletariat and the poor peasantry"<sup>63</sup>. Komala's heartland is south of the KDPI's, around the Sanandaj-Marivan area.<sup>64</sup> In 1983 Komala joined other leftist groups and founded the Iranian Communist Party (ICP). As the ICP was short-lived, Komala soon left the Communist Party and continued working under its original name again.<sup>65</sup> In the mid-1980s clashes between KDPI and Komala occurred, referred to above as the civil war between these two Kurdish factions.<sup>66</sup> Komala intended to create an autonomous Kurdish region based on the northwestern Iranian provinces of Kurdistan, Ilam, Kermanshah and Western Azerbaijan. In the 1980s Komala was driven out of Iran into Iraq and has its base in the Kurdish city of Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq ever since.<sup>67</sup> Similar to the KDPI, Komala split a few times:

There are now five organizations that are active under the same name of Komala: 1) The Kurdistan Organization of the Iranian Communist Party-Komalah (note the "h" at the end of the name, apparently influenced by the Persian pronunciation of the name) under the leadership of Ibrahim Alizadeh; 2) The Revolutionary Organization of Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan, under the leadership of Abdullah Mohtadi. In the 12th congress of Komala in August 2007, Komala modified its name in Persian to Hezb-e Komala-ye Kordestan-e Iran (Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan); the Kurdish version remained unchanged. (...) 3) The Organization of Toilers of Kurdistan, led by Omar Ilkhanizade; 4) Komalay Shorshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistanî Eran — Rewti Yekgrtnewe (The

Revolutionary Organization of Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan – Reunification Faction), led by Abdulla Konaposhi. This faction split to form Mohtadi's Komala on April 29, 2008, accusing Abdullah Mohtadi of non-democratic management of Komala and a policy of cooperation with Reza Pahlavi and the monarchists in Iran. (...) 5) On July 15, 2009 a group of ICP cadres announced that they, following their split from the ICP, would work as Rewti Sosialisti Komala (Socialist Faction of Komala).<sup>68</sup>

Initially, the Komala had quite radical demands, like the unconditional right of self-determination or an autonomous Kurdish state.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, it “endorses proletarian struggle against capitalism, remarks in passing that revisionism (as represented by the Soviet Union) is the greatest obstacle to this struggle, and presents as its objective a ‘revolutionary democratic republic’ based on sovereignty of the people (exercised through people’s Soviets).”<sup>70</sup> Nowadays, the creation of a ‘Greater Kurdistan’ or even secession from Iran is seen as ‘unrealistic’. Komala prefers the establishment of a ‘democratic, secular, federal Iran’ instead.<sup>71</sup> On the Website of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan a decision from the 9th congress of the party in 2001 is published mentioning a federation of states in Iran as an alternative to the present theocracy, respectively the velayat-e-faqih (rule by the jurisprudence):

Iran is not one nation, but a large and wide country with several nationalities, languages, cultures and contrasts. (...) Iran must guarantee a situation where local political discrimination has come to an end. It must also give guarantees that the people can participate in ruling their country, and these rights must be established by laws of the Iranian constitution. A future socialistic government of Iran will be based on equal rights and duties for all nationalities. Their voluntary participation in a federation of states is a guarantee for just treatment of all nationalities. The federation of states in Iran is an alternative which guarantees these rights and strengthens the solidarity and joint

consultation among Iranian groups of people.<sup>72</sup>

In the past Komala formed the strongest organization after the KDPI but today the party, similar to the KDPI, has become a shadow of its former self. It is banned in Iran and its base is located in KRG area.

### **Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK / PEJAK)**

PJAK started out in Iran in the late 1990s as an entirely peaceful student-based human rights movement. The group initially wanted to maintain and build a Kurdish national identity and prevent the Iranian government to redefine the Kurds as ethnic Persians or Aryans.<sup>73</sup> The group started launching attacks from the Kandil Mountains in 2004.<sup>74</sup> The party calls itself a political, social, and cultural movement with an armed wing.<sup>75</sup> Today it presents itself as “the only Kurdish party that managed to grow and is not dependent on the KRG (...), based in the Kandil Mountains in the border areas between Iran, Iraq and Turkey, where the KRG has no control.”<sup>76</sup> The founding of the party occurred at a time when other Kurdish Parties were not present in Iran and thus many young Iranian Kurds supported and joined the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party).<sup>77</sup>

The PKK later decided to organize its Iranian members in a separate party and PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) was founded in 2004. The established Iranian Kurdish political parties were suspicious of PJAK and refused to deal with it. However, the party quickly demonstrated its ability to operate militarily inside Iran and towards the end of 2006 most Kurdish political parties altered their rhetoric. There has since been frequent contact. The leader of PJAK, Rahman Haji Ahmadi, has denied any relationship with the US and Israel, as claimed by the Iranian government, but there have been numerous reports of contact between the US and PJAK.<sup>78</sup>

It can be said that PJAK stepped into a power vacuum left by KDPI

and Komala. Because of the splits of the other Kurdish parties, it seems that the support of the Kurds shifted to PJAK.<sup>79</sup> PJAK is a leftist party and can be seen as a 'sister party' of the PKK<sup>80</sup>, both sharing a base in Kandil.<sup>81</sup> Although, PJAK is denying formal ties to the PKK, it regards Abdullah Öcalan as its leader and it imitates Öcalan's talk of "democratic confederalism, a blurry form of political autonomy"<sup>82</sup>:

PJAK shares the same leadership and logistics of the PKK militants in Turkey, as well as allegiance to its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, but unlike the PKK PJAK fights Iranian government forces rather than the Turkish government forces.<sup>83</sup>

The party itself claims that it operates only in the Kurdish region of Iran. PJAK states as well that it operates only against military targets and never targets civilians – contrary to the PKK<sup>84</sup> – and the Iranian Regime has never accused the PJAK of attacking civilians.<sup>85</sup> According to the party most of its members are Kurds from Iran but also Kurds from other neighboring countries as well as the diaspora. There are reports that also Arabs, Baluchis and even Persians are members. The PJAK calls for a 'peaceful and democratic solution' to the Kurdish question<sup>86</sup>, while Iran regards it as a terrorist organization.<sup>87</sup> PJAK is the last Kurdish group fighting for self-rule in Iran<sup>88</sup>, and it has carried out numerous attacks in the country.<sup>89</sup> In 2011 PJAK and Iran signed a ceasefire<sup>90</sup>, but skirmishes between Iranian Special Forces and the PJAK's military wing still occur. In the view of PJAK the group exercises its right of self-defense while claiming that the Iranian government is the aggressor.<sup>91</sup> Since the ceasefire in September 2011 the number of clashes has increased.<sup>92</sup> The last bomb attacks occurred in the spring of 2015 when the Iranian Army shelled PJAK quarters in Kandil area.<sup>93</sup>

According to estimations PJAK has about 3.000 fighters.<sup>94</sup> Concerning the structure of the PJAK, its Germany-based leader Haji Ahmadi stated that the party holds a congress every three years and is organized in four governing bodies: the Congress, the President, an

Assembly and a Coordinating Board. There are also subcommittees, arranged according to four themes: ideology, politics, social issues and defense. Furthermore it has a Judicial Committee which acts as an internal court. Since its third Congress in 2008 PJAK has adopted an ideology of 'democratic liberation'. This means the goal is to create a 'democratic system in Iran and democratic autonomy for Kurdistan'. The PJAK also seeks to "achieve a radical democracy and to be able to establish a democratic confederation in eastern Kurdistan"<sup>95</sup>. The PJAK has an armed wing which is called HRK (Hezen Rojhelati Kurdistan), the military forces of Eastern Kurdistan. PJAK also maintains units of female fighters. Its women's branch is called The Union of the Women of Eastern Kurdistan. Its youth movement is called The Union of the Youth of Eastern Kurdistan. PJAK is a member of the Kurdistan Communities Union<sup>96</sup> (Koma Civaken Kurdistan or KCK) and the Kurdistan National Congress<sup>97</sup> (KNK). The party runs a satellite TV station based in Norway called Newroz.<sup>98</sup> PJAK founded the KODAR (Organization of Free and Democratic Society for East Kurdistan), which called for dialogue with Tehran concerning an autonomous self-administration.<sup>99</sup>

PJAK does not openly promote the creation of a single independent Kurdish state. Instead, they favor replacing Iran's velayat-e-faqih (rule by the jurisprudent) system of clerical government with a democratic and highly federalized system which would effectively grant self-rule not only to Kurds, but also to Azeri, Baloch and Arab regions.<sup>100</sup>

Regarding the struggle of the Iranian government against the PJAK, Dr. Walter Posch, senior researcher at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management (IFK) of the Austrian Defense Academy (Austrian Armed Forces), stated in an April 2015 interview that "[t]he Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) has been the "most successful" agency with regard to operations against the PJAK. In fact, it is the National Security Council that coordinates which state entity should deal with a given group in a certain situation. For example, this could be local

army units that may be deployed against the PJAK as part of their border guard duties. There are many rivalries among the security agencies with regard to competencies, although these conflicts are more apparent on the “Baloch front” than on the “Kurdish front”.<sup>101</sup>

The PJAK can today be seen as the most active political party inside Iran, although it is considered a terrorist organization by the Iranian government and therefore banned. After taking up the armed struggle in 2004, both parties signed a ceasefire in 2011 but clashes were still ongoing.

### **Participation in the political process**

The participation in a legal political process is impossible for the above mentioned Kurdish parties. Most of the Kurdish parties are considered as separatist and/or terrorist organizations by the Iranian government and are thus banned. The mere presumption of being a member of any of these parties can lead to long-term prison sentences. Many Kurds are among the victims of political persecution with frequent charges of terrorism – in particular the alleged support of PJAK – and often disproportionate degrees of punishment.<sup>102</sup> While all of the three described parties are located in Northern Iraq, only Komala’s and KDPI’s headquarters are based in the KRG area. Therefore, both had to stop their military activities against Iran as a precondition for being permitted to operate in the KRG area.<sup>103</sup> As mentioned above one of the biggest impediments for united Kurdish efforts is the disunity within the Kurdish community – respectively the Kurdish parties. KDPI’s and Komala’s history is characterized by internal discord and allegations of conspiracy or collaboration with the enemy are also widespread.<sup>104</sup> What unites the Kurdish parties is the leftist alignment (in various forms of radicalism) and their demand for a self-determined Kurdistan within Iran. This can be derived from Ghassemlou’s KDPI-slogan “Autonomy for Kurdistan and Democracy for Iran”<sup>105</sup>. Internal disunity, longstanding political repression and dependence on government jobs weakened the



Kurdish political parties.<sup>106</sup> While Komala and KDPI are based in the KRG area and have therefore ended their armed struggle against Iran, the PJAK is the only party which still clashes with the Iranian security forces. According to its self-portrayal PJAK is not breaking the ceasefire signed in 2011, as they consider Iran as the perpetrator and their armed actions as self-defense.<sup>108</sup> Both the Iraqi and the Iranian government instrumentalized, supported and used the Kurds for their respective purposes. This is a recurring theme in Kurdish history resulting in numerous Kurdish casualties.<sup>109</sup> The Kurdish dilemma also becomes apparent as Kurds constitute a minority in Iran in various aspects: they are an ethnic minority but also a religious minority as most Kurds are Sunnis<sup>110</sup>. Moreover, the Kurds are also a linguistic minority:

[S]peakers of Kurdish, a subdivision of the Iranic branch of the Indo-European family of languages, which is akin to Persian. Modern Kurdish divides into two major groups: 1) the Kurmanji group and, 2) the Gurani group. These are supplemented by many sub-dialects. The most popular vernacular is that of Kurmanji (or Kirmancha), spoken by about three-quarters of the Kurds today. Kurmanji [is] divided into North Kurmanji (also called Bahdinani, with around 15 million speakers, primarily in Turkey, Syria, and the former Soviet Union) and South Kurmanji (also called Sorani, with about 6 million speakers, primarily in Iraq and Iran).<sup>111</sup>

Also, the infrastructure in the Kurdish areas is underdeveloped and no great efforts are made by the Iranian government to change this situation. To be fair – this is also the case in other minority-inhabited areas in Iran, such as the Arab or Baloch region and others.

The scope of political work within Iran is rather limited for the mentioned political parties because of the ban. Therefore, they have increasingly focused on civil society activities such as working in NGOs in recent years. Moreover, the most common types of political

activities in Iran are printing and distributing political materials, broadcasting radio and TV programs, conveying messages via the internet etc.<sup>112</sup> Only PJAK's military wing still engages in military activities against Iranian forces in the areas bordering Iraq.<sup>113</sup> In comparison to Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the situation of political Kurdish activity in Iran seems to stagnate as it is entirely operating underground.

*Simone Langanger is a country analyst at the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum in Vienna.*

- <sup>1</sup> Furthermore the question of how Kurdish identity might be defined – e.g. by ethnicity, language etc. will not be discussed further in this article. Its aim is to explain the situation which led to the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iran and to outline which different Kurdish parties have been involved in Kurdish politics in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning 21st century in Iran. Some background knowledge is inevitably necessary to understand their goals, structure and last but not least their frequent fragmentations.
- <sup>2</sup> Known as Reza Shah Pahlavi since 1925.
- <sup>3</sup> Strohmeier, Martin; Yalcin-Heckmann, Lale (2010): *Die Kurden. Geschichte, Politik, Kultur*, 3. Aufl. München: Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, p. 89, 92.
- <sup>4</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>5</sup> Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 146f. / cf. McDowall, David (1997): *A modern history of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, pp. 222.
- <sup>6</sup> Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 147. / McDowall: p 223-226.
- <sup>7</sup> Also known as Republic of Mahabad.
- <sup>8</sup> Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 147-151.
- <sup>9</sup> Deschner, Günther (2003): *Die Kurden. Volk ohne Staat. Geschichte und Hoffnung*, München: F.A. Herbig Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, p. 20f.
- <sup>10</sup> Nirumand, Bahman (Hg.) (1991): *Die kurdische Tragödie. Die Kurden – verfolgt im eigenen Land*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, p. 112.
- <sup>11</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>12</sup> Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 148.
- <sup>13</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>14</sup> Deschner: p. 15.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 21.
- <sup>16</sup> Kurdistanica.com (12.3.2008): Qazi Muhammad [1893-1947], <http://www.kurdistanica.com/?q=node/31>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>17</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>18</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ahmadzadeh, Hashem; Stansfield, Gareth (Winter 2010): *The Political, Cultural and Military Re-Awakening of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iran*, in: Project Muse. Middle East Journal, Volume 64, Number 1, p. 14.
- <sup>23</sup> Kurdistanica.com (12.3.2008): Qazi Muhammad [1893-1947], <http://www.kurdistanica.com/?q=node/31>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>24</sup> Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 151.
- <sup>25</sup> Kurdistan Tribune (12.6.2011): Mahabad – the first independent Kurdish republic, <http://kurdistantribune.com/2011/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/>, accessed 2.7.2015
- <sup>26</sup> Nirumand: p. 116.
- <sup>27</sup> Rubin Center (19.8.2013): *The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide*, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 6.7.2015
- <sup>28</sup> McDowall: p. 265, 267.
- <sup>29</sup> Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 153.

- 30 Nirumand: p. 118.
- 31 This was the second party congress out of 15 until now. Cf: Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (n.d.): About, <http://pdki.org/english/about/>, accessed 10.7.2015
- 32 Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: pp. 153. / cf. McDowall: pp 252.
- 33 Nirumand: pp. 119.
- 34 Strohmeier, Yalcin-Heckmann: p. 154.
- 35 Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: p 16.
- 36 Yildiz, Kerim (2007): *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future*, London: Pluto Press & Kurdish Human Rights Project, p. 86-87, in: Rubin Center (19.8.2013): *The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide*, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 6.7.2015
- 37 Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: pp 16.
- 38 Ibid. p. 17.
- 39 Nirumand: p 123.
- 40 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): *Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: *Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars* McDowall: pp. 252.
- 41 McDowall: pp. 252.
- 42 Nirumand: p. 121.
- 43 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): *Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: *Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars* Nirumand: p. 125.
- 44 Nirumand: p. 125.
- 45 Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (n.d.): *Dr. Abdol-Rahman Ghassemlou*, <http://www.iranhrc.org/english/publications/reports/3152-no-safe-haven-iran-s-global-assassination-campaign.html#4.4>, accessed 10.7.2015
- 46 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): *Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: *Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars* Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: pp. 19.
- 47 Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: pp. 19.
- 48 Nirumand: pp. 128.
- 49 Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: pp. 19.
- 50 Ibid. pp. 20.
- 51 Al Monitor (11.5.2015): *Iran's Kurds rise up as their leaders remain divided*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-turkey-syria-kurds-iranian-kurds-rise-up.html>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 52 Ibid. pp. 21.
- 53 Stansfield, Gareth; Lowe, Robert; Ahmadzadeh, Hashem (12.2007): *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*. Chatham House, Middle East Programme Briefing Paper 07/04, p. 7, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/bp1207kurds.pdf>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 54 *Kurdish Globe* (12.12.2006): *Iran's major Kurdish party split*, <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/article/3DC6EB784060A07123376AE1FB633ACB/Iran-s-major-Kurdish-party-split.html>, accessed 13.7.2015
- 55 PDKI – Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (n.d.): About, <http://pdki.org/english/about/>, accessed 22.7.2015
- 56 PDKI – Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (n.d.): About, <http://pdki.org/english/about/>, accessed 22.7.2015 / Rubin Center (19.8.2013): *The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide*, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 22.7.2015
- 57 Rubin Center (19.8.2013): *The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide*, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 58 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1994): *The Kurdish Experience*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer189/kurdish-experience>, accessed 22.7.2015, in: *Middle East Report 189 (07/08 1994): The Kurdish Experience*
- 59 Rubin Center (19.8.2013): *The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey:*

- a research guide, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 60 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1994):The Kurdish Experience, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer189/kurdish-experience>, accessed 22.7.2015, in: Middle East Report 189 (07/08 1994): The Kurdish Experience
- 61 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars
- 62 McDowall: p. 265.
- 63 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq, [http://www.academia.edu/707652/The\\_Kurds\\_between\\_Iran\\_and\\_Iraq](http://www.academia.edu/707652/The_Kurds_between_Iran_and_Iraq), accessed 23.7.2015, in: Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars
- 64 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars / cf. McDowall: pp. 265.
- 65 Rubin Center (19.8.2013): The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 66 Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: p 20.
- 67 Jamestown Foundation (24.4.2009): Iraq-based Komala party describes the struggle for Iranian Kurdistan, Terrorism Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 10, Briefs, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Bwords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews%5Bany\\_of\\_the\\_words%5D=komala&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=34894&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=74e621dd90f7cea36a76dde27571f4b2](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Bwords%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=komala&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34894&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=74e621dd90f7cea36a76dde27571f4b2), accessed 21.7.2015
- 68 Ahmadzadeh, Stansfield: p. 23.
- 69 Nirumand: pp. 137.
- 70 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars
- 71 Merip - Middle East Research and Information Project (07/08 1986): Major Kurdish Organizations in Iran, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer141/major-kurdish-organizations-iran>, accessed 10.7.2015, in: Middle East Report 141 (07/08 1986): Hidden Wars
- 72 Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (n.d.): The necessity of changing the political system of government into a federal republic of states in [Iran], <http://www.komala.org/english/documents/item/53-the-necessity-of-changing-the-political-system-of-government-into-a-federal-republic-of-states-in.html>, accessed 22.7.2015
- 73 Brandon, James (15.6.2006): Iran's Kurdish Threat: PIAK. Jamestown Foundation. Terrorism Monitor Volume: 4 Issue: 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=805&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no\\_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=805&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB), accessed 20.7.2015
- 74 Pulitzer Center (7.11.2011): Iran-Kurdish Rebel Ceasefire Holds Amid Skepticism, <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/iraq-cease-fire-kurdish-rebels-iran-government>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 75 Rubin Center (19.8.2013): The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 76 Al Monitor (14.1.2014): Iranian Kurdish parties prefer dialogue with government, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/iranian-kurdish-parties-waning-support-exiles-pkk-turkey.html#>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 77 Al Monitor (14.1.2014): Iranian Kurdish parties prefer dialogue with government, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/iranian-kurdish-parties-waning-support-exiles-pkk-turkey.html#>, accessed 15.7.2015 / Stansfield, Lowe, Ahmadzadeh: p. 7.
- 78 Stansfield, Lowe, Ahmadzadeh: p. 7.
- 79 Daily Star (12.5.2014): Iran plays a complex game with the Kurds. In: ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin Information and Asylum Research and Documentation (7.2015): Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of

- Law. COI Compilation, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/4543\\_1436510544\\_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/4543_1436510544_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf), accessed 20.7.2015
- 80 Global Security (22.10.2014): PJAK / PEJAK, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pjak.htm>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 81 Rubin Center (19.8.2013): The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 20.7.2015
- 82 Al Monitor (11.5.2015): Iran's Kurds rise up as their leaders remain divided, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-turkey-syria-kurds-iranian-kurds-rise-up.html>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 83 TRAC - Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (n.d.): Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/party-free-life-kurdistan-pjak>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 84 The National (23.6.2011): Dreaming and fighting, the Kurdish guerillas who say 'to be free you must accept suffering', <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/dreaming-and-fighting-the-kurdish-guerillas-who-say-to-be-free-you-must-accept-suffering#full>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 85 Brandon, James (15.6.2006): Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK. Jamestown Foundation. Terrorism Monitor Volume: 4 Issue: 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=805&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no\\_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=805&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB), accessed 20.7.2015
- 86 The National (23.6.2011): Dreaming and fighting, the Kurdish guerillas who say 'to be free you must accept suffering', <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/dreaming-and-fighting-the-kurdish-guerillas-who-say-to-be-free-you-must-accept-suffering#full>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 87 Global Security (22.10.2014): PJAK / PEJAK, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pjak.htm>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 88 Al Monitor (11.5.2015): Iran's Kurds rise up as their leaders remain divided, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-turkey-syria-kurds-iranian-kurds-rise-up.html>, accessed 15.7.2015
- 89 Global Security (22.10.2014): PJAK / PEJAK, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pjak.htm>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 90 Pulitzer Center (7.11.2011): Iran-Kurdish Rebel Ceasefire Holds Amid Skepticism, <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/iraq-cease-fire-kurdish-rebels-iran-government>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 91 KN – Kurdische Nachrichten (23.5.2015): PJAK-Einheiten töten einen iranischen Soldaten, <http://kurdischenachrichten.com/2015/05/pjak-einheiten-toeten-einen-iranischen-soldaten/>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 92 Landinfo (6.6.2013): Temanotat. Iran: PJAK – Parti for et fritt liv I Kurdistan, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/1788\\_1386248886\\_2390-1.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1788_1386248886_2390-1.pdf), accessed 17.7.2015
- 93 Kurdish Daily News (27.4.2015): Iranian army shells PKK and PJAK bases in Kandil, <http://kurdishdailynews.org/2015/04/27/iranian-army-shells-pkk-and-pjak-bases-in-kandil/>, accessed 16.7.2015
- 94 Brandon, James (15.6.2006): Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK. Jamestown Foundation. Terrorism Monitor Volume: 4 Issue: 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=805&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no\\_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=805&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB), accessed 28.7.2015 / cf. Ekurd Daily (11.12.2012): Iranian Kurdish PJAK says Komala, KDPI uncovering its members in Iran, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/12/irankurd900.htm>, accessed 28.7.2015
- 95 Landinfo (6.6.2013): Temanotat. Iran: PJAK – Parti for et fritt liv I Kurdistan. In: ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin Information and Asylum Research and Documentation (7.2015): Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law. COI Compilation, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/4543\\_1436510544\\_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/4543_1436510544_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf), accessed 17.7.2015
- 96 The KCK is an organization founded by the PKK to put into practice Abdullah Öcalan's ideology of Democratic Confederalism.
- 97 The KKK is a coalition of organizations from across Europe, formed by exiled Kurdish politicians, lawyers, and activists, working to promote and lobby for a peaceful political

- solution to the Kurdish Question. Its head office is located in Brussels.
- <sup>98</sup> Rubin Center (19.8.2013): The main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a research guide, <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/08/the-main-kurdish-political-parties-in-iran-iraq-syria-and-turkey-a-research-guide/>, accessed 20.7.2015
- <sup>99</sup> BPB – Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (10.12.2014): Kurdenkonflikt, <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/weltweit/innerstaatliche-konflikte/54641/kurdenkonflikt>, accessed 20.7.2015
- <sup>100</sup> Brandon, James (15.6.2006): Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK. Jamestown Foundation. Terrorism Monitor Volume: 4 Issue: 12, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=805&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no\\_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=805&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1#.VQA3C5sQFSB), accessed 20.7.2015
- <sup>101</sup> Dr. Walter Posch (13.4.2015): Interview. In: ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin Information and Asylum Research and Documentation (7.2015): Iran: Political Opposition Groups, Security Forces, Selected Human Rights Issues, Rule of Law. COI Compilation, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/4543\\_1436510544\\_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/4543_1436510544_accord-iran-coi-compilation-july-2015.pdf), accessed 20.7.2015
- <sup>102</sup> ÖB Teheran (10.2014): Asylländerbericht
- <sup>103</sup> DIS/DRC – Danish Immigration Service/Danish Refugee Council (30.9.2013): Iranian Kurds, On Conditions for Iranian Kurdish Parties in Iran and KRI, Activities in the Kurdish Area of Iran, Conditions in Border Area and Situation of Returnees from KRI to Iran, p. 13, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/1226\\_1380796700\\_fact-finding-iranian-kurds-2013.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1226_1380796700_fact-finding-iranian-kurds-2013.pdf), accessed 28.7.2015
- <sup>104</sup> Cf. Ekurd Daily (11.12.2012): Iranian Kurdish PJAK says Komala, KDPI uncovering its members in Iran, <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/12/irankurd900.htm>, accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>105</sup> Iran Human Rights and Democracy for Iran (I): Abdol-Rahman Qasemlu (Ghassemloo), <http://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/30421/abdol-rahman-qasemlu-ghassemloo>, accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>106</sup> Al Monitor (14.1.2014): Iranian Kurdish parties prefer dialogue with government, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/iranian-kurdish-parties-waning-support-exiles-pkk-turkey.html#>, accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>107</sup> Cf. PDKI – Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (n.d.): Kurdish Leader Mustafa Hijri Addressed Armed Struggle in an Interview, <http://pdki.org/english/kurdish-leader-mustafa-hijri-addressed-armed-struggle-in-an-interview/>, accessed 24.7.2015 / Cf. Steinberg, Guido (5.2011): Die neue Kurdenfrage. Irakisch-Kurdistan und seine Nachbarn. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2011\\_S12\\_sbg\\_ks.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2011_S12_sbg_ks.pdf), accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>108</sup> Cf. KN – Kurdische Nachrichten (23.5.2015): PJAK-Einheiten töten einen iranischen Soldaten, <http://kurdischenachrichten.com/2015/05/pjak-einheiten-toeten-einen-iranischen-soldaten/>, accessed 24.7.2015 / Cf. Steinberg, Guido (5.2011): Die neue Kurdenfrage. Irakisch-Kurdistan und seine Nachbarn. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2011\\_S12\\_sbg\\_ks.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/studien/2011_S12_sbg_ks.pdf), accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>109</sup> BPB – Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (10.12.2014): Kurdenkonflikt, <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/weltweit/innerstaatliche-konflikte/54641/kurdenkonflikt>, accessed 28.7.2015
- <sup>110</sup> Kurdistan Report (11/12 2013): Kurdistan Report Nr. 170. Für ein freies Kurdistan in einem demokratischen Mittleren Osten Report, [https://www.nadir.org/nadir/periodika/kurdistan\\_report/2013/170/170\\_ebook.pdf](https://www.nadir.org/nadir/periodika/kurdistan_report/2013/170/170_ebook.pdf), accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>111</sup> Foreign Policy Journal (22.4.2011): The Kurdish Issue, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/04/22/the-kurdish-issue/view-all/>, accessed 24.7.2015
- <sup>112</sup> DIS/DRC – Danish Immigration Service/Danish Refugee Council (30.9.2013): Iranian Kurds, On Conditions for Iranian Kurdish Parties in Iran and KRI, Activities in the Kurdish Area of Iran, Conditions in Border Area and Situation of Returnees from KRI to Iran, p. 13, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/1226\\_1380796700\\_fact-finding-iranian-kurds-2013.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1226_1380796700_fact-finding-iranian-kurds-2013.pdf), accessed 28.7.2015
- <sup>113</sup> Ibid.

# Kurds in the middle East



This map shows only the main areas of settlement of Kurds in the Middle East.  
 Source: ATLAS - Syria, [www.ecoi.net/atlas\\_syria.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/atlas_syria.pdf)



## *regiones et res publicae - Country Analysis Reports*

---

1

### **SOMALIA**

Security, Minorities & Migration

2

### **AFGHANISTAN**

2014 and beyond

3

### **PAKISTAN**

Challenges & Perspectives

4

### **THE KURDS**

History - Religion - Language - Politics

[www.bmi.gv.at](http://www.bmi.gv.at)

[www.staatendokumentation.at](http://www.staatendokumentation.at)

ISBN 978-3-9503643-6-1