

# Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle

**Middle East Report N°136** | 22 January 2013

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary.....  | i  |
| Recommendations.....  | iv |
| I. Introduction .....   | 1  |
| II. From Arab Uprising to Kurdish Opportunity .....                         | 6  |
| A. The Syrian Arab Republic and the Kurds .....                             | 6  |
| B. Local Stirrings.....   | 9  |
| C. Political Parties Take the Lead .....                                    | 11 |
| D. The PYD's Ascent .....   | 12 |
| III. Factional Rivalries.....   | 17 |
| A. Youth Committees .....   | 17 |
| B. The KNC: A Fractious Confederacy .....                                   | 18 |
| C. The PYD: Encumbering Ties to the PKK.....                                | 19 |
| IV. A Regional Tug of War .....   | 22 |
| A. Barzani as Self-Interested Marriage Broker .....                         | 22 |
| B. Turkey Leans In .....  | 28 |
| V. Growing Militarisation .....   | 31 |
| A. Escalating Intra-Kurdish Tensions.....                                   | 31 |
| B. The Struggle for Qamishli.....   | 33 |
| VI. Troubled Relations with the Non-Kurdish Opposition.....                 | 35 |
| A. The PYD: Staking Out an Independent Line .....                           | 37 |
| B. The KNC: A Frustrating Relationship with the Non-Kurdish Opposition..... | 38 |
| VII. Conclusion .....   | 41 |
| APPENDICES  |    |
| A. Map of Syria.....  | 42 |
| B. Diagram of PKK-related Parties.....                                      | 43 |
| C. Diagram of KRG-related Parties .....                                     | 44 |
| D. Glossary of Abbreviations .....  | 45 |

## *Executive Summary*

As Syria's conflict has expanded, the population in majority-Kurd areas has remained relatively insulated. Keeping a lower profile, it has been spared the brunt of regime attacks; over time, security forces withdrew to concentrate elsewhere. Kurdish groups stepped in to replace them: to stake out zones of influence, protect their respective areas, provide essential services and ensure an improved status for the community in a post-Assad Syria. Big gains could be reaped, yet cannot be taken for granted. Kurdish aspirations remain at the mercy of internal feuds, hostility with Arabs (evidenced by recent clashes) and regional rivalries over the Kurdish question. For Syria's Kurds, long-suppressed and denied basic rights, prudence dictates overcoming internal divisions, clarifying their demands and – even at the cost of hard compromises – agreement with any successor Syrian power structure to define and enshrine their rights. And it is time for their non-Kurdish counterparts to devise a credible strategy to reassure all Syrians that the new-order vision of the state, minority rights, justice and accountability is both tolerant and inclusive.

Ethnically and linguistically a distinct group, Syria's Kurds inhabit lands close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders, though several cities in other parts of the country, in particular Damascus and Aleppo, also have large Kurdish constituencies. Strictly speaking, theirs is not a region, whether politically – unlike their Iraqi counterparts, they have not gained autonomy under the Baathist regime – or geographically: even majority-Kurdish areas in the north east are interspersed with mixed areas also comprising Sunni Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkomans and Yazidis. As things stand, one cannot speak of a contiguous territory. Moreover, and unlike their brethren in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, they do not have the benefit of mountains in which to safely organise an armed insurgency against central rule.

Partly co-opted by the regime, which developed its own Kurdish clients by tolerating some political and paramilitary activism (as long as it was directed against Turkey) and criminal activity (mostly smuggling), Syria's Kurds also have seethed under systemic discrimination and repression. Among the more egregious forms of inequity, some 300,000 of them – roughly 15 per cent of the estimated two million total – remain stateless, living in a legal vacuum and deprived of fundamental rights. Although revolts occasionally erupted, these quickly were crushed. The result has been a largely quiescent population.

This is changing. As occurred in Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003, the current acute crisis presents Kurds with an opportunity to rectify – or at least start rectifying – what they consider an historic wrong: the decision by the French and British Mandatory powers to divide the Near East in a way that left them as the largest non-state nation in the region. They appear determined to seize it, though hobbled by competing visions about how best to do so.

If, when Syrians rose up in 2011, many young Kurds joined in, echoing calls for the downfall of the regime, traditional Kurdish political parties took a somewhat different view. They feared fierce reprisal against their people if they decisively joined the opposition; nursed resentment at Arab indifference during their own protests – and subsequent regime crackdown – in 2004; saw more to gain by remaining on the sidelines; and worried that newly empowered activists would challenge their role. Meanwhile, hoping to avoid a new battlefield and banking on Arab-Kurdish divisions to further muddy the picture, the regime for the most part left Kurds alone. As a result, most Kurdish parties opted to remain in the shadows of Syria's broader conflict,

neither fighting nor supporting the regime, while assuming a sceptical approach toward the (non-Kurdish) opposition, viewed as overly Arab nationalist and Islamist.

What is currently (and largely as a result of the ongoing conflict) the most influential of these parties, the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD), also has been the most reluctant to confront the regime, prompting charges of collusion. Well-organised, trained and armed, it is a Syrian Kurdish offshoot of the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party), the main Kurdish rebel group in Turkey. Shortly after the uprising broke out, the PYD, which had been encamped with the PKK in northern Iraq's mountains, returned to Syria, bringing along a contingent of fighters. In July 2012, it took advantage of the regime security forces' partial withdrawal from Kurdish areas to firmly establish its political and security presence, ousting government officials from municipal buildings in at least five of its strongholds and replacing Syrian flags with its own. In so doing, it openly asserted itself as the authority in charge of state institutions in most predominantly Kurdish towns.

The PYD's main competitors are a motley group of small Kurdish parties, several of which have close ties with Iraqi Kurdish groups. Under the patronage of Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), over a dozen of these parties coalesced in the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) in October 2011. This alliance has been the only effective Kurdish political rival to the PYD, even as internal divisions and the absence of a fighting force inside Syria have reduced its potential as an effective counterweight. Still, by creating a security and political vacuum in Kurdish areas, Syria's conflict has prompted intensifying competition between these two main trends.

Kurdish factions compete not only with each other but also with non-Kurdish opposition groups, all of which vie for space as they struggle to accrue resources and expand their areas of influence. Many Kurds, especially but not only PYD supporters, are alienated by the predominantly Arab nationalist and Islamist narratives put forth by the non-Kurdish opposition, as well as by its perceived dependence on Turkey and Gulf-based conservative sponsors. As the conflict endures and threatens to turn into an all-out civil war, sectarian as well as ethnic tensions are building up; already, the country has witnessed clashes between PYD fighters and opposition armed groups (often referred to under the loose and rather deceptive denomination of the Free Syrian Army, FSA). So far these essentially have been turf battles, but they could escalate into a broader conflict over the Kurds' future status.

Finally, the Syrian conflict has exacerbated the undeclared fight for the heart and soul of the Kurdish national movement in the four countries (Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran) across which it is divided. The PYD's and KNC's respective regional patrons, the PKK and Barzani's KDP, represent the two predominant models of Kurdish nationalism today as well as two competing paradigms for dealing with Turkey, whose territory encompasses much of what Kurds see as their historic homeland. The PKK has used an episodic armed struggle to try to force Ankara to extend greater cultural and political rights to Kurds in Turkey; in contrast, the KDP, using its dominance of the Kurdistan Regional Government, has laboured hard in recent years to develop economic interdependence and political ties to coax Turkey into a more constructive posture and simultaneously reduce the KRG's dependence on Baghdad.

Turkey itself must be added to the mix. How much autonomy the PYD enjoys vis-à-vis the PKK is a matter of some controversy, though for Ankara the question has long been settled. In its view, the Syrian Kurdish movement is little more than a branch or carbon copy of the PKK, whose attempts to establish a foothold in Syria risk fuelling separatist sentiment in Turkey. A PYD stronghold at its doorstep, poten-

tially exploited by the PKK as a springboard in its fight in Turkey, is something Ankara will not tolerate.

Seeking simultaneously to contain internal rivalries, reassure Ankara and assert his own dominance, Barzani has tried to broker an agreement between the PYD and KNC. Both have something to gain: whereas the KNC enjoys international partners and legitimacy, it increasingly is divided internally and lacks a genuine presence on the ground; conversely, the PYD's strong domestic support is not matched by its international standing. But this Barzani-brokered marriage, the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), at best is one of convenience. Neither side trusts the other; the two maintain (strained) relations with conflicting Syrian opposition groups; skirmishes have occurred between them in sensitive areas; and both are biding their time until the situation in the country clarifies.

Likewise, although for the time being Turkey has opted not to intervene directly against the PYD – for fear of being sucked into a quagmire and for lack of a clear *casus belli* involving the PKK – and although it has given Barzani a leading role in containing the PYD, this approach may not last. Over time, Erbil's and Ankara's interests are likely to diverge. Whereas the former aims to consolidate a broad, Kurdish-dominated area straddling the Iraqi-Syrian border, the latter almost certainly fears the implications of such an outcome on its own Kurdish population, and in particular its impact on the PKK's overall posture.

Syria's Kurds should do their best to avoid both over-entanglement in this broader regional battle and overreach in their quest for greater autonomy. Their fate at present rests in Syria, and thus it is with Syrians that they must negotiate their role in the coming order and ensure, at long last, respect for their basic rights.

## *Recommendations*

### **To the PYD, KNC and representatives of independent youth groups:**

1. Improve coordination of political and administrative activity, and work toward a joint strategy to provide security and basic services to Kurdish areas.
2. Reach out to broader Syrian society without necessarily entering into conflict with the regime, including by offering humanitarian aid, establishing field hospitals for wounded civilians regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation and expressing solidarity with the plight of civilians throughout Syria.
3. Refrain from actions stoking fears of Kurdish secessionism, such as replacing national symbols with Kurdish ones.

### **To the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC):**

4. Formulate a clear, unified position on what it expects from any successor power structure regarding respect for Kurdish rights, and negotiate on that basis with its non-Kurdish Syrian counterparts.

### **To the PYD and its YPG armed forces:**

5. Maintain a low military profile, limiting their role to internal policing duties in majority-Kurd areas, in coordination and cooperation with the KNC and independent youth groups.
6. Refrain from any acts of force or intimidation in areas under their control.
7. Refrain from provocative acts that could prompt Turkish military intervention, for example by using Syrian territory as a staging ground for PKK-backed Kurdish militancy in Turkey.

### **To KDP-trained Kurdish fighters operating under KNC control:**

8. Enter Syria only based on an explicit agreement with the PYD that delineates zones of operation, stipulates how disputes between the two armed groups will be resolved and creates a transparent system for identifying fighters in each force, their leaderships and activities.

### **To the non-Kurdish Syrian opposition, including its armed elements:**

9. Engage in or support negotiations with the Supreme Kurdish Committee over what the establishment of a democratic political system in which citizens enjoy equal rights would entail with respect to the Kurds.
10. Support publicly prompt repeal of all legislation removing citizenship from or denying it to certain groups of Kurds.
11. Seek coordination with the Supreme Kurdish Committee when operating in and around areas patrolled by Kurdish armed groups.

**To the Turkish government:**

12. Continue to refrain from direct intervention in Kurdish areas of Syria, while redoubling efforts to peacefully resolve the Kurdish question in Turkey.
13. Consider talks with the PYD, possibly under the auspices of the Supreme Kurdish Committee, aiming in particular at creating a mechanism for communication and coordination regarding border security.
14. Encourage the non-Kurdish Syrian opposition to bring in Kurdish opposition groups on the basis of a vision for a democratic political system in which all citizens enjoy equal rights.

**To the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq:**

15. Refrain from playing Kurdish factions one against another, and pursue instead a policy of consolidating unity and bolstering the representativeness and legitimacy of the Supreme Kurdish Committee.
16. Encourage in particular the KNC and PYD to work together more closely in bringing peace and stability to majority-Kurd areas of Syria, in coordination with independent youth groups.

**Erbil/Damascus/Brussels, 22 January 2013**

# Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle

## I. Introduction

On the margins of the escalating struggle between Syria's pro- and anti-regime camps, the country's predominantly Kurdish areas in the north and north east are witnessing a brewing, intricate conflict of their own. It opposes Kurds originating in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK), a group that has led an armed insurgency against the Turkish state in a quest for greater Kurdish rights since the 1980s,<sup>1</sup> and rival Kurdish factions loosely gathered under the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which is supported by Iraq's Masoud Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Arguably the largest and most powerful Kurdish faction, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), founded in 2003, is ideologically, and some would claim organisationally and militarily, affiliated with the PKK. While the PYD denies it is a branch of that group, it is a member of the Union of Kurdish Communities (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), an umbrella organisation that shares the same leadership and charter as the PKK, as seen in more detail below.<sup>2</sup>

There also are military ties between the two. The PYD's armed branch, the People's Defence Corps (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), was trained by the PKK at its headquarters in northern Iraq's Qandil mountain range. The PKK's presence there has been exposed to repeated Turkish air force bombing since the 1990s; more recently, these have caused strains between the movement and the president of Iraq's Kurdish region, Masoud Barzani, who has developed a close relationship with Ankara. For the PKK, the Syrian uprising, which began in March 2011, was an opportunity to shift – or at a minimum diversify – its political and military rear base.

Although the PYD was banned in Syria,<sup>3</sup> its leadership headed home from Qandil soon after the uprising started. Salih Muslim, its leader, served jail time in Syria for illegal political activity before fleeing in 2010 and seeking refuge with the PKK in

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<sup>1</sup> The PKK, an insurgent Kurdish nationalist group in Turkey, was co-founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, who remains its leader though serving a life sentence in a Turkish jail since 1999. It claims to seek cultural and political rights for Kurds in Turkey, a change from its earlier goal of an independent state. Turkish policies have denied Kurds, estimated at 15 to 20 per cent of the population, basic language and legal rights for decades, fuelling an insurgency that began in 1984. At least 30,000 have died on both sides of the conflict. Crisis Group Europe Report N°213, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, 20 September 2011.

<sup>2</sup> For the intricate, overlapping nature of the PKK and its related organisations, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°219, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, 11 September 2012, pp. 7-9. The PYD foreign affairs representative, Alan Semo, explained that while the PYD is a member of the KCK, it maintains its own specific party organisation: "[The] PYD is a Syrian Kurdish party with its own leader, organisations, structures, exclusive council and leadership. The PYD only shares the ideology of democratic self-governance with the KCK, similar to how other Syrian Kurdish parties share the ideology of the KDP or PUK". Crisis Group email correspondence, 10 August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> In 2009, for example, four Syrian Kurds were sentenced to six years in prison on charges of belonging to the PYD and "attempting to cut off part of Syrian territory to attach it to a foreign country". Al-Arabiya, 10 November 2009.



Iraq; while in exile, the regime sentenced him to life imprisonment. He reportedly returned to Syria's Kurdish areas in April 2011.<sup>4</sup> At that point, the party began aggressively pursuing political and paramilitary activities to mobilise support among Syrian Kurds. According to someone with close ties to the PYD, that also is the time when the PKK sent 1,000 armed fighters to establish the PYD's military wing, the YPG.<sup>5</sup>

These developments raised suspicions, notably among rival factions, that the PYD had reached an agreement with the regime allowing it to reestablish a presence and operate openly in Syria in exchange for cooperation with security forces in quelling anti-regime demonstrations in predominantly Kurdish areas.<sup>6</sup> Some go farther, using the derogatory term *shabbiha* for the party.<sup>7</sup> Alleged Baath party documents, purportedly leaked to Al Jazeera, suggest the regime early on had decided to rely on the PYD as a local proxy rather than directly attacking the Kurdish areas itself. One of these documents emphasised the need "[t]o place Kurdish areas under surveillance; and to coordinate with the [PYD] in secret to quell protests and protestors; and not to intervene [directly] with security forces in the Kurdish areas".<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group cannot authenticate these documents or confirm the existence of a formal agreement between the PYD and the regime; it is possible the PYD merely exploited the vacuum left by preoccupied, under-deployed and, in some areas, mostly absent security forces, while reaching a tacit *modus vivendi* with Damascus.

As the uprising wore on and Assad's grip on the country weakened, the PYD joined and took on a leadership role in the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB). A moderate opposition group formed in June 2011, the NCB largely is made up of leftist Arabs and Kurds who have issued tempered calls for regime change while remaining staunchly opposed to foreign intervention and highly critical of more hardline strands within the opposition.

In July 2012, seventeen months into an uprising that, however inconclusive, exhibited signs of diminished regime strength and continued opposition resilience, the PYD projected a more assertive stance. It took advantage of the regime security

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48726>.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi Kurdistan, 7 January 2012. A Syrian Kurdish analyst critical of the PKK dismissed the figure: "As part of a PKK agreement with Iran, they sent 500 PKK guerrillas from Qandil to Syria. The Iranians are pressuring them to send even more people from Qandil, and the Iranians also asked some Iranian Kurdish *jash* [collaborators, literally: donkey foal] forces to go, but these Kurds refused and said we have agreed to cooperate with you only here [in Iran], not in Syria". Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 January 2012.

<sup>6</sup> An official of the rival Kurdistan National Council said, "I don't know exactly what agreement they had, but there were signs suggesting an agreement. For example, there were some PYD members who had Syrian arrest warrants out for them, but when they returned from Qandil to Syria, they were not arrested". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 December 2011. Crisis Group was not able to verify this claim.

<sup>7</sup> *Shabbiha* originally referred to criminal gangs with ties to the ruling family that terrorised coastal dwellers and drove around in a type of Mercedes dubbed *shabah* (ghost). The regime rooted them out by the 1980s, but the expression stuck and has come to loosely designate a wide array of pro-regime civilian proxies. A KNC official said, "it isn't in our interest to be with the PYD. They're acting like *shabbiha* in the Kurdish region. To give an example, once there was an informant within the government security services giving the Kurdish political parties some information, and the PYD went and killed him, calling him a traitor; they cut his nose and ears". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, January 2012. KurdWatch, a Berlin-based NGO, has reported isolated incidents of PYD supporters terrorising people with similarly extreme measures, eg, 4 July 2012. Crisis Group is not in a position to independently verify these allegations.

<sup>8</sup> "The Damascus Documents", Al Jazeera, 20 March 2012.

forces' partial withdrawal to firmly establish its own political and security presence in Kurdish-populated areas. As opposition armed groups surged in non-Kurdish areas of northern Syria, the PYD ousted government officials from municipal buildings in at least five of its strongholds – Ayn al-Arab (Kobane in Kurdish), Amouda, Al-Malikiyah (Derek), Afrin and Jinderes<sup>9</sup> – replacing Syrian flags with its own.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the PYD, which already had emerged as the foremost Kurdish group in the country, openly asserted itself as the authority in charge of state institutions in most Kurdish towns, with the exception (among others) of the main city of Qamishli.

This unprecedented PYD show of force greatly alarmed neighbouring Turkey, which saw the movement as just another manifestation of the PKK. Soon thereafter, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened that his country had the “undisputed right” to intervene if the PKK were to set up camps in Syria.<sup>11</sup>

The PYD's revival as of spring 2011 also led the country's other Kurdish parties – a collection of some sixteen small and traditionally sparring political factions – to band together and seek more robust foreign support. In October 2011, they formed the Kurdish National Council (KNC) under the patronage of Barzani's KDP. Most parties comprising the KNC are breakaway factions of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party (Partiya Kurdên Demokratên Sûrî), Syria's first Kurdish party, founded in 1957.<sup>12</sup>

The KNC's diverse membership has led to manifold internal divisions. Its factions possess different patrons, ideologies and bases of support. Today, the two most influential parties within the coalition enjoy direct links to Iraqi Kurdish parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê, PDKS), headed by Abdulhakim Bashar, is the Syrian sister party to Barzani's KDP; and the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, hereafter the Progressive Party), headed by Abdulhamid Darwish, is the sister party to Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).<sup>13</sup> Ongoing rivalry between the KDP and PUK historically has translated into a PDKS-Progressive Party competition that persists – alongside other divisions – under the somewhat loose KNC umbrella.

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<sup>9</sup> Jinderes is sometimes spelled Cindêris in Kurdish and often subsumed under Afrin. See Bashdar Pusho Ismaeel, “Welcome to the Kurdistan Region of Syria”, *Kurdish Globe*, 24 July 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Some disputed the PYD claim that it had “liberated” these cities. Speaking in late July 2012, Abdulhakim Bashar, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (the Syrian sister party to Barzani's KDP), said, “liberation means clearing Kurdish cities of Syrian forces and never allowing them to come back. Currently, Syrian security forces have a presence everywhere in western [ie, Syrian] Kurdistan, including the so-called liberated cities. It is true that a certain political party's flag [the PYD's] has been raised on top of government offices, but the regime can force them to leave if it wants. The Syrian government is still in control of its offices. They still move their equipment in and out without any problem. So I would say no Kurdish cities have been [liberated]”. Hevidar Ahmed, “KNC leader: Syrian Kurds are disappointed by PYD's actions”, *Rudaw*, 1 August 2012. Although government officials remained in place in some Kurdish areas, the regime's ability to return in force at a time when it is preoccupied with fighting a tenacious rebellion elsewhere is highly doubtful

<sup>11</sup> *Today's Zaman*, 26 July 2012.

<sup>12</sup> KNC factions today are descendants of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party; a series of breakaways, mergers and splits that occurred since its founding in 1957 has obscured which faction is its legitimate successor. Abdulhakim Bashar, Abdulhamid Darwish and other faction leaders all claim this mantle. See “Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956-2011”, *KurdWatch*, report 8, December 2011, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive history of Syrian Kurdish political parties, see *ibid.*

Attempts have been made to reconcile the PYD and KNC. On 11 July 2012, just before Syrian state authority began to collapse in some Kurdish areas, Barzani mediated a power-sharing accord between the two leading groups. Known as the “Erbil Declaration”, it provided that they would govern Syria’s Kurdish regions jointly during the transition and established the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) to this end.

The agreement seemingly came as a shock to Ankara, which saw Barzani as an ally in containing and marginalising – as opposed to integrating – the PYD.<sup>14</sup> Since 2007, the Iraqi Kurdish region’s economic integration with Turkey had paved the way for exceptionally strong ties between Ankara and Erbil.<sup>15</sup> Barzani’s close relationship with Turkey in turn shaped his involvement with Syrian Kurds. For years, Turkey had pressured Barzani to act against the PKK in Qandil; from 2011 onward, it urged him to do the same against the PYD, arguing that his interests would best be served by limiting the influence of the main competitor to his sister parties in Syria and consolidating his own role in the Syrian political arena. Turkish authorities likewise took the view that the PKK’s pan-Kurdish character threatened not only Barzani’s authority as president of Iraq’s Kurdish region, but also any pan-Kurdish ambitions he might have.

The Erbil agreement highlighted Barzani’s pragmatism – an acknowledgment of the PYD’s relative strength and of the military and political risks entailed in PYD-KNC fighting. With memories of the bloody civil war that pitted the PUK against the KDP in the 1990s still very much alive among Kurds across the Middle East, Kurd-on-Kurd warfare is highly unpopular. An internal struggle among Syrian Kurds also risked inflaming already tense PKK-KDP relations in northern Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Barzani took steps to strengthen his allies’ military position. In July 2012, he announced that the KRG was training Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army in camps located in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>17</sup> He later explained:

There are between 10,000 and 15,000 Kurdish refugees from Syria in Kurdistan. Many of them are young men. It is true that some of them have received training. They have not been trained for attack, but for defence. The regions where they live have no system of defence, and they need to be able to preserve them from chaos.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An AKP deputy and adviser to Turkey’s prime minister said, “this kind of initiative will never be worth as much as Turkey’s friendship ... creating a new place for the PKK to base itself and spread its influence will create an unacceptable situation”. Yalçın Akdoğan, “Yeni Kandil’lere izin verilemez” [“No permission will be given to new Qandils”], *Star*, 27 July 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°81, *Turkey and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict or Cooperation?*, 13 November 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Any such conflict would risk spilling over into Iraq, the PKK being likely to strike back at KRG moves against the PYD. Tellingly, a conflict between Iran and the PJAK (an armed group of Iranian Kurdish rebels, the Party of Free Life for Kurdistan, *Partiya Jiyana Azad Kurdistanê*) spilled over into Iraq in 2007. In retaliation for the death of two of its soldiers, Iran attacked PJAK forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. Border fighting lasted over a month, and the PUK intervened, sending 200 soldiers to take action against PJAK members in Suleimaniya province. See “Rrt Erbil: PUK-PJAK Confrontation In Sulaimaniyah”, U.S. embassy Baghdad cable, 19 September 2007, as reported by WikiLeaks.

<sup>17</sup> See Jane Arraf, “Iraqi Kurds train their Syrian brethren”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 July 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with President Massoud Barzani, *L’Essentiel des relations internationales*, 27 September 2012.

A trainee at one of the camps explained:

From the moment I started the training, there were different programs: basic training for fighters and officer training. This was supervised by Aziz Weysi, head of the Zerevani forces [a gendarmerie-like paramilitary force affiliated with the KDP].<sup>19</sup> Generally, those who join the training camps in the Kurdistan region are young Syrian Kurds escaping Syria in order to avoid military service there or because they are unemployed. Others think this will be the way to contribute to the Kurdish cause and the battle against the regime.<sup>20</sup>

The force, rumoured to number around 650 at the time and some 1,200 by October 2012,<sup>21</sup> presumably was intended to counter the YPG – the PYD's armed wing. Indeed, its members reportedly faced difficulties re-entering Syria because of tension with the YPG, which controls the Syrian side of the border.<sup>22</sup>

The Erbil agreement diminished prospects of escalation between the PYD and KNC, but did not eliminate them. To this day, and notably thanks to its armed might and strong support base among Syrian Kurds, the PYD continues to work mostly alone, dominating the Syrian Kurdish scene both politically and militarily; its primary weakness lies in its links to the PKK, which ensure both Barzani's and, chiefly, Turkey's hostility. By contrast, the KNC remains a fragmented coalition, unable to act effectively as a single body. Yet it endures thanks to external financial and political sponsorship. In this sense, the intra-Kurdish struggle in Syria pits a strong party with weak allies against a weak coalition with strong ones.

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<sup>19</sup> For a description of Kurdish security forces, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°103, *Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears*, 28 March 2011, Section IV.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kurdish soldier who deserted the Syrian army and joined a training camp, Erbil, 3 October 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Rozh Ahmed, "A rare glimpse into Kurdish armed forces in Syria", *Rudaw*, 5 August 2012.

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## II. From Arab Uprising to Kurdish Opportunity

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Roughly 10 per cent of Syria's 23 million people are ethnic Kurds,<sup>23</sup> located mainly in the Hasake region in the north east and in large non-contiguous pockets along the Turkish border reaching to Afrin in the north west, as well as in the metropolitan cities of Aleppo and Damascus and a few secondary towns as far south as Quneitra. Adding to this lack of geographical continuity, Syrian Kurds, much like Kurds across the Middle East, are politically fragmented and have given rise to a multitude of factions prone to align themselves with competing regional powers. Since the onset of the 2011 Syrian uprising, dramatic changes within the Kurdish political landscape reflect renewed efforts by the Kurds to assert themselves as important political players in their own right, an endeavour that has faced significant hurdles.

### A. *The Syrian Arab Republic and the Kurds*

Relations between the Syrian state and its Kurdish minority were fraught even before the current regime came to power in the aftermath of the 1963 Baathist takeover. In 1962, the authorities used census data from the al-Jazeera region (the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) in the north east to strip approximately 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian citizenship, claiming they were illegal immigrants from Turkey.<sup>24</sup> These stateless Kurds and their descendants today are estimated at roughly 300,000, 15 per cent of the country's estimated two million Kurds.<sup>25</sup> They exist in a legal vacuum, deprived of important rights: to travel within Syria and abroad (which requires a passport or other ID); to own property; to enter into legally recognised marriage; to benefit from food subsidies; to participate in elections; and to hold office (whether elected or as civil servants). Although some were registered as foreigners/aliens (*ajaneb*), many were completely ignored. The latter category is referred to as the "unregistered" (*maktumin*, literally: concealed). By one estimate, Syria had some 154,000 *ajaneb* and 160,000 *maktumin* as of 2008.<sup>26</sup>

Linguistic rights, too, long have been denied to Syria's Kurds. A 1958 decree outlawed the publication of materials in Kurdish, and even private schools were barred

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<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°108, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, "[i]n 1962, an exceptional census stripped some 120,000 Syrian Kurds – 20 percent of the Syrian Kurdish population – of their Syrian citizenship. By many accounts, the special census was carried out in an arbitrary manner ... Brothers from the same family, born in the same Syrian village, were classified differently. Fathers became foreigners while their sons remained citizens. The number of stateless Kurds grew with time as descendants of those who lost citizenship in 1962 multiplied; as a result, their number is now estimated at 300,000". "Syria: The Silenced Kurds", October 1996. The government has justified its actions by claiming that many such Kurds hailed from neighbouring countries, particularly Turkey. After the collapse of the 1925 Kurdish rebellion against Kemal Atatürk's new Turkish nationalist republic, many Turkish Kurds fled to Syria to escape oppression. For more on the rebellion, see <http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/Turkey's%20Kurdish%20Question.pdf>. Cast as an Arab nationalist action to prevent the settlement of non-Arab groups in the province, the 1962 census and subsequent de-naturalisation of Kurds in reality served primarily to protect large landowners. Jamal Barut, "Kaifa naša' at muškilat › 'ağānib Turkiyā' fi Sūriya?", *Le Monde diplomatique – éditions arabes*, August 2009; "Stateless Kurds in Syria: Illegal invaders or victims of a nationalistic policy?", *KurdWatch*, report 5, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> In the absence of reliable figures, two million is widely accepted as a rough estimate.

<sup>26</sup> *KurdWatch*, report 5, op. cit., pp. 6-9.

from teaching in that language. The regime replaced Kurdish names of towns and villages with Arabic ones; for example, the Kurdish town of Kobane was re-baptised Ayn al-Arab.<sup>27</sup> More recently, in 2008, the government added to a long list of Kurdish grievances legislation that restricts property ownership, transfer and other land rights in border regions, in effect denying even Kurds in such areas who enjoyed citizenship the right to own real property.<sup>28</sup>

The Kurds' status remained essentially unchanged under Hafez Assad's and Bashar Assad's rule. Despite acknowledging the problems associated with the 1962 census, Bashar failed for years to take steps toward naturalising either the *ajaneb* or the *maktumin*.<sup>29</sup> As previously described by Crisis Group, Kurds also suffered from the regime's enduring and glaring neglect of north-eastern Syria, an area particularly rich in resources but treated like a milk cow by central authorities.<sup>30</sup>

When the 2011 uprising broke out, Syrian Kurds initially were of two minds about whether to join. Although they had little sympathy for the regime, memories of the brutal 2004 government crackdown in Qamishli<sup>31</sup> and of the callous reactions it prompted among Syria's non-Kurds – long suspicious of Kurdish secessionist sentiment – remained fresh. A youth activist explained: "There was a big fear in the street at the very beginning. First, political parties were discouraging demonstrations. Then, there was also our fear that the others would see us as 'secessionists' [*infisaliyin*]. We knew that the regime would try to say this about us, just as it had done during the 2004 Qamishli events".<sup>32</sup>

Reactions varied from city to city. In Amouda, for example, the local youth committee joined the uprising and benefited from experience young activists acquired in

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<sup>27</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, the government began giving Arabic names to Kurdish towns and villages in Hasake governorate and in the Kurd Dagh area near Afrin in the 1970s. See [www.hrw.org/reports/1996/10/01/syria-silenced-kurds](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/10/01/syria-silenced-kurds). For an overview of the situation of Kurds in Syria, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York, 2004), pp. 466-484; and Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> See "Decree 49: Dispossession of the Kurdish population? Commentary on the political implications and economic consequences of a decree", KurdWatch, report 6. In September 2008, Decree 49 tightened the procedures for purchase, sale and lease of land in border regions. Kurdish parties denounced it as a regime attempt to Arabise Kurdish areas, although it severely affected Arab areas too, notably in Hawran along the border with Jordan. For the full text, see *ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> In a 2007 speech, Bashar Assad publicly acknowledged the mistakes of the 1962 census and distinguished between the *ajaneb* and *maktumin*, saying that naturalisation of *ajaneb* would be conceivable only once the status of the *maktumin* has been resolved. The naturalisation of both would tip the demographic balance between Kurds and Arabs in Hasake province in the Kurds' favour. Amude.com, 18 July 2007. No concrete measures ensued until the outbreak of unrest in 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The Surian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, *op. cit*.

<sup>31</sup> In March 2004, a fight broke out between Arabs and Kurds at a football game in Qamishli, the main city in Syria's Kurdish areas. Kurdish fans raised their national flags and chanted in support of U.S. President George W. Bush, who in 2003 had led the war in Iraq. The fight escalated, and riots erupted throughout Qamishli, lasting three days. Rioters burned down the Baath Party local office and toppled a statue of Hafez Assad; in response, the army deployed thousands of troops to Qamishli and carried out a brutal crackdown, killing at least 30 Kurds, injuring more than 160 and detaining over 2,000, according to "Syria: End Persecution of Kurds", Human Rights Watch, 26 November 2009. For an overview, see Julie Gauthier, "Les événements de Qamichlo: Irruption de la question kurde en Syrie?", *Études kurdes 8: Errance et terre promise. Juifs, Kurdes, Assyro-Chaldéens* (2005), pp. 97-114; Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A people discovered", Middle East Program, Chatham House briefing paper (2006), pp. 1-8; and "The al-Qamishli uprising: The beginning of a new era for Syrian Kurds?", KurdWatch, report 4.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 7 October 2012.

2004. Elsewhere, where Kurdish political parties were stronger, their leaders feared harsh regime repression and kept any inclination to protest in check, including in Qamishli, where the parties have their headquarters.<sup>33</sup>

The regime was keen to avert a showdown in the north east, concerned it might divert precious resources and eager to maintain the loyalty of minority groups by depicting the uprising as an essentially Sunni Arab sectarian revolt. As a result, it dealt with local unrest in Kurdish regions far more tactfully than in other areas and promptly made political overtures to the Kurds.<sup>34</sup>

In April 2011, after anti-regime demonstrations erupted in majority-Arab cities, the regime extended citizenship to several thousand Kurds in the Hasake region.<sup>35</sup> The unspoken purpose of the concession was to placate the constituency and keep a lid on anti-regime Kurdish protests. It is unclear whether this tactic worked. A number of Kurds complained the move was insufficient but felt that if they refrained from acting against the regime, more might be forthcoming.<sup>36</sup> Others disagreed. A young activist from Qamishli who obtained citizenship in 2011 showed Crisis Group his new Syrian identity card in October 2012 and said, “when I got this last year, I went out to demonstrate again that very same day”.<sup>37</sup> The regime also released several Kurdish political prisoners in October 2011 as part of a deal with the PYD. This strategy succeeded at least to an extent, as a person with close ties to the PYD explained in early 2012:

Now the regime is weak, so we can gain concessions regarding Kurdish rights, as we saw with the citizenship issue. Syria used to make Kurds perform their military service, give them citizenship ID cards when they joined the military and then take those ID cards away when they finished their service. Without citizenship, you can't get married under the law; you can't buy a house or a car, etc. In the beginning, the PYD told its members not to protest, so it had a role in keeping the Kurdish areas quiet in the first months of the revolution, and this gave the regime a reason to grant citizenship. Moreover, all PYD prisoners were released from Syrian prisons three months ago.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The activist, a member of the Amouda Youth Committee, said, “in Amouda, we were among the first in all of Syria to organise demonstrations after Deraa [where the uprising began in March 2011]. We first went into the streets on 29 March. We wanted to be in the rhythm of the revolution along with other Syrian cities, and we were carrying both the Syrian and the Kurdish flags and chanting in both Kurdish and Arabic. At each Friday demonstration, we even had a competition with Kafr Nubil – [an Arab] town that has carved out a reputation as a result of its witty slogans – over who had the nicest banners. We had acquired experience since the Qamishli events in 2004, and more people took to the streets this time, as they saw a possibility to achieve something”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 9 October 2012.

<sup>34</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, op. cit., 6 July 2011.

<sup>35</sup> BBC, 7 April 2011. Decree 49 (April 2011) grants citizenship to stateless, registered *ajaneb* but does not mention *maktumin*.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Erbil, January 2012. Another stateless Kurd, a refugee in the Domiz camp in the Iraqi Kurdish region since 2004, complained that the regime had belatedly “granted” the Kurds citizenship under duress, not willingly “returned their right” to it. Crisis Group interview, Domiz, 7 October 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 6 October 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi Kurdistan, 7 January 2012.

## B. *Local Stirrings*

In response to the uprising elsewhere in the country, a limited Kurdish anti-regime protest movement emerged around pre-existing youth groups or newly formed “local coordination committees” (LCCs).<sup>39</sup> Young activists organised themselves by resorting to Facebook and other social media. As one put it:

At first, in Amouda, we decided to create committees only in order to better organise demonstrations. After Amouda, Ras al-Ayn [Sere Kaniye in Kurdish] and Derek followed. In late 2011, all the Kurdish coordination committees merged into a Union of Kurdish Youth Coordination. In 2012, splits occurred, with nine coordination committees joining another coalition, the Avahi Union.<sup>40</sup>

The activists’ slogans echoed those heard elsewhere, calling in particular for “toppling the regime” (*isqat al-nidham*). More broadly, they displayed a shared sense of purpose with other segments of society. A Syrian Kurdish journalist explained: “When you hear a slogan in Hama, the next day you’ll hear the same slogan in Qamishli. These protesters [the LCCs] see themselves as part of the opposition, and when the government cracks down in Homs and Hama, the Kurdish LCCs try to show solidarity with those areas”.<sup>41</sup> Demonstrations often took place on Fridays to remain in harmony with a nationwide protest movement that used weekly prayers as a rallying point, even if many secular Kurds worried at the thought of an Islamist successor regime in Damascus.

From the outset, Kurdish LCCs faced the countervailing influence of Kurdish political parties, almost all of which were reluctant to join anti-regime demonstrations. A Kurdish activist said:

Political parties discouraged the people to take to the streets. The reasons are many. Some believed that the revolution would fail. They also were afraid that the young people would create a political movement that could compete with the traditional parties. And many still considered the option of negotiating with the regime. In Amouda, we organised demonstrations without the political parties’ approval. Independent young activists took to the street, and many young people decided to leave the political parties.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, insofar as their protests called for the regime’s overthrow and were not endorsed by any political movement, the LCCs proved most vulnerable to attacks by the PYD, which repressed demonstrations in the Kurdish region as part of its effort to assert control.<sup>43</sup> As a result, most LCCs focused on Qamishli or Amouda, where the PYD traditionally has been weakest.

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<sup>39</sup> These include the Kurdish Youth Movement, the Union of Kurdish Youth Coordination and the Kurdish Youth Union.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 9 October 2012. According to Abdussalam Uthman, the founder of the Union of Kurdish Youth Coordination, as of December 2012 the main coordinating groups are his own, as well as Avahi, the Youth of the Birth of Freedom, the Movement of Revolutionary Youth, the Kurdish Youth Movement and the Alliance of Sewa Youth. For more details see [www.kurdwatch.org/syria\\_article.php?aid=2719&z=en&cure=240](http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2719&z=en&cure=240).

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Adib Abdulmajid, 1 February 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 9 October 2012.

<sup>43</sup> KurdWatch has recorded a number of cases involving PYD members and supporters reportedly attacking, threatening or kidnapping anti-regime youth activists. It says, inter alia, that on 7 September 2012 the PYD arrested three activists in Amouda and later attacked demonstrators demand-



The 7 October 2011 assassination of Meshaal Tammo, founder of the Future Movement, a small and strongly anti-regime Syrian Kurdish party with close ties to youth activists, triggered the largest demonstration to that day. Tammo was one of the few Kurdish politicians to take part in anti-regime demonstrations, call for its toppling and join the Syrian National Council (SNC), a coalition of predominantly Arab opposition groups. He was gunned down by plainclothes assailants while attending a political meeting in a private home in Qamishli, allegedly upon regime orders but amid widespread suspicion of PYD involvement.<sup>44</sup> Although LCC-affiliated Kurds claimed that 10,000-15,000 demonstrators poured into the streets of Qamishli on each of several Fridays following the assassination, there is no evidence to support the assertion. YouTube videos, whose images are hard to verify, typically showed no more than roughly 1,000 during Friday protests.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of the numbers, the protests sparked by Tammo's assassination were not sustained. Kurdish youth groups, their activism notwithstanding, were hard-pressed to find room to grow within either the Syrian uprising or the Kurdish political arena. This was mainly because these groups were hamstrung both by increasing intra-Kurdish divisions – often encouraged by the political parties, as well as by growing difficulties in coordinating with non-Kurdish opposition groups elsewhere – and by their inability to translate mobilisation into a clear political project. In the words of an activist:

The Kurdish youth groups became increasingly divided. At the very beginning, we tried to coordinate with the youth committees in other parts of the country, but this became more and more difficult. It is an almost nine-hour drive from Qamishli to Damascus. Also, political parties have tried to co-opt some of the youth committees, offering funding first and then weapons. In this way they have exacerbated divisions among the people.<sup>46</sup>

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ing their release with billy clubs and stones; on 29 June 2012, PYD members allegedly attacked demonstrators in Ayn al-Arab and Afrin; and on 12 July 2012, PYD supporters purportedly attacked members of several youth groups in Al-Malikiyah. See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=245&z=en](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=245&z=en). The PYD denies such allegations. Its Salih Muslim told KurdWatch: "You published a news article in which it was implied that the PYD was responsible for certain deeds. We do not accept this .... The PYD is a political organisation. We reject politically motivated violence and the oppression of people; we condemn this .... The PYD did not kidnap or threaten anyone. Show me one single person who says that they were kidnapped and threatened by the PYD. That is nothing but propaganda with the goal of discrediting the PYD and the Kurdish freedom movement. We reject this". Quoted in KurdWatch, 8 November 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Tammo had escaped an earlier attempt on his life, on 8 September 2011, after which he told KurdWatch: "The regime issues the order. But of course, acquaintances will carry out the order. The regime has many henchmen .... In Kobani an activist was kidnapped. In Sere Kaniye [Ras al-Ayn] two others were beaten. In Derek [Al-Malikiyah] there was an attempted kidnapping". As these actions allegedly were carried out by the PYD, Tammo likely was implying PYD involvement in the September assassination attempt. See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2077&z=en&cure=232](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2077&z=en&cure=232). While several KNC officials and unaffiliated Syrian Kurds privately claim the PYD killed Tammo, they finger the regime publicly. The PYD alleges that Turkey was responsible, but few observers take this seriously, as Tammo was one of the few Kurds to join the Turkish-supported SNC. See [www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=B401BD71512EFC6525D69EA3048CD6F7](http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=B401BD71512EFC6525D69EA3048CD6F7).

<sup>45</sup> For example, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_pr-YhoawE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_pr-YhoawE); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5gHLa29m8k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5gHLa29m8k); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmCmG5niuxg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmCmG5niuxg); and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLPefehcncs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLPefehcncs).

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 6 October 2012.

Significantly, the PYD suppressed anti-regime protests; its own demonstrations were more pro-PYD than anti-regime. Once it was established in late October 2011, the KNC followed suit, staging demonstrations to boost its standing rather than to oppose the regime.

### C. *Political Parties Take the Lead*

Alongside demonstrations organised by young activists, other street protests dominated by political parties displayed a distinct character, reflecting their particular agendas rather than solidarity with the nationwide rebellion. The KNC and PYD used milder anti-regime slogans – the most widespread being “No’ to the Baath and ‘no’ to foreign interference” – even as Kurdish nationalist sentiment became more prevalent and outspoken.

The PYD in particular injected a strong Kurdish tone into its rallies, using Kurdish symbols and expressing support for PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned in Turkey. As previously noted, the PYD also justified its more moderate stance by arguing that this allowed the Kurds to gain government concessions.<sup>47</sup> The KNC likewise discouraged anti-regime demonstrations, instead voicing specifically Kurdish demands. A KNC official explained:

At the beginning, when the revolution broke out, we didn’t want to participate in big numbers. That was a tactical move to avoid getting people killed. It was known that in the Arab Spring, Arabs would demonstrate on Fridays. Therefore, we as Kurds decided to demonstrate on Wednesdays so as to differentiate ourselves.<sup>48</sup> After the KNC was created, people demonstrated less for “toppling the regime” than for the Kurdish right to self-determination and “changing the entire system” [*taghyir al-nidham*].<sup>49</sup>

The KNC professes to support a democratic transition. Abdulhakim Bashar, head of the PDKS, the KDP’s sister party, said, “the KNC calls for ‘changing the regime’, not ‘toppling the regime’, because ‘topple’ is a violent word, whereas ‘change’ implies a democratic process. We let the youth call for ‘toppling the regime’, while we prefer to raise the issue in a more diplomatic way”.<sup>50</sup> Another KNC member put it differently: “It’s not that we don’t want the regime to fall. Let it fall 1,000 times. But if the politi-

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<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, person close to PYD, 7 January 2012. Conversely, it helped shield the Kurds from the kind of retribution witnessed elsewhere. A person close to the PYD offered the following justification: “We don’t use the slogan ‘topple the regime’, because if we do, then the killing that is happening in Homs and Hama might also happen in Kurdistan. And unlike in Homs and Hama, the Muslim Brotherhood [which makes up a large part of the SNC] and others won’t care if the killing is happening in Kurdistan”. Crisis Group interview, 7 January 2012.

<sup>48</sup> LCCs wanted to make a point of showing solidarity with Syrian Arab revolutionaries by demonstrating on Fridays, like their counterparts in Homs, Hama and elsewhere, whereas Kurdish political leaders from both the PYD and KNC differentiated themselves by resorting to Wednesday demonstrations.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 December 2011. Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to the KRG president, said, “as the protest had started in Syria, we sat with our brothers, the Kurdish parties of Syria, and we planned a strategy. If they had started immediately, the regime would have attacked them directly and accused them of seeking secession. Instead, we decided to proceed gradually: first, see if others would begin [demonstrating]; then, if we [Kurds] chose to participate, we would start peacefully and call for democratic change”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 14 January 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 28 January 2012.

cal infrastructure stays the same, regardless of whether the regime stays or goes, we as Kurds won't have our rights. So we need to change the whole system, because the infrastructure hammers in the idea of a centralised state".<sup>51</sup> In other words, without greater Kurdish autonomy, the KNC sees no solution to the Kurdish question in Syria, regardless of the identity of those in power.

#### D. *The PYD's Ascent*

Alongside its discriminatory policies vis-à-vis the Kurds, the regime at times has sought to co-opt the PKK and its affiliates as potential cards in a power play with Turkey and Iraq. As of the 1970s, Kurds living in north-eastern Syria were seen in better light in Damascus than the Sunni Arab tribes they coexisted with and whose natural ties to Iraq the regime deemed more of a threat to national security. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Turkish-Syrian relations suffered due to territorial disputes over Hatay province (which Turkey annexed in 1939); strengthening Turkish-Israeli ties; and Ankara's 1983 decision to build an enormous barrier – the Atatürk Dam – on the Euphrates River, just north of where it flows into Syria. Then-President Hafez Assad, alarmed at Turkey's control of Syria's water supply, stepped up his support for the PKK, giving it shelter on Syrian soil and in Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon.<sup>52</sup> Only when Turkey threatened military action in 1998 did Syria force the PKK to leave, after which it established its headquarters in the Qandil mountain range in northern Iraq.<sup>53</sup>

As Turkish-Syrian ties improved, the regime's relationship with the PKK deteriorated. The 1999 Adana agreement between Damascus and Ankara prompted Syrian security forces to crack down on remaining PKK elements inside the country. The PKK responded in 2003 by covertly establishing the PYD as its political branch in Syria, drawing on support built during the years it openly operated in the country; it also relied on many relatives of PKK combatants of Syrian descent killed in the struggle against Turkey.<sup>54</sup> Tellingly, the regime's brutal repression of the 2004 uprising in Qamishli focused heavily on PYD members, suspected by the authorities of spearheading the unrest.<sup>55</sup>

The situation changed with the 2011 uprising. After failed attempts at convincing Bashar to change course, Turkey broke off relations with the Syrian regime and emerged as one of its opposition's most active supporters.<sup>56</sup> In reply, Bashar stole a

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<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 5 January 2012.

<sup>52</sup> See Gil Dibner, "My enemy's enemy: Turkey, Israel, and the Middle Eastern balance of power", *Harvard International Review*, 12 December 1998.

<sup>53</sup> For more background on the Turkish-Syrian relationship, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°108, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009, pp. 5-8.

<sup>54</sup> According to a person enjoying close ties to the PYD, around 3,500 PKK fighters killed in battles with the Turkish state were of Syrian origin. Crisis Group interview, 7 January 2012. One way the PYD cultivates this base of support is by demonstrations to commemorate its killed fighters, as shown in a photo of PYD supporters carrying a banner that reads: "Friday [of] Martyrs [and] Freedom", [www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.369729856424259.88910.252366188160627&type=3](http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.369729856424259.88910.252366188160627&type=3).

<sup>55</sup> See "Group Denial", Human Rights Watch, 26 November 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Turkey initially took the regime's reform pledges seriously and offered political support and technical expertise during high-profile visits to Damascus. In parallel, it established ties to the opposition and voiced growing criticism of the ongoing repression. By mid-2011, this ambivalent approach began to tilt against the regime. See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow Motion*

page from his father's playbook, seeking to co-opt the PYD both to contain anti-regime protests and, importantly, strengthen his leverage vis-à-vis Turkey by dangling the threat of an empowered PKK.

For the PYD, this shifting landscape offered an opportunity to establish a strong presence in Syria. It founded the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK), which it describes as a stand-in, elected local assembly designed to provide social services. According to a person with close PYD ties, "the PCWK has local representatives in all of Syrian Kurdistan, including Kobane, Qamishli and [the predominantly Kurdish] Sheikh Maqsood neighbourhood of Aleppo. The PCWK has mayors and local leaders who do the work of municipalities in place of the government. It was created on 12 December 2011 and has 320 members".<sup>57</sup>

The PCWK's activities aimed at mobilising support for the PYD through patronage networks – providing social services and a semblance of governance in areas experiencing a vacuum of authority.<sup>58</sup> It sought to offer a counter-model to the KNC's perceived corruption and disorganisation.<sup>59</sup> A Syrian Kurdish analyst said:

The PCWK was established so that the PYD could say: we are in unity with the people, and we don't need the other political parties. They have always done things like this. In 1992, when the Kurdistan regional government was established in Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK established the People's Council of Western Kurdistan in Brussels in response, since they couldn't join the KRG. Now that the KNC has been established in Syria, the PCWK is their way of saying: we have the masses with us, and we are in sync with them rather than in a front with the [other Kurdish] political parties.<sup>60</sup>

From the PYD's inception, its strength has derived from its mode of organising. It established People's Local Committees (PLCs), putting each in charge of specific activities in Kurd-populated areas under its control. The PLCs are gathered under a centralised organ established in 2007, the Central Coordination Committee (Lajnet

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*Revolution*, op. cit., 6 July 2011; and "Understanding the Syrian Opposition: A Turkish, American, and Syrian Dialogue", Project on Middle East Democracy, 8 June 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, January 2012. The PCWK's charter calls for popular activities, such as establishing elected local councils; building health, sport and cultural centres, human rights academies, schools and language centres focused on teaching Kurdish; developing media organisations and women's rights centres; and making efforts to restore the Kurdish names of cities, towns and villages in the Syrian Kurdish region. "The Middle East and Democracy: Recent events in Syria and the position of the Kurds", PYD conference attended by Crisis Group, Brussels, 12 March 2012.

<sup>58</sup> For example, the PYD in Afrin claimed it was launching a campaign against hashish growing, emphasising its local governance skills and civil responsibility. [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=397322800331631&set=a.253541481376431.66744.252366188160627&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=397322800331631&set=a.253541481376431.66744.252366188160627&type=1).

<sup>59</sup> The PYD projects an image of efficiency, especially on security matters. KurdWatch's Siamend Hajo said, "you have the PYD's political cadres but you also have a local population that is now joining the PYD because they see the group is strong. Some people in Qamishli say, well, at least the PYD can control the streets and so we support them. The PYD clearly has more experience than the other Syrian Kurdish parties; they make the youth feel involved by giving them responsibilities, such as taking care of security in neighbourhoods. They have sold gasoline at a discounted price; they have paid house visits to poor families and provided similar services. By contrast, several youths complained that the KNC had squandered money it had received from the KRG. They sent a representative to the KRG to complain about its decision to give money to KNC individuals instead of to the KNC as an institution, and then this representative was given money by the KRG, and he also took it for himself". Crisis Group interview, Berlin, 7 March 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group telephone communication, January 2012.

al-Munasiqiya al-Markiziya, CCC), which comprises the heads of each department.<sup>61</sup> A PYD member responsible for its youth department said:

Inspired by Öcalan's ideology, we believe that the organisation of society is a necessary step to achieve our political project of democratic self-administration. The PYD is just a political party, part of a bigger project called the Movement for a Democratic Society (Harakat lil-Mujtamaa al-Democratiya), which also includes the youth movement (Harakat al-Shabiba), the women's movement (Harakat al-Mara or Yekiti Star) and Kurdish-language institutes (Muasasat al-Lugha al-Kurdiya).<sup>62</sup>

Since the Syrian uprising, the PYD has added a security department that runs local People's Protection Committees that in turn oversee the work of the People's Protection Corps. The latter is akin to a police force and as such replaces the Damascus-run police under the interior ministry. Relying on local recruits, it is in charge of maintaining civil order in Kurdish areas.

The PYD also has established a militia, the People's Defence Corps (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). It pre-existed the uprising; since then, however, it has functioned as a surrogate for the army, controlling the boundaries of majority-Kurd populated areas, as well as the areas bordering Iraqi Kurdistan and, most importantly, a large part of the border with Turkey. The YPG likewise has deployed in cities alongside the People's Protection Corps, manning checkpoints, securing access to roads and providing security to government buildings. More than any other aspect of the PYD's presence in Kurdish areas, its paramilitary character has been a red flag for competing Kurdish groups and Turkey.

Until July 2012, relations between the PYD and the regime were both complex and in flux. Their interests arguably coincided in the short term: the regime benefited from Kurdish-Turkish as well as Kurdish-Arab tensions, whereas the PYD seized an opportunity to consolidate its position. But they also were somewhat at odds. On the one hand, growing PYD control over Kurdish areas inevitably weakened the regime's hold; on the other, insofar as Syria's Kurdish population harbours deep resentment of the central authorities, persistent allegations of PYD cooperation with Damascus undoubtedly damaged its credibility. By the start of 2012, the movement was keen to shed the "Kurdish *shabbiha*" label, resorting to social media to project its anti-regime credentials. It began using Facebook to regularly provide updates on developments and anti-regime commentary, although the bulk of the material posted promoted the PKK.

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<sup>61</sup> The PYD established the CCC during its third party congress in 2007. The committee then had eleven members. During the fourth party congress in August 2012, this was increased to 24. Each department is in charge of specific activities and has opened centres in most Kurdish cities, as the PYD expanded its control throughout 2011-2012. For instance, the political department communicates with the PYD party office; the youth department trains young Kurds in political activities; the cultural affairs department runs centres that aim to preserve Kurdish language and traditions as well as youth, women's and martyrs' organisations; and the women's affairs department is in charge of female political militancy. All departments are in Afrin, where PYD long has been active. Some cities have opened specialised departments; eg, in gas-rich Derek, the PYD has a department for developing natural resources. Crisis Group interview, PYD youth committee member, Erbil, 4 October 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 7 October 2012. The Movement for a Democratic Society is also known as TEV DEM.

Tensions with the regime became more visible in May 2012, when security forces arrested a number of the movement's demonstrators, and regime backers reportedly killed several PYD supporters in Aleppo.<sup>63</sup> Around this time, the PYD's tone (in its slogans and statements) turned increasingly harsh toward the regime.<sup>64</sup> Its foreign affairs representative, Alan Semo, illustrated the change: "We considered the uprising to be pro-democracy, and we have actively participated in the democratic uprising against four-to-five decades of dictatorship. If we were with the regime, why would they be killing us in Aleppo?"<sup>65</sup> To further bolster their case, PYD officials claimed both longstanding and violent confrontation with the regime. PYD Co-Secretary Salih Muslim said:

People accuse us of being on the regime's side. But we have been part of the struggle against this regime for almost a decade. We were the only party to support the 2004 mobilisation in Qamishli, and PYD members have been persecuted repeatedly. Since the revolution began, we have stood on the side of the revolution, and we became part of the opposition body, the NCB [National Coordination Body for Democratic Change]. On the ground, we have had martyrs, for example in Aleppo. If the regime has not persecuted us, it is because they realised after the 2004 events that they could not win against us.<sup>66</sup>

The PYD's real opportunity to push forward – and push the regime aside – came in July 2012, when it took over government buildings in the Kurdish areas in a demonstration of both strength and independence. A person with close ties to the PYD said:

We told the authorities in our cities they had 24 hours to leave or we would force them out. The police left Afrin and Kobane [Ayn al-Arab] with no problem, but in Derek [Al-Malikiyah] they left only after some fighting. We created a committee to protect Assyrians, Arabs and others. We took over gas stations and started selling gas and giving the engineers their salaries. So the system hasn't collapsed; it's just that the PYD is now in charge of it.<sup>67</sup>

Anti-PYD sources, including Turkish officials and Syrian Kurdish politicians affiliated with rival parties, claim that the PYD staged these uprisings in coordination with the regime. For instance, Prime Minister Erdoğan alleged that Assad had handed over five provinces to the PYD.<sup>68</sup> True, the PYD's enhanced control in the north arguably presented potential benefits for the regime: it constrained other armed opposition groups, hampering their access to border areas; by raising the movement's profile, it exacerbated fears among many Syrians – whether pro- or anti-regime – of

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<sup>63</sup> On 3 May 2012, PYD supporters held a rally in front of the courthouse after security forces arrested Abdulkhaliq Hasan, a movement member. Security forces then attacked protesters and arrested two, prompting other PYD rallies in Amouda. According to reports, the PYD held two members of the security forces hostage until the two protestors were released that night. Later that month, four PYD members reportedly were killed by regime supporters in the mostly-Kurdish Sheikh Maqsood neighbourhood of Aleppo. See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2518&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2518&z=en&cure=245); and [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2542&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2542&z=en&cure=245).

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, person close to PYD, 7 January 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group Skype interview, London, 1 June 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 October 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>68</sup> See <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/26/228476.html>. Erdoğan presumably was referring to Afrin, Amouda, Derek, Kobane and Jinderis.

Kurdish secessionist aspirations; and, more broadly, it fed into the regime's divide-and-rule strategy.<sup>69</sup>

Still, it is not clear why the regime would have had an interest in deliberately allowing the PYD to assert control in such an ostentatious manner at the cost of projecting weakness and suggesting that yet another previously quiet part of the country was slipping from its grip. What is more, the PYD has made a point of repeatedly asserting its independence and staging anti-regime protests. Unsurprisingly, the PYD dismissed allegations of collaboration with the regime as Turkish propaganda designed to harm its credibility.<sup>70</sup>

In the end, and regardless of whether and to what extent the regime and PYD might have cooperated, the movement's pragmatism and the relative overlap in the two sides' short-term interests help explain the apparent *modus vivendi*: the PYD secured several areas of the north, while the regime took no action to recover them.

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<sup>69</sup> Others have interpreted the July 2012 events differently. A Kurdish activist from Amouda recounted what happened there as follows: "The regime forces withdrew from the administration building. Then the PYD people arrived with four cars and surrounded the building. They allowed the employees to leave, taking with them all the documents". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 8 October 2012. A member explained the PYD strategy: "Our strategy was self-defence. In Ayn al-Arab, once the regime forces withdrew, it was our duty to take control of the buildings in order to prevent the FSA [Free Syrian Army, a loosely coordinated rebel armed group] from taking control of these areas, because once the FSA comes in, it will attract the regime forces to show up as well". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>70</sup> A PYD official said, "we are not surprised by the campaign of Turkey and the promoted lies and what is propagated about the alleged relationship between our party and the dictatorial regime in Syria, but we find that the Arab and world media are accusing us, quoting via Turkish media without investigation or scrutiny". Crisis Group interview, 24 July 2012.

### III. Factional Rivalries

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#### A. Youth Committees

The youth movement that emerged as part of the popular revolt explicitly set itself up against traditional Kurdish parties essentially gathered in the KNC.<sup>71</sup> In its eyes, these parties historically had not advanced Kurdish interests; offered unacceptable concessions to the central authorities; remained on the sidelines when Syrians rose up in 2011; and, more broadly, represent neither the spirit of the rebellion nor Syrian Kurds as a whole, disconnected from the ground and its youth while operating under an old, discredited leadership. A young activist expressed his frustration: “Political parties have had the same leadership for decades, and they did not achieve much for the Kurds. We are different. We don’t have a leader, but we meet each week, and we discuss how to proceed”.<sup>72</sup> Local youth committees went to some lengths to distinguish themselves from traditional parties, establishing a non-hierarchical governance structure as well as more democratic, inclusive decision-making.<sup>73</sup>

The youth movement’s view of the PYD hardly is more positive. Although they give the movement credit for being energetic and productive (especially when compared to KNC affiliates),<sup>74</sup> activists accuse it of policing Kurdish streets just as the regime used to do; repressing youth activities in most Kurdish cities;<sup>75</sup> and adhering to an alien, unpopular ideology – the PKK’s – focused on the struggle against Turkey.

Many young Syrian Kurds have sought to downplay any communal identification, highlighting their Syrian identity instead. According to an activist from Amouda:

We took to the streets with both the Syrian and the Kurdish flags, chanting: “The Syrian people are one”, in both Kurdish and Arabic. However, as the revolution proceeded, the relationship between Kurdish and Arab youth committees became

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<sup>71</sup> That said, relations with the KNC are not black-and-white. The Union of Youth Committees, which comprises six youth committees, and the Youth Movement (Harakat al-Shabaab) joined it. Political parties belonging to the KNC tried to attract members of the youth movement to their side by helping form party-affiliated youth unions or co-opting some of the LCCs and dissolving them into the KNC. A Syrian Kurdish journalist said, “some youth committees decided to become part of the KNC, but the youth do not really have a voice inside the KNC. We should call it the ‘Council of Parties’ rather than the ‘Kurdish National Council’”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 10 September 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of Amouda LCC, Erbil, 4 October 2012. Another said, “these people don’t do any work. They hold meetings in five-star hotels, they eat, they sleep, and they go. The PDKS opened a Kurdish school in Derek, but the classes lack organisation, and a PDKS member’s relative became the head schoolmaster. This is not the Syria we want”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 4 October 2012.

<sup>73</sup> In Amouda, for instance, the Youth Committee’s central administration (*idaara*) comprises 25 members who collectively reach decisions. Its various subcommittees are in charge of foreign relations; maintaining contacts with youth committees in other Syrian Kurdish cities; providing aid to families facing difficulties; and organising classes and education projects. Crisis Group interview, member of Amouda LCC, Erbil, 6 October 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Erbil, 14 September 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of Amouda LCC, Erbil, 4 October 2012. They see the events of July 2012 not as the liberation of Syrian Kurdish cities, but as the PYD seizing control of government buildings as the regime pulled out.



more difficult, due in part to growing difficulty in travelling across Syria and our restricted means of communication.<sup>76</sup>

Unlike the KNC and PYD, the youth committees do not seek Kurdish autonomy or special status for Kurdish areas. Instead they call for a democratic, secular state founded on the principle of citizenship in which the rights of Kurds would be recognised alongside those of other minority groups. An unaffiliated youth activist from Qamishli said, “there is a country called Syria, and as young Kurds we are part of it. I am a Kurd and a Syrian at the same time. I feel closer to a Syrian Arab of my age than to an Iraqi Kurd. The solution I see in Syria is to have a secular and democratic state that recognises my identity as a Kurd. Abdulhakim Bashar [head of the PDKS] does not represent the Kurds of Syria but what the KRG wants. I see my future with Syria, not with Barzani”.<sup>77</sup>

### B. *The KNC: A Fractious Confederacy*

As seen, the KNC's most significant asset is the international legitimacy it enjoys by association with the KRG and consequently, at one remove, Turkey. Accompanied by the head of the Syrian National Council, Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, met in August 2012 with KNC representatives in Erbil under the KRG's aegis, treating the KNC as the voice of Syria's Kurds. By contrast, he refused to meet with the PYD.

At the same time, the KNC has been hobbled by its lack of cohesion, detachment from youth activists and absence of a unifying vision and program. A leader of one of its factions said, “there are Kurdish parties that aren't ready to make far-reaching demands, because they believe the regime will punish them for it. They say that they want to remain modest so that they won't be harmed. The truth is they are still afraid of the regime. We hope, however, that this question will not lead to a split”.<sup>78</sup>

Even more divisive is the matter of conflicting personalities, themselves often a reflection of a battle for influence among outside sponsors. Abdulhamid Darwish (who is close to Talabani) and Abdulhakim Bashar (close to Barzani) count among the most influential KNC leaders; their personal dislike aside, their enmity also reflects PUK-KDP rivalry for influence over Syrian Kurds. Power struggles within some of the KNC's member parties have become more frequent, likely a symptom of the group's enhanced profile and potential role; in at least one instance (that of the Yassar Party), they have suffered internal splits.<sup>79</sup>

The KNC also has a comparatively weak presence in Kurd-populated areas of Syria. Despite stated plans to open offices in most of the Kurdish-populated towns, it has yet to do so; it lacks a military force of its own; and does not exercise effective control over KDP-trained groups of Syrian Kurds based in Iraqi Kurdistan – all of which casts doubt on its ability to decide on behalf of Syrian Kurds or deliver on any agreement it signs.

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<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of Amouda LCC, Erbil, 6 October 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil 13 September 2012.

<sup>78</sup> See [www.kurdwatch.org/syria\\_article.php?aid=2504&z=en&cure=240](http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2504&z=en&cure=240).

<sup>79</sup> In April 2012, the Yassar Party's central committee declared its chairman, Muhammad Mousa, banned. This led to a split, resulting in two Yassar parties, one under the name “Central Committee”, the other under the name “Congress”. Ibid.

In order to prepare for its role in a post-Assad Syria, the KNC claims it plans to reform and become a more effective body.<sup>80</sup> This it purportedly will do by concentrating decision-making in a smaller number of people; formulating a clear set of demands; placing these on the table in negotiations with the PYD and Syrian opposition; and increasing its presence on the ground by branching out to tribes and youth committees. To this end, the KNC was considering giving the larger factions veto power. Should such centralisation eventually occur, it likely would empower elements closely tied to the KDP, in turn assisting Barzani's efforts to enhance his influence over Syria's Kurdish areas.

These reforms have yet to take place. However, in December 2012 four party leaders close to Barzani – Abdulhakim Bashar, Ismail Hama, Mustafa Juma and Mustafa Oso – announced the formation of a new political coalition, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union (SKDU), stating that this move “will improve the KNC's political clout” and that negotiations with the Syrian opposition concerning Kurdish issues would continue in coordination with other KNC members and the Supreme Kurdish Committee. Yet others allege that the new group might try to sideline competing Syrian Kurdish political forces, with an eye to strengthening Barzani. An Erbil-based Syrian Kurdish activist said:

The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union consists of the parties that are closest to Barzani. They share the same opinion on federalism and on the Iraq-based Syrian Kurdish forces. The creation of this union will increase divisions within the KNC. At this point, Barzani might as well sit down with just his friends and decide over our future. That would be easier!<sup>81</sup>

### C. *The PYD: Encumbering Ties to the PKK*

The PYD is a well-organised, trained and armed political party, strengthened by an internal decision-making process that tends to produce a unified vision. Together with a common history, it shares the PKK's clear leadership hierarchy and ideology. It belongs to the Union of Kurdish Communities (the KCK), an Öcalan-led pan-Kurdish umbrella organisation that includes the PKK and affiliated parties: in Iran, the Party of Free Life for Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK) and, in Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party.<sup>82</sup> The KCK and PKK have the same

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<sup>80</sup> A KNC member criticised the Council's internal functioning: “The system of rotation to appoint heads of the KNC committees complicates things. For instance, one's mandate as head of the KNC Foreign Relation Committee is too short to achieve anything; whoever comes afterwards has to start from scratch”. Crisis Group interview, 5 October 2012. A Kurdish party official close to KNC head Faysal Yusuf said, “we are planning to reform the KNC in order to make it a more efficient decision-making body. The result might be that decision-making will be concentrated in a smaller number of people. Also, the reform might favour the larger parties by giving them greater decision-making power”. Crisis Group interview, member of the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (a split-off from Abdulhamid Darwish's Syrian Kurdish Progressive Party), Erbil, 4 October 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 19 December 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Local activists established a PKK proxy party in Iraq in 2002, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (KDSP). Iraqi Kurdish security forces closed its headquarters in Erbil on 3 November 2007. In 2009, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission barred a KDSP subgroup, “Hewa”, from the 2009 parliamentary elections in the Kurdish region. See “Erbil: Candidates and Coalitions for Kurdistan Region Parliamentary Elections”, U.S. embassy Baghdad cable, 7 June 2009, as reported by WikiLeaks; [www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2007/11/independentstate1747.htm](http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2007/11/independentstate1747.htm).

charter and share the same leaders: the top three names in the KCK executive committee also are the PKK's principal leaders.<sup>83</sup>

The PYD openly echoes the PKK's political phraseology and symbolism. It has been calling for "democratic autonomy", a concept of power devolution devised – in terms that appear deliberately vague – by Öcalan.<sup>84</sup> Portraits of Öcalan regularly feature in PYD demonstrations.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, as seen, its armed branch was co-located with and trained by the PKK in Qandil.<sup>86</sup>

How much autonomy the PYD has from the PKK is controversial. An anti-PKK Syrian Kurdish activist said, PYD leaders "are not the ones who decide [key matters]; it's [the PKK in] Qandil that does"<sup>87</sup> – yet the movement's return to Syria could lead to diverging priorities.<sup>88</sup> The presence of active PKK branches or allies in an adjacent Kurdish territory could give it additional strategic depth in its fight against Turkey, but the PYD must factor in new considerations and forge a political role more attuned to local realities. This requires gaining wider popularity among Syrian Kurds as a *Syrian* Kurdish party; developing a Kurdish-Syrian agenda; becoming an interlocutor for the (non-Kurdish) Syrian opposition; and acquiring greater international legitimacy. Tellingly, in response to Turkish threats in summer 2012 to attack it in Syria,<sup>89</sup> its leaders publicly distanced themselves from the PKK, claiming the only remaining link was ideological affinity. Ilham Ahmed, a PYD official, said, "our movement benefited from Öcalan's ideology, but physically and organisationally we are independent from the PKK".<sup>90</sup>

Any effort to forge a more independent identity could be hampered by its armed wing, the YPG, whose leadership reportedly remains strongly dependent on the PKK. PYD members stress that the YPG has its own independent command structure.<sup>91</sup> But in the event border clashes between Syria and Turkey were to escalate into full-

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<sup>83</sup> The three are jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, PKK acting leader Murat Karayılan and PKK co-founder and former insurgent forces chief Cemil Bayık. Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group has referred to Öcalan's concept as "the unbearable vagueness of 'democratic autonomy'", explaining that the movement intentionally keeps its definition of autonomy imprecise partly because any set formula is likely to be interpreted as "separatist" by the centralised Turkish system. Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, op. cit., p. 22. The PYD regularly uses the term "democratic autonomy" in its public statements, eg, [ikjnews.com/?p=494](http://ikjnews.com/?p=494), 28 November 2012. The PKK separately employs the term "democratic confederalism", a form of organisation designed to join Kurdish regions in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Öcalan has described it as a pan-Kurdish "pyramid-like model of organisation [in which] it is the communities who talk, debate and make decisions"; see his, "The declaration of democratic confederalism", 2 April 2005, [www.kurdmedia.com/article.aspx?id=10174](http://www.kurdmedia.com/article.aspx?id=10174).

<sup>85</sup> See "Slogans, signs and protests: Syrian Kurds revolt", photo essay, *Al-Monitor*, June 2012.

<sup>86</sup> Historically, many PKK fighters have been Syrian Kurds, because the PKK spent years in Syria before its expulsion in 1998.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, 7 January 2012.

<sup>88</sup> Likewise, even though PJAK and the PKK have the same leadership and ideology, and the PKK has armed and paid PJAK's Iranian Kurdish fighters, PJAK's priority is to fight the Iranian regime, while the PKK's focus is on Turkey.

<sup>89</sup> Erdoğan said, "the terrorist PKK organisation's cooperation with the PYD is something we cannot look upon favourably .... If there is a terror operation ... intervening there would be our most natural right". See [english.al-akhbar.com/node/10298](http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/10298).

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 September 2012. PYD leader Salih Muslim maintained the same position. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 10 September 2012.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ilham Ahmed, Erbil, 10 September 2012.

blown Turkish military intervention, the YPG could find itself fighting against Ankara to protect areas under its domination, thereby leading to de facto alignment with the PKK.

Reflecting on the complicated ties between the PYD and PKK, a KNC member said:

The PYD will need to change its strategy if it wants to survive in a post-Assad Syria. They will be the first to benefit from cooperation with other Kurdish Syrian parties grouped in the KNC. An agreement will benefit the PYD's image in front of public opinion, because people would stop seeing them as collaborators with the regime. Moreover, they would no longer see the PYD as implementing the PKK's agenda in Syria. Finally, the PYD would also recast its image at the international level and gain the legitimacy it lacks due to its historical affiliation with the PKK.

If you were to ask me: "What is the PYD? What kind of relationship do they have with the PKK?" I could not answer you, and perhaps the PYD couldn't either. I believe there is an internal PYD debate over which strategy to follow: to transform the PYD into a Syrian political movement or to continue their affiliation with the PKK's armed struggle.<sup>92</sup>

Overall, the PYD appears to be seeking to rebrand its image as independent from the PKK, even as the PKK in effect retains control over its decision-making. But it might not be able to maintain such ambiguity for long, compelled to choose between being a PKK branch in Syria or becoming a Syrian Kurdish organisation with a PKK past but decidedly Syrian agenda.

Unlike the KNC, the PYD has established a presence throughout Kurd-populated areas and ensured a form of policing through its armed branch. Highly organised, internally cohesive and effective in mobilising its base, it controls access to and within towns while supplying the local population with basic goods and services, including fuel, gas and flour. A Syrian Kurd in Erbil said, "they get into the details of people's needs. For instance, in Aleppo's (predominantly Kurdish) Sheikh Maqsoud and Ash-rafiya neighbourhoods, they took control of the pharmacies and medical supplies".<sup>93</sup>

As seen, what the PYD lacks is international standing as a political body representing Syrian Kurds. In the words of a KNC member who took part in the August 2012 Erbil visit during which the Turkish foreign minister refused to meet with the PYD, "Davutoğlu only asked to meet with the KNC. But generally, neither side was ready for a meeting. Turkey views the PYD as the same as the PKK and as having ties with the regime. On the other side, the PYD sees [and opposes] Turkish interference in Syrian affairs".<sup>94</sup> PYD leader Salih Muslim commented: "When Davutoğlu came to Erbil, we were there, but he refused to meet with us. From our side, if they are ready to recognise us and recognise Kurdish rights, then we will sit with them. But there are principles involved, and recognition of Kurdish rights is a fundamental one". As for the SNC, Muslim said that while the PYD would be happy to engage in dialogue with it, that group – "acting under Turkish influence" – had referred to the PKK in its statements as "a terrorist organisation", something the PYD could not accept.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 13 September 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, KNC member, Erbil, 10 September 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 10 September 2012.

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## IV. A Regional Tug of War

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### A. Barzani as Self-Interested Marriage Broker

Taking sides in the unfolding Syrian conflict, Barzani and his KDP have used their access to the KRG's resources, military strength and international legitimacy to both bolster and influence the KNC.<sup>96</sup> In February 2012, he hosted the KNC in Erbil, offering it military and financial assistance – an unambiguous message to the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, as well as the PYD, that the KRG had a hand in Syrian affairs and that the KNC was a force with which to be reckoned.

The KNC-PYD competition directly reflects a broader KDP-PKK struggle over the Kurds' leadership in the four countries across which they are divided, itself a manifestation of the PKK's historic pan-Kurdish aspirations and Barzani's more recent success in expanding Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. The currents represent the two predominant models of Kurdish nationalism and competing paradigms for dealing with Turkey, whose territory encompasses much of what Kurds see as their historic homeland and which offers the KRG its only export route to Western markets. The PKK has used an episodic armed struggle to force Ankara to extend greater cultural and political rights to Kurds in Turkey; in contrast, the KDP, using its dominance of the KRG, of late has worked hard to develop economic interdependence and political ties with Turkey to reduce Iraqi Kurds' dependence on Baghdad.<sup>97</sup>

In exchange for Turkey's political and diplomatic support, the KRG has cooperated with Ankara in its fight against the PKK. Notably, it largely has kept silent regarding Turkish airstrikes against PKK bases in the Qandil mountain range, earning Barzani criticism not just for failing to support his Kurdish brethren, but also for condemning the PKK's resort to armed struggle. Mahmoud Othman, an independent Iraqi Kurdish lawmaker said, "Barzani is under Turkish influence: He criticises PKK attacks in Turkey but not Turkish attacks against the PKK, and he calls on the PKK to lay down its arms, not on Turkey to end its war in the south east".<sup>98</sup> Öcalan and Barzani thus stand on exact opposite sides on the question of relations with Turkey; at loggerheads, they have become de facto competitors for the hearts and minds of the wider Kurdish community.<sup>99</sup>

From the KDP's perspective, close relations with Ankara hold the potential of providing the movement with a leading political role in all Kurd-populated areas in the Middle East, enabling Barzani to become the pan-Kurdish leader. Optimally, as

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<sup>96</sup> Although Barzani's KDP spearheaded KRG policies on the Kurdish Syrian issue, it was done in coordination with Jalal Talabani's PUK. A PUK official was present during the Turkish foreign minister's August 2012 visit to Erbil, for example. A PUK politburo member said, "we support the Kurds of Syria. We recently met with the KDP and reaffirmed our cooperation on the Kurdish issue in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 9 January 2013.

<sup>97</sup> For background on Barzani's strategy of economic integration with Turkey, in particular oil and gas-related investment, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°120, *Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit*, 19 April 2012; on the PKK's agenda in Turkey, see Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, op. cit.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 4 September 2012.

<sup>99</sup> Such alliances are not new. In 1997, for example, between 25,000 and 50,000 Turkish troops launched a campaign into Iraqi Kurdistan against the PKK. Barzani was widely suspected of having asked Ankara to intervene, because the KDP was involved in a civil war with the PUK, which had allied with the PKK. See Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, vol. 21, 11 November 1999, p. 384.

the KDP sees it, the fall of the Assad regime would allow Syria to emulate the Iraqi model, increasing Barzani-championed Kurdish power throughout the region. A KDP official said:

Barzani delivered a state to Kurds; the PKK did not. We want to solve the Kurdish issue by peaceful means, and we want each part of Kurdistan to see its own rights recognised in a peaceful way. We also want the others to benefit from our experience. The PKK cannot have the same influence [in Turkey] that we have [in Iraq]. We have something close to a state, and we have accumulated a lot of positive experience. The PKK, with its extremism, did not achieve any result. Diplomacy is the right strategy to accomplish things.<sup>100</sup>

Tellingly, Barzani intends at some point to hold a pan-Kurdish conference in Erbil, a project he has been working on for a long time and that could bolster the KDP's status as the Kurdish standard-bearer.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, by working with Ankara, the KDP is seeking to establish itself as the champion of Turkey's Kurds and help solve the Kurdish question.<sup>102</sup> Faleh Mustafa, who holds the KRG's foreign relations file, described Barzani's participation in the ruling AK Party's September 2012 conference in Ankara as a "historic step", adding: "We believe that Erdoğan has the right policy toward the Kurdish issue. The days when Turkey denied the Kurds' presence are over".<sup>103</sup>

This change in relations between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey is nothing short of momentous. Barely five years ago, the KRG and Turkey were sworn enemies, exchanging invective and mutual recriminations over issues such as the PKK's bases in the Iraqi Kurdish region, the KRG's exercise of economic and political autonomy from Baghdad and its claim to Kirkuk. Over time, however, Ankara developed a new perspective on relations with its neighbours, including Iraqi Kurds. Coming amid growing tensions between Ankara and Baghdad,<sup>104</sup> the rapid rapprochement between Turkey and the Kurdish region covered virtually all critical issues, notably energy, leading to the virtually full economic integration between the two. Developments in Syria likewise keep Ankara and Erbil mostly on the same page: both wish for the collapse of the regime, and both fear the PKK's influence there. For now at least, this appears to have helped overcome lingering Turkish misgivings that Barzani might

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<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamid Darbandi, director, public relations department, presidential office, Erbil, 3 October 2012.

<sup>101</sup> The KDP's Kamal Kirkuki, a former speaker of the Kurdish parliament in Erbil, said, "this conference will be an important step to tell the world what the Kurdish people want". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 7 October 2012.

<sup>102</sup> A KDP official said, "Turkey needs to resolve the Kurdish problem and to find a compromise with the PKK. In his speech to the AKP conference, Barzani gave a sign by speaking in Kurdish. He is ready to be the link between the Kurds and Turkey, and to help in Ankara's negotiation with the PKK". Crisis Group interview, Hamid Darbandi, Erbil, 3 October 2012. Kamal Kirkuki said, "Erdoğan has taken unprecedented steps in the solution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Turkey can continue to solve the Kurdish issue through peaceful means, and we [the KDP] will do anything that can contribute to Turkey's domestic stability". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 7 October 2012.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 6 October 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Turkey-Iraq relations have been profoundly affected by, among others, the deteriorating personal relationship between Prime Ministers Erdoğan and Maliki. The first damage came from Turkey's misconceived support for Iyad Allawi to replace Maliki after the March 2010 elections. Crisis Group Report, *The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit*, op. cit.

exploit the vacuum in northern Syria to establish yet another autonomous Kurdish region.

Ankara and Erbil have somewhat different approaches to the PYD, however. Unwilling to be seen as involved in a Kurd-on-Kurd military confrontation, hoping to avoid a direct conflict between Turkey and the PYD's armed branch, fearful of complicating the delicate relationship between the KRG and PKK in Iraq and seeking to enhance his image among Kurds region-wide, Barzani has tried to forge an alliance between the KNC and PYD. The KDP leader's approach reflects his difficult balancing act and preference for containing the PYD and perhaps weaning it from its traditional PKK sponsor. Indeed, his goal arguably is to encourage the PYD to evolve into a more strictly political body that cuts ties with the PKK and lays down its weapons.<sup>105</sup>

Barzani's willingness to engage with the PYD has given Erbil additional leverage with Ankara. It could put him in position to pave the way for direct Turkish-PYD negotiations, for example over border security. Hamid Darbandi, the KRG presidential office's public relations director, came close to evoking this possibility: "We understand that the Turkish foreign minister refused to meet with the PYD [directly]. I found this almost natural. They fear the development of the PKK in these areas. Any threat to the unity of Turkey is also against our views, however. The KRG could play a positive role in easing relations between Turkey and the Kurds of Syria".<sup>106</sup> Further down the road, Barzani might even seek to mediate between Ankara and the PKK, should the opportunity arise.<sup>107</sup>

Barzani's first effort to mend ties between the two Syrian Kurdish branches ended in failure. The PYD refused to join the KNC when it was formed in October 2011, rejecting the coalition's claim of equal representation for all parties.<sup>108</sup> It made little sense for the PYD to become one of seventeen parties under Barzani's tutelage, since it had the means to carry out its own agenda in Syria. With an eye to dealing with Barzani as an equal, it instead formed the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK) as a parallel body to the KNC.

Subsequently, on 11 June 2012, Barzani brokered a seven-point agreement between the KNC and PYD. It included creation of joint committees to coordinate political work and settle disputes in Kurdish areas of Syria, an end to the presence of armed groups there and cessation of mutually harmful propaganda.<sup>109</sup> The agreement was

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<sup>105</sup> The KDP has attempted to encourage PYD members to sever their ties with the PKK, develop a Syrian Kurdish agenda and cooperate with the KNC under Barzani's umbrella. A KRG official said, "they can become just like the BDP, which can operate freely in the Turkish parliament. Everybody would benefit from this evolution". Crisis Group interview, Hamid Darbandi, director of the public relations department, presidential office of the Kurdistan region, Erbil, 3 October 2012. (The BDP – Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, Peace and Democracy Party – is a Kurdish political party in Turkey.) Another KRG official added: "We have to establish negotiations with the PYD's soft-liners, and then, starting from there, we can put an end to the fight. We could turn the Kurdish areas in Syria into a safe haven. But all the Kurdish parties should work together". Crisis group interview, Faleh Mustafa, head of the KRG's foreign relations department, Erbil, 6 October 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 3 October 2012.

<sup>107</sup> See *World Bulletin*, 22 March 2012.

<sup>108</sup> A PYD official offered a slightly different account: "Our condition for joining the KNC was that people should vote for it. We wanted to have an elected KNC, not an appointed, undemocratic one. The KNC would not accept this because they knew that the PYD would get most of the votes and would dominate the KNC." Crisis Group interview, Alan Semo, 1 June 2012.

<sup>109</sup> The seven points are: (1) "Establish a joint Supreme Committee of both councils to coordinate political and diplomatic work as well as to develop a unified political objective ... based on the im-

not implemented, however,<sup>110</sup> and a month later, Barzani tried again, apparently with greater success. On 11 July, as noted above, the two sides signed the Erbil Declaration, in which they committed to joint government of Syrian Kurdish areas during the transitional phase via a new Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), comprised of ten members, five from each group, and three subcommittees covering security, foreign relations and services.<sup>111</sup>

Creation of the SKC was an important first step in overcoming mutual suspicions. Still, as soon became apparent, challenges remain formidable. They have been most visible on the security front, given the presence of the YPG and ongoing KDP training of fighters. In further negotiations, including in Geneva at the end of September, the security issue was paramount. Under the accord's terms, the PYD was to relinquish its monopoly over Kurdish armed forces in Syria and cooperate in forming a Joint Security Committee (Lijnat al-Amn al-Mushtarika) composed of five PYD and five KNC members, as well as a Joint Force (Quwa Mushtarika) that incorporates both the YPG and KDP-trained Syrian Kurdish fighters. The security committee and security force are both to fall under the SKC's authority, but the YPG has blocked the KDP-trained fighters from entering Syria from their training camps in northern Iraq. A PYD leader said, "the YPG will not accept any of the KDP-trained people and Peshmerga into Syria. Inevitably, their entry will provoke a clash between the two parts".<sup>112</sup>

Efforts at a rapprochement are informed by the two Kurdish camps' recognition of their own vulnerabilities – the PYD being strong locally but isolated regionally; the KNC lacking both popular support and a military force. They also reflect common fear that the new order that eventually will emerge in Damascus might not be sympathetic toward their claims, judging from the Syrian opposition's reluctance to explicitly recognise Kurdish rights.

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mutable values of the Kurdish people as a nation and ethnicity in Syria and [working] towards the overthrow of the dictatorship in Damascus, the construction of a democratic, pluralistic state, and the creation of a new Syria with many ethnicities. This new Syria will satisfy the aspirations of our people by recognizing its existence as an original people in the constitution. The Kurdish question must be solved democratically. (2) Establish a Supreme Organisational Committee of both councils to coordinate practical work in the field in all regions. (3) Establish subcommittees to coordinate practical work in the field in the individual regions. (4) Cease all propaganda activities [presumably all directed at each other]. (5) Abolish all forms of armed presence in the Kurdish regions and communities. (6) Establish joint, unarmed protection committees. (7) Establish joint mediation committees to solve social conflicts. These committees should be the highest responsible authority in such matters". Text at: [www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_Do27\\_en\\_ar.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_Do27_en_ar.pdf).

<sup>110</sup> According to Walid Sheikho, a representative of the Azadi (Freedom) Party in Europe, the 11 June agreement failed "because the PYD didn't comply with the agreement and continued to arrest activists and torture Kurds, and attacked houses and killed innocent people". Alan Semo, the PYD's foreign affairs representative, countered that in his view the main problem was that not all Kurdish parties had signed on. Referring to the 11 July Erbil Declaration, he said, "this time all of them were there, and all of them signed it, hopefully. Before, some Kurdish parties did not agree with signing an agreement with the PYD". Both quoted in *Rudaw*, 17 July 2012.

<sup>111</sup> In the new accord, the KNC and PCWK (ie, the PYD) recognised and pledged to implement the June agreement; resolved to establish a joint council to lead the Kurdish movement in Syria and formulate political principles; agreed to take consensus decisions; called for cessation of mutual attacks in the media; and banned use of force or any activities likely to create tensions in the Kurdish areas. See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2594&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2594&z=en&cure=245). Text of the Erbil Declaration available at [www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch\\_Do31\\_en\\_ar.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_Do31_en_ar.pdf).

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, Asia Abdullah, PYD co-secretary, Geneva, 26 September 2012.



Still, a significant obstacle to a genuine intra-Kurdish understanding is that it is the YPG that must agree to formation of a joint armed force, and it has its own leadership and is not wholly dependent on PYD decisions. The PYD has advanced two possible solutions: the YPG can submit itself to the SKC's authority but, in exchange, the SKC would recognise the YPG as the sole force responsible for security in Kurdish Syria; alternatively, the YPG might integrate the KDP-trained fighters under its command. Neither proposal is acceptable to the KNC or KDP. A KNC official argued that the only way forward was for the YPG either to disarm or to relinquish command over its fighters to the new Supreme Kurdish Committee.<sup>113</sup> The struggle over security has carried over into other dimensions of the relationship. For example, the PYD has pushed for formation of a foreign relations committee because it faces ostracism internationally and needs the SKC framework to gain legitimacy. The KNC has seemed reluctant to accede to this as long as the PYD insists on the YPG's military supremacy.

Ultimately, deep distrust persists. In KNC eyes, the PYD remains excessively close to the PKK and maintains an ambiguous relationship with the Syrian regime as well as Iran. A KNC member said, "they are in constant telephone communication with high-ranking PKK officials. The final decision remains in Qandil".<sup>114</sup> Another KNC leader stated: "If they cut their relationship with the PKK, they will find themselves without weapons or funding and will soon become a very small party".<sup>115</sup> The KNC also faults the PYD for highly centralised, even dogmatic, decision-making, leaving little room for negotiations, and an attendant refusal to share power effectively or relinquish control over security. "It is very difficult to establish cooperation with them, a KNC official said. "It is often not enough to convince those at the negotiating table, because the decision does not lie with them. And it is also evident that they prefer to work on their own".<sup>116</sup>

The PYD for its part complains that the KNC, suffering from extreme fragmentation, is dysfunctional and lacks a significant following in Syria's Kurdish areas. A PYD leader said, "these parties sometimes consist of no more than 40 people, who are an extended family that has influence only in one limited region. We would like to work with them, but they are simply not organised".<sup>117</sup>

More broadly, the PYD and KNC – and even the KNC's constituent parts – lack a common vision for the Kurds' role in a post-Assad Syria. Although none has called for an independent Kurdish entity, the similarities end there. The KNC's pro-Barzani faction supports a federal arrangement modelled on the Iraq experience.<sup>118</sup> The pro-

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<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Sulaiman, KNC member, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, KNC member, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 13 September 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>118</sup> Under this view, the Kurdish region should be part of a federal Syria, in which the main communities (Druze, Alawites, Christians, etc.) each would have the right to establish its own federal region, and the central government would share power with their governments. Ethnic and sectarian identities would form the basis of a future Syria, much as they defined post-2003 Iraq. The Kurdish region would extend from Afrin in the north west to Derek in the north east, with Qamishli as its capital and government seat. Although it would not have geographical continuity, Abdulkhaleq Bashar, leader of the pro-Barzani PDKS, said, "the idea consists of establishing a region populated by a Kurdish majority in which minorities will have their share of seats in both the regional government of Qamishli and the provincial council in each main city. Each group's seats will be determined on the basis of a population census. For instance, if Arabs are 15 per cent of Qamishli's popu-

Talabani faction talks instead of a democratic Syria based on citizenship, with a degree of Kurdish self-administration in Kurd-populated areas.<sup>119</sup> The PYD, echoing Öcalan, has called for “democratic autonomy” or “democratic self-administration” of Kurdish areas in Syria.<sup>120</sup>

Difficulties notwithstanding, Barzani has continued his efforts to ensure success of the arranged marriage between the KNC and PYD. He has intensified his courtship of the latter, seeking to ensconce it firmly within the Supreme Kurdish Committee and thus cement the KDP's role as the deal's patron. Simultaneously, KDP officials have been negotiating with more moderate PYD members to press them to enforce the Erbil agreement. In the words of a KDP official involved in the negotiations:

if you are not unified, you cannot achieve what you want. We are talking to those PYD members who are the most pragmatic rather than to those who are the most radical, and we are pushing them to be on the same page as the KNC. Time is running out. It is very important for Syrian Kurds to unite and formulate a clear set of demands vis-à-vis the Syrian opposition. Syrian Kurds should crystallise their demands before it is too late.<sup>121</sup>

A second KDP official said:

There are some PYD members with whom it is possible to talk. What they need to do first is to think in the interests of the Kurds of their country [Syria]. The moment has arrived for them to come down from the mountains: to abandon their armed struggle [against Turkey] and engage in politics. For the Kurds, the era of armed struggle has ended.<sup>122</sup>

On 22 November 2012, Barzani met with the SKC in Erbil to discuss creation of a “unified Kurdish army” (*jaysh kurdi muwahhad*), formed from the YPG and Barza-

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lation, they will get 15 per cent of the seats on the Qamishli provincial council. [In other words,] in mixed-population areas, we might have a situation similar to that of Kirkuk. And a border will divide the Kurdish-majority areas from the rest of the country”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 13 September 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Ahmed Suleiman of the pro-Talabani Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria argued that the solution to the Kurdish question in Syria consists in establishing democratic government based on the citizenship principle, with a central government that would recognise Kurdish rights and in which Kurds would play an active role. Kurd-populated areas would have an unspecified degree of self-rule. He pointedly rejected federalism as inappropriate for Syria: “The project of a federal region cannot work in Syria's geography. There are thousands of Kurds living in Aleppo and Damascus. I feel that those who seek federalism are seeking power rather than recognition of Kurdish rights in Syria. When I am thirsty, I won't know what to do with an entire tank of water, and a glass of water will be quite enough”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil 11 September 2012.

<sup>120</sup> According to Sinam Muhammad, co-head of the pro-PYD People's Council for Western Kurdistan, the solution to the Kurdish question in Syria entails establishment of a democratic society. Supporters of this reject the idea of borders between Kurd-populated areas and the rest of the country, and call for recognition of ethnic differences between Kurds and Arabs. Each Kurd-populated city would organise a Kurdish higher council to provide local self-administration and report to a 300-member People's Council of Western Kurdistan, a legislative body with executive and legislative branches. In mixed-population areas, Arabs would have their own council and participate in administration in consultation with the Kurdish councils. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 11 September 2012.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, Kamal Kirkuki, KDP official, Erbil, 7 October 2012.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hamid Darbandi, public relations director, KRG presidential office, Erbil, 3 October 2012.

ni-trained Syrian Kurdish fighters, “for the protection and liberation of the Syrian Kurdish people”,<sup>123</sup> but the sides failed to agree. A PYD official said that Syrian Kurds who received military training in Iraqi Kurdistan would be allowed to enter Kurdish areas of Syria only with the approval of the Supreme Kurdish Committee (on which the PYD holds half the seats) and in cooperation with the YPG. He added: “They will not enter for now, because the Council has not given its approval, and there will be big problems if they choose to work by themselves”.<sup>124</sup> A KNC official acknowledged that this was the case, complaining that the PYD would not agree; that even if it acquiesced while in Erbil it would change its mind the moment it returned to Syria; and that in any event it would never carry out its commitments. “As it stands”, he said, “if one of the Syrian Peshmerga [trained fighters] steps into Syria, there will be a conflict with the YPG”.<sup>125</sup>

The key to any ultimate compromise would be agreement on who would exercise both formal and effective command over the armed forces, in which parts of Syrian Kurdistan they would be permitted to operate and with what mandate. The KDP has been focusing on empowering the pro-Barzani faction within the KNC – the Kurdish Democratic Political Union – promoting a federalism model for Syria’s future.<sup>126</sup> In the end, however, it may try to forge a consensus over a Syrian Kurdish confederation, pursuant to which each Syrian Kurdish province would administer itself. This would merge the federalism it sponsors with the PYD’s promotion of “democratic autonomy” and could lead to a de facto partition of Syrian Kurdistan, with Afrin in the north west governed by the PYD and the al-Jazeera region, close to the Iraq border, falling under control of the KNC (ie, the KRG in effect ).<sup>127</sup>

## B. *Turkey Leans In*

Turkey’s policy toward Syrian Kurds should be understood in the context of its broader involvement in the Syrian conflict and also its four-decades-old battle with the PKK that has caused the death of over 30,000 people and cost \$300 billion.<sup>128</sup> Ankara has played a key role in seeking to nurture and assist the opposition, notably the Syrian National Council (before it was replaced by the Syrian National Coalition in November 2012), which was founded and primarily based in Istanbul, as well as the Free Syrian Army, the loosely coordinated rebel armed group that keeps its nominal command centre and headquarters in south-eastern Turkey. But if Turkey increasingly is seeking to influence events in Syria, so too are those events spilling over into Turkey: growing refugee flows; cross-border shelling; and, of relevance to this report, fear that the PKK is seizing the opportunity to bolster its activities in both countries.

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<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baradost Azizi, Syrian Kurdish journalist, Erbil, 26 November 2012.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Rasho, PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil, 27 November 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 27 November 2012.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interview, KNC leader, Erbil, 9 January 2013.

<sup>127</sup> This arrangement would resemble Iraqi Kurdistan’s de facto division between areas of PUK (Sulaymaniyah) and KDP (Badinan) control – with both parties present in the capital, Erbil – except that in Iraqi Kurdistan this division would also have a linguistic basis. A KDP official said, “it is not possible for a single party to monopolise control over the Kurdish areas. It won’t be possible considering the geography of the areas. The PYD is not the only party. Kurdish Syrian parties all must work together in terms of security administration and education”, Crisis Group interview, 14 January 2013.

<sup>128</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, op. cit.

As Ankara sees it, the PYD is little more than a branch or carbon copy of the PKK that is attempting to establish a foothold in Syria; as a result, it fears the Kurds' empowerment there might fuel separatist sentiment in Turkey. An official said, "the PYD and PKK are the same. We have evidence that they are. You cannot cover the sun. We do not believe in nuanced shifts. We only believe in dramatic changes". Another Turkish official said, "if there is no connection between the PYD and the PKK, they have to prove it. If they want us to negotiate, they will have to prove they are independent from the PKK, stopping the movement of arms between them and making a clear statement".<sup>129</sup>

Of greatest concern to Turkish officials is that the PYD could become strong enough in Syria to establish operational bases similar to those in Qandil, from which the PKK might then launch or organise cross-border attacks. Tellingly, Turkish military deployments and drills in the border area directly across from Qamishli and Kobane commenced in the wake of the PYD's July 2012 show of force.<sup>130</sup> Regardless of its stated motivation – to cope with a worsening refugee crisis and resulting humanitarian conditions – Turkey's priority has been to curb the PYD presence to the south of its borders as part of its national security strategy.<sup>131</sup>

Though it wants to sideline and contain the PYD militarily and politically, Turkey has opted for now against direct intervention, lest it be sucked into a quagmire; any such intervention, far from solving its PKK problem, could well escalate it.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the Syrian conflict has political and sectarian ramifications that would prompt opposition to military involvement from a plethora of non-Kurdish actors inside Turkey (eg, the Alevis, a religious sect distinct from Syria's Alawites but whose members tend to share their distrust of the predominantly Sunni Syrian rebels);<sup>133</sup> and in the region (Iran and Iraq, as well as many Arabs concerned about a revived Turkish imperialism).<sup>134</sup> Diplomatic wisdom in Ankara is that, barring accidental escalation or limited hot-pursuit action, Turkey is unlikely to intervene militarily in Syria, not only because of the impact on its NATO alliance, but also because, alone, it would be unable to do this effectively. Instead, it first sought to prop up Barzani-affiliated parties

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<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, October 2012.

<sup>130</sup> Turkish military drills took place in the city of Mardin, 10km north of Qamishli, and in Suruç, across from Kobane/Ayn al-Arab, where they involved tanks and batteries ostensibly positioned to target Kobane. See Servet Yanatma, "Drills aimed at PYD under way, US cautions against intervention", *Today's Zaman*, 2 August 2012. PYD leader Salih Muslim responded: "The protection of my people in my areas, in my town: that is my right, no one can deny it, and that's what we did. So there is no need for Turkey to be worried and make threats". Reuters, 7 August 2012.

<sup>131</sup> A Turkish official said, "things got to the point where we could not sit and watch from the outside any longer. Security threats emanated from northern Syria, and they [PYD] want to transform the region into another Qandil. But the PYD cannot control these areas forever – there is no space for its ideology in Syria. They don't represent the people. Once the regime falls, they will have no role in the country". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 9 October 2012.

<sup>132</sup> In March 2012, PKK leader Murat Karayılan warned: "If the Turkish state intervenes against our people in Western Kurdistan [an allusion to Kurdish areas in Syria], all of Kurdistan will turn into a war zone". Jon Hemming, "Kurd militants threaten Turkey if it enters Syria", Reuters, 22 March 2012. This almost certainly was an exaggeration of PKK capabilities – and intention – but reflected potential Kurdish mobilisation against Ankara should it choose military intervention.

<sup>133</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman, "As Syria war roils, unrest among sects hits Turkey", *The New York Times*, 4 August 2012.

<sup>134</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "Why Turkey hasn't intervened in Syria", *The New Republic*, 13 March 2012.

in the KNC, with the central goal of checking PYD expansion into Qamishli and isolating it in any political talks.<sup>135</sup>

This focus on the immediate threat posed by the PYD and on bolstering the KNC at the PYD's expense<sup>136</sup> appeared to trump all else – including the risk that Syrian Kurds, with Barzani's help, may seek to replicate the Iraqi model. Following the August 2012 trip to Erbil during which he met with KNC officials, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu went so far as to assert that his country would not oppose Syrian Kurdish autonomy if it were declared by the Syrian National Council:

I told them, the leader of the SNC chairs the council as a Syrian Kurd. And you [KNC] are sitting here as Syrian Kurds. Sit down and come to terms. What we oppose is the threat of terrorism and the possibility of one of you claiming possession of somewhere. Elections should be held in Syria; a parliament should be formed that includes Kurds, Turkmens and Arabs. You can come together and say we will grant autonomy [to the Kurds]. This is up to you. We would not oppose that.<sup>137</sup>

Short-term common interests between Turkey and Barzani notwithstanding, differences most likely will emerge in the longer run. The KRG's ultimate goal is to ensure the Kurdish region in Syria becomes more dependent on it than on Damascus; Turkey almost certainly will fear that such an outcome would inspire similar separatist inclinations among its own Kurds.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> The Turkish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), an opposition party in Turkey, criticised government policies. "We are not against the relationship between the KRG and the Turkish government. Barzani can play an important role in solving the Kurdish question, but the PYD should not be sidelined. The PYD is the most powerful Kurdish party in Syria and cannot be excluded from negotiations over the Kurdish issue", Crisis Group interview, BDP official, Ankara, 10 October 2012.

<sup>136</sup> A Kurdish journalist said, "the PYD says that Barzani ignored them because they are against Turkey. Barzani wanted to weaken the PYD for two main reasons: first, because Barzani wants to be the only nationalist symbol in Syria, although 50 per cent or more of Syrian Kurds consider Öcalan to be their hero. Secondly, because Barzani has the best ties with Turkey, and Turkey doesn't want a PYD presence in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Kamal Chomani, 21 September 2012.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in *Today's Zaman*, 9 August 2012.

<sup>138</sup> A Turkish official offered more details on what his country might accept – and on potential tensions with Barzani's approach: "Syria is not a country that should be split up. There is no single Kurdish region in northern Syria, and creating one would complicate matters further. It is not even possible, considering that there are 1.5 million Arabs living in the same areas. We don't want another Iraqi Kurdistan in northern Syria. What we might support is a decentralised system for the entire country in which the governor of each province has a little bit of autonomy. This is similar to the system we are working on in Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 9 October 2012. Likewise, a Turkish analyst said, "Barzani is overplaying the nationalist card. The project of a federal region in Syrian Kurd-populated areas is a fantasy: there aren't only Kurds living in those areas. Moreover, the project is not sustainable from an economic point of view. The main Kurdish city is Qamishli, but Qamishli without Aleppo and Damascus would be nothing more than a village. Qamishli would need Turkey to sustain its economy". Crisis Group interview, Taha Özhan, president, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), Ankara, 10 October 2012.

## V. Growing Militarisation

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### A. Escalating Intra-Kurdish Tensions

Even as the Syrian Kurdish scene increasingly becomes militarised, it remains unclear against whom the Kurds' growing military might be used: against the regime, the (non-Kurdish) opposition, Turkey or each other. The PYD's military force, the YPG, has established checkpoints throughout Kurdish areas, replacing the regime.<sup>139</sup> It claims to be acting in defence of Kurd-populated areas, chiefly to protect them from non-Kurdish opposition armed groups that hold positions in the vicinity. Ilham Ahmed, a PYD member of the Supreme Kurdish Committee, said:

We only act to defend our people and territories. Our relationship with the Free Syrian Army [FSA] depends on its moves. The moment it tries to enter Kurdish areas, we have the duty to protect our people and territories. When the FSA tried to enter Afrin and Kobane to take control of the border with Turkey, we had to defend our people and territory.

When the regime decided to withdraw from Kobane [in July 2012], we gave government employees five hours to leave. They did not attack us but decided to go, and for this reason we did not attack them. In fact, two or three employees are still working in these offices [without problems]. Most importantly, as the regime left, we had to take armed control of the city, because the FSA began to advance from Jarablous [between Afrin and Kobane], threatening to occupy the city. We stood to protect it.<sup>140</sup>

KNC factions, as described above, have been receiving military training from the KDP.<sup>141</sup> If in April 2012 Barzani still described the nature of support for Syrian Kurds as “moral, political and financial”, strenuously denying any “military support or provision of ammunition”, by July he publicly acknowledged actively training Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army.<sup>142</sup> There reportedly are three main training camps: Zaytoun in Erbil governorate, Faysh Khabbour in Dohuk governorate and Zammar in Ninewa, providing basic training for soldiers (*dawrat asasiya*) and advanced classes for officers (*dawrat al-dubbat*). The new brigades consist of Kurdish officers up to the level of lieutenant and other Syrian army deserters, as well as young Syrian Kurds who have dodged the draft. According to a deserter:

Former Syrian army officers are assigned military ranks they did not have in the army, while young trainees receive a daily payment. They are all working for the future of Kurdistan in Syria and will become the Kurdish police of Kurd-populated areas, an equivalent to the Peshmerga forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> For a description of PYD checkpoints, see [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19291072](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19291072).

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 September 2012.

<sup>141</sup> Abdulhamid Darwish, the leader of the pro-PUK KDPPS, said the trained brigades are under the sole command of the KDP. Crisis Group interview, Geneva, 27 September 2012.

<sup>142</sup> See [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/a-fine-balance-can-barzani-help.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/a-fine-balance-can-barzani-help.html). Barzani said that “the training that has taken place is not for fighting; it is just a precautionary measure to play a role in Syria once the situation collapses, and there’s a vacuum”. Quoted in Jane Arraf, “Q&A: Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani”, Al Jazeera, 30 July 2012.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Syrian army soldier trained at Zaytoun, Erbil, 14 October 2012.

A pattern of clashes, assassinations, kidnappings and other forms of harassment over the past year suggested a brewing conflict between the PYD and KNC, well before both their July 2012 agreement and the beginning of KDP training. Thus, in February 2012, armed PYD supporters staged attacks on KNC demonstrators in Afrin, wounding seventeen people and yelling, among other things, "Afrin is the city of martyrs. Supporters of Erdoğan and Barzani have no business here".<sup>144</sup> On 21 February, Nasruddin Birhak, a member of Abdulkhakim Bashar's pro-Barzani PDKS, died of his injuries after a drive-by shooting believed to have been carried out by the PYD, and, on 19 September, the PYD reportedly kidnapped Birhak's brother and held him for a day.<sup>145</sup>

Despite a non-belligerence agreement in February and attempts at cooperation, violence did not stop. Siamend Hajo, head of the independent KurdWatch said:

[On 16 February 2012,] the PYD and the KNC agreed not to fight each other,<sup>146</sup> but the killing of Nasruddin [Birhak] shows how naive the KNC really is. Publicly the KNC says the regime killed him, but privately one of the party members admitted to me his belief that the PYD killed him. I told this man: "One day, you'll want the Baath [Party] back". He replied: "We already want the Baath back".<sup>147</sup>

For the time being, and as long as the KNC remains the weaker of the two currents, it likely will seek to keep the conflict with the PYD within bounds. In April 2012, Salih Gado, member of the Yassar Party, which maintains relatively good relations with the PYD, evaded a question about allegations that the PYD had killed Kurdish activists, some of whom belonged to the KNC: "Regardless of who is carrying out the murders, in our opinion, the regime is ultimately responsible".<sup>148</sup>

In this respect, the initial Barzani-mediated KNC/PYD agreement proved more symbolic than effective. A week later, KurdWatch reported the PYD was making weapons available to its supporters, apparently at subsidised prices.<sup>149</sup> On 29 June, the KNC Facebook group posted an update accusing PYD "hooded armed elements" of preventing KNC demonstrators from entering Kobane, shooting to intimidate them and kidnapping a KNC supporter. It called this "a flagrant violation" of the accord.<sup>150</sup> The 11 July agreement, as seen, led to the joint SKC to oversee Kurdish forces trained by the KDP and serve as a unified authority in Syrian Kurdistan; significantly, two of five PYD members belonged to the YPG. Yet, in this instance as well, tensions soon re-emerged, this time between the YPG and some Barzani-trained Kurds, when the

<sup>144</sup> For the report and YouTube videos compiled by KurdWatch corroborating the report, see [www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2449&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2449&z=en&cure=245).

<sup>145</sup> According to KurdWatch, "[i]t was initially assumed that supporters of the government attacked Birhik after he came into conflict with them. A leading member of a Kurdish party told KurdWatch, however, that prior to the assassination attempt, Birhik had been threatened by supporters of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)". See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2464&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2464&z=en&cure=245); and [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2638&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2638&z=en&cure=245).

<sup>146</sup> On 16 February 2012, the KNC and PYD signed an agreement pledging to cooperate to prevent escalations, especially in public spaces. See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2455&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2455&z=en&cure=245).

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interview, Berlin, 14 March 2012.

<sup>148</sup> See [www.kurdwatch.org/syria\\_article.php?aid=2504&z=en&cure=240](http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2504&z=en&cure=240).

<sup>149</sup> According to KurdWatch, PYD supporters can purchase machine guns for 20,000 Syrian Lira (around \$250), while others must pay 25,000 (around \$300). See [www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2560&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2560&z=en&cure=245).

<sup>150</sup> See [www.facebook.com/E.N.K.L.S](http://www.facebook.com/E.N.K.L.S) post, 30 June 2012.

YPG reportedly stopped 650 fighters from entering Syria. A YPG leader was quoted as saying, “we refused them entry because ... if anyone wishes to protect the Kurdish areas, they should join us. We cannot accept any other armed forces outside the YPG”.<sup>151</sup>

Since the formation of the Kurdish Democratic Political Union, each of its four members has developed its own armed wing;<sup>152</sup> in the future this might pave the way for KDP-trained Syrian Kurdish forces to enter Syria. Whether the introduction of such forces would trigger conflict with the YPG or, alternatively, prompt a division of territory into respective spheres of influence remains to be seen. But there is reason to worry.

### B. *The Struggle for Qamishli*

Over the long term, the principal danger likely will spring from Qamishli, the largest and most important Kurdish city in the country. With substantial Assyrian, Syriac and Sunni Arab populations, it is considered the heartland of Kurdish Syria, carrying great symbolic weight because of the size of its Kurdish population and because it was the site of the 2004 uprising.<sup>153</sup> The city also holds some oil and gas reserves, increasing its value in the eyes of all.<sup>154</sup>

For KNC parties and KDP-trained forces, Qamishli is of special significance: both enjoy genuine support there, and the city is the former's headquarters. Ultimately, this is where they will either clash or learn to work with the PYD. Summing up the reasons for Qamishli's political importance and associated risks of conflict, a person with close ties to the PYD said:

Qamishli has Arabs, Assyrians and Alawites [who have moved there as a result of civil service employment], so it's much more complicated than Afrin and Kobane, which are Kurdish cities and PYD strongholds. Part of Qamishli, called Mahal al-Gharbiya [the Western Quarter], is in PYD hands; the city also has a strong regime presence and all other Kurdish parties have their headquarters in Qamishli. Turkey and Barzani won't let Qamishli fall into the PYD's hands because of the oil in

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<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Rozh Ahmad, “A rare glimpse into Kurdish armed groups in Syria”, *Rudaw*, 5 August 2012.

<sup>152</sup> According to a PYD member, “as the Kurdish Democratic Political Union was formed, Hakim Bashar's party, Yekiti and the two branches of Azadi [ie, the Union's four members] have set up their own armed units in Derek, Qamishli and Amouda”. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 January 2013. KurdWatch also has reported that the Yekiti party fielded a battalion in Amouda and organised a military parade in Qamishli. See [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2703&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2703&z=en&cure=245); and [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2701&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2701&z=en&cure=245).

<sup>153</sup> Qamishli once was predominantly Assyrian and Syriac. Currently, it is thought to be 15-20 per cent Christian, and tensions between Kurdish and Christian groups are high, in part because of resentment at what the latter see as Kurdish encroachment on a city they consider their own, and suspicions that its Kurds want to separate from Syria. In 2009 a Syriac Christian in Qamishli reportedly told U.S. diplomats: “Al-Jazira [al-Jazeera, the region in which Qamishli is situated] is not Kurdistan’, and that the non-Kurdish population would never support a breakaway from Syria – which is what he claimed was the ultimate goal of the Kurdish community as a whole”. “Northeastern Syria: It's More than Just Unhappy Kurds”, U.S. embassy in Damascus cable, 18 March 2009, as reported by WikiLeaks.

<sup>154</sup> In the 1960s, oil fields were discovered in Qarachuk and Rumaylan, both part of the al-Jazeera region (the area in Syria and Iraq that sits between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers). See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, op. cit., p. 476.



the province. This is why we could see a fight between the regime and the people or among Kurdish parties themselves in Qamishli.<sup>155</sup>

Although Qamishli traditionally has been a stronghold of KNC-affiliated parties, the PYD has made important inroads over the past year and a half. In March 2012, Kurd-Watch's Siamend Hajo observed an increase in the PYD's mobilisation capabilities: "Now, the PYD is getting 2,000 people to demonstrate [in its support] in Qamishli and so the [non-PYD anti-regime] activists in Qamishli are afraid of it. The PYD used to get a maximum of 200 people in Qamishli".<sup>156</sup> Risks of intra-Kurdish armed confrontation in the city notwithstanding, successful implementation of the Barzani-brokered power-sharing deal between the KNC and PYD could significantly reduce tensions over time there and in other Kurdish areas.

But Turkey also is an actor in this field, with the immediate priority to prevent Qamishli from falling into PYD hands – an outcome it worries would enable the movement to expand its sphere of influence and encompass most of Syria's Kurdish areas. In the longer term, Kurdish political and military control over Qamishli – whether by the PYD or KNC – could be read by Ankara as a prelude to a Syrian Kurdish declaration of autonomy.

This is the same reason why Syria's non-Kurdish opposition likewise fears Kurdish control of Qamishli during the transitional phase – when the regime's hold is weakening, and the SNC and FSA are vying to prove their ability to assume full control over post-Assad Syria. Riad al-Assad, the FSA's commander in chief, warned after the July uprisings 2012 in Kurdish cities: "We will never leave Qamishli for the agenda of any Kurdish faction, and we are willing to fight for each inch of Syrian land".<sup>157</sup>

Qamishli is the principal flashpoint, but not the only one. Other towns with a Kurdish population exhibit a precarious coexistence of political forces and armed groups. For example, several groups are present in Amouda, which has a majority-Kurdish population: the PYD, Ismail Hama's Yekiti (a KNC member) and the Amouda Youth Committee, alongside regime employees who remain in place. After the regime withdrew most of its personnel in July 2012, the PYD took control over some of the buildings, and by early December it had extended its presence to the offices of the Political Security Directorate, the Military Intelligence Service and the Recruitment Office.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>156</sup> Crisis Group interview, Berlin, 14 March 2012.

<sup>157</sup> Adib Abdulmajid, "Leader of Free Syrian Army says no Kurdish region allowed to establish in Syria", *Rudaw*, 31 July 2012.

<sup>158</sup> For more detail on armed forces in Amouda, see [www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2702&z=en&cure=245](http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2702&z=en&cure=245).

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## VI. Troubled Relations with the Non-Kurdish Opposition

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Kurdish factions compete not only with each other but also with non-Kurdish opposition groups, all of which vie for space in anticipation of the regime's fall. Many Kurds, especially but not only PYD supporters, are alienated by the predominantly Arab nationalist and fundamentalist narratives of the non-Kurdish opposition, as well as by its perceived dependence on Turkey; for this and other reasons, opposition armed groups in particular have been unable to make significant inroads into Kurdish areas. Despite small Kurdish militias apparently allied with the opposition, such as the Salah al-Din Brigade (see below) and the "Meshaal Tammo battalion", consisting of army defectors,<sup>159</sup> some others prefer joining militias allied with Kurdish political groups or escape to the relative safety of one of three refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>160</sup> The latter tend to be directed to the Domiz camp near Dohuk, with some 22,000 refugees, chiefly army defectors and their families.<sup>161</sup> The two others, Moqbleh and Qamishli, which were established after the 2004 Qamishli events, have seen only a trickle of new refugees.<sup>162</sup>

Arab-Kurdish rivalry is manifested in other ways. According to some reports, the PYD has used checkpoints to obstruct the movement of opposition armed groups. A person close to the movement said it was allowing travel through cities under its control, while barring these groups from setting up camp or operating openly in those cities.<sup>163</sup> The outcome suggested an implicit non-aggression pact: the PYD sought to keep Kurdish areas out of the conflict, whereas opposition armed groups wished to focus their efforts on the battle against the regime. As a result, both sides shared control over Aleppo and the countryside to the north east and north west of the city.<sup>164</sup>

This de facto arrangement came under threat in late October 2012. Tensions had been building over access to the Turkish border and the problem posed by Arab villages in Kurdish areas north west of Aleppo. On 25 October, the Kurdish "Salah al-Din Brigade" (reportedly a component of the FSA, with members hailing principally from Afrin) and the Salafi "Al-Nusra Front" entered Ashrafiya (a mixed Aleppo neighbourhood adjacent to the Kurdish area of Sheikh Maqsoud that until then had

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<sup>159</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyoMgGj3tGY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyoMgGj3tGY).

<sup>160</sup> Mohammad Ballout, "Syrian Kurds trade armed opposition for autonomy", *As-Safir*, 20 June 2012.

<sup>161</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian Kurdish army defectors, Domiz refugee camp, June 2012. Journalist Josh Wood wrote in September 2012 that 22,000 Syrian Kurds were living in Domiz, around 9,000 of them "single men". <http://twitter.com/woodenbeirut>.

<sup>162</sup> Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army flee across the border for two main reasons: fear of retribution (at the hands of the regime for having defected or of the armed opposition for refusing to join a non-Kurdish militia); and dismal economic conditions at home. As miserable as the situation is in refugee camps across the border, many Syrian Kurds imagine prosperous Iraqi Kurdistan offers greater economic opportunity and the promise of upward mobility. This has yet to materialise, however, and the lack of jobs could push some to join Kurdish armed groups. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian Kurdish army defectors and family members, Domiz refugee camp, June 2012. When asked why he did not join opposition armed groups in Syria instead of fleeing to Iraqi Kurdistan, a Syrian Kurdish army defector admitted: "We support the FSA, but it is very dangerous to join the FSA; it is easy to get killed". Most other defectors agreed.

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

<sup>164</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Rasho, PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil, 1 November 2012.

been under de facto PYD/YPG control). Ashrafiya is a militarily strategic location for all concerned: for the YPG/PYD, to keep the road open to its north-west stronghold of Afrin; and for opposition armed groups, to gain access to Azaz, the town north of Aleppo and close to the Turkish border where the regime commands a small military airbase. The ensuing confrontation between these groups and the YPG resulted in some 30 deaths. The conflict spread from there, with reports of tit-for-tat kidnappings in the area and altercations in Kurdish villages north of the city.<sup>165</sup>

In November, fighting also broke out between the Al-Nusra Front and the YPG in Ras al-Ayn (Sere Kaniye), a mixed Arab-Kurdish area on the Turkish border where the interests and presence of the PYD, KNC and Assad regime overlap. A number of fighters on both sides were killed. As this report was being prepared for press, fighting had started anew and seemed to be escalating in dangerous ways.<sup>166</sup>

Whether the previous modus vivendi can survive such clashes is unclear; certainly, the appearance of anti-PYD Kurdish brigades, whether as part of or separate from the FSA, puts it at risk. In the aftermath of the Aleppo clashes, the PYD referred to the new Kurdish brigades as bandits. A PYD representative said:

We don't want problems with either the regime or the FSA. However, it is our duty to protect the Kurdish areas and keep them peaceful and stable. The moment FSA groups enter Ashrafiya, they will attract regime forces and bring conflict to this area. Now Ashrafiya is back under YPG control. We don't intend to fight against anyone as long as they stay out of the area.<sup>167</sup>

Complex relations with local Arab tribes also represent a potential flashpoint, tying into tensions between Kurdish factions and opposition armed groups. Although in the early stages of the uprising both actors appeared to coordinate their demands vis-à-vis the regime,<sup>168</sup> territorial issues and mutual suspicions derived in part from longstanding regime practices of playing one side against the other, as well as competition for control of local resources have prompted a growing number of violent incidents. Hostilities have involved in particular tribes the regime historically settled along the Turkish border, part of an attempt to establish an Arab corridor to separate Turkish and Syrian Kurds.<sup>169</sup>

Beside military clashes and friction with tribes, the PYD feels increasingly challenged by what it perceives as a blockade imposed both by opposition armed groups

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<sup>165</sup> See Lauren Williams, "Rebel groups work to contain Kurd-Arab, Intra-Kurd tensions", *The Daily Star*, 1 November 2012.

<sup>166</sup> Clashes reportedly intensified on 17-18 January 2013, with fighters from the Al-Nusra Front and another armed group, Ghuraba al-Sham, battling Kurdish militia after they assaulted the border town. See <http://mobile.france24.com/en/20130118-kurd-jihadist-firefights-rage-northern-syria>.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Rasha, PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil, 1 November 2012.

<sup>168</sup> In April 2011, a delegation representing the Hasakah region and comprised of fifteen Kurdish officials, fourteen Arab tribal figures and one Christian presented Assad with a list of demands concerning state subsidies, development of the province's infrastructure and other items seeking to redress the regime's tradition of neglect of that part of the country. See [www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch\\_forderungen\\_en.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_forderungen_en.pdf).

<sup>169</sup> Kurds reacted negatively when the leader of the Baqqara tribe welcomed Jabhat al-Nusra, a prominent salafi-jihadi armed group, upon its entering the border town of Ras al-Ayn. See [www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5416.html](http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5416.html). His support for Turkey and Turkish policy reinforced the belief held by some Kurds that Ankara's goal is to co-opt Arab tribes and Turkmen into a unified front to challenge the PYD in these areas.

– which have prevented delivery of food and energy to areas they control – and by Iraqi Kurdistan, which it accuses of hindering trade between Syria and Iraq.<sup>170</sup> While it is possible that non-Kurdish armed groups, vying for resources, merely are preying on those available, such behaviour nevertheless has reinforced the Kurdish sense of being besieged and specifically targeted. A PYD member said:

The FSA is blocking petrol that was coming from Damascus via Homs, Salamiye [and] Raqqa and reaching Qamishli. This problem affects Kobane and Afrin. And they have also closed the border between Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria. Trade is no longer possible. Villagers were active in moving goods from one side to the other. Now these people are in a very difficult situation. Just imagine: some of them are burning the floorboards of their houses in order to stay warm. Then there is no bread. This is an embargo that is taking shape around the Kurdish areas of Syria, and I see it as a project to strangle the PYD.<sup>171</sup>

#### A. *The PYD: Staking Out an Independent Line*

From the PYD's perspective, much of the non-Kurdish opposition has been both excessively close to Turkey and pushing a mix of Islamist and Arab nationalist ideology. This is true of the SNC, both the original Syrian National Council as well as its new iteration, the Syrian National Coalition, established following the opposition meeting in Qatar in November 2012. At a PYD conference in Brussels in March 2012, delegates pointed to the danger represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, which made up a large part of the SNC at the time; they accused it of receiving substantial support from Turkey, which they said was seeking to counter Kurdish aspirations, and from Gulf states that wanted to empower their own brand of Islamism.<sup>172</sup>

In particular, PYD representatives highlighted a controversial comment by former SNC chief Burhan Ghalioun likening Syrian Kurds to Muslim immigrants in France, suggesting it demonstrated the group's intention to deny them basic rights.<sup>173</sup> The remark had a profound impact on the protest movement across Syrian Kurdistan, including among Kurds who are not supportive of the PYD. Sirwan Kajjo, a journalist, said, "immediately after Ghalioun's remark, and other remarks by the Muslim Brotherhood about Syria being an 'Arab and Muslim country', you could see more Kurdish flags being raised in demonstrations, which took on a more nationalistic tone".<sup>174</sup> Conversely, the SNC distrusted the PYD, which it suspected of serving the regime's interests.

As a result, the PYD chose to join the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), which rejects any form of foreign intervention in Syria.<sup>175</sup> PYD head

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<sup>170</sup> Some analysts interpreted the decision to close the border between Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria less as a politically motivated measure against the PYD than as further evidence of the absence of any thought-out KRG strategy. See Sirwan Kajjo, "Syrian Kurds on the Verge of Collapse", Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), 7 January 2013.

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 5 January 2013.

<sup>172</sup> "The Middle East and Democracy", PYD conference, op. cit.

<sup>173</sup> PYD representative Alan Semo said, "the SNC talks of Kurds as France talks of its immigrants. How can I fight with you if you don't even recognise me?" See <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.wordpress.com/2012/02/17/syrian-kurdish-opposition-groups-hold-public-meeting-in-parliament>.

<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 31 January 2012.

<sup>175</sup> Many anti-regime Kurds, including those in the KNC, have tended to favour foreign intervention in Syria. The Kurdish head of the SNC, Abdelbasit Seyda, elected on 10 June 2012 to replace Bur-

Salih Muslim became deputy to NCB Chairman Hassan Abdul Azeem.<sup>176</sup> A Syrian Kurdish analyst explained:

The PYD decided to join the NCB for many reasons. First, the NCB was more for dialogue than for regime change. Secondly, the PYD can't explicitly say that it is supporting the regime because that would undermine its support among Kurds in the region. The PYD is putting forth an image of itself as part of an opposition that is willing to enter into dialogue and push for reform. Were the NCB to join ranks with the SNC, I think the PYD would distance itself from them both.<sup>177</sup>

**B. *The KNC: A Frustrating Relationship with the Non-Kurdish Opposition***

Strongly opposed to the regime, distrustful of the NCB (which it views as excessively close to both the regime and PYD) and progressively disillusioned with the rest of the non-Kurdish opposition, the KNC has found itself in an awkward position. The original SNC had mounted repeated attempts to court the KNC,<sup>178</sup> aware of the fact that bringing in a major minority group would help define it as a broad-based representative opposition; in like manner, Turkey has shared an interest in bringing the Kurds under the umbrella of an opposition group over which it exercises influence. But the efforts fell short, largely due to KNC concern over the lack of attention to Kurdish aspirations. Kurds took particular umbrage at the SNC's rejection of the term "Kurdish nation" and at the fact that the opposition failed to discuss a Kurdish list of demands at an Arab League-hosted conference in Cairo in July 2012; these demands

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han Ghalioun (before himself being replaced in November 2012 when the SNC was reformed and re-baptised), said, "unless the international community intervenes in relation to what is happening in Syria, there may be instability not only in Syria but also extending to neighbouring countries". See [www.facebook.com/TheSyrianNationalCouncil](http://www.facebook.com/TheSyrianNationalCouncil). An Azadi representative said, "foreign intervention is indispensable. It must not necessarily be a military one, but its [aim] must be to protect the Syrian people from the oppression of this tyrannical regime". *El-Khabar*, translated by *Al-Monitor*, 13 January 2012.

<sup>176</sup> Critics allege that joining the NCB is not a genuine anti-Assad move, as some groups that comprise it have had known regime links. A Turkish government official said, "the NCB is seen as 'Assad's opposition'". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, March 2012. Some KNC parties also joined the NCB but froze membership under KNC and Barzani pressure. In a speech in Erbil on 28 January 2012 attended by Crisis Group, Barzani said Kurdish factions should withdraw from other umbrella groups and join the KNC. This was an attempt to unite the KNC as a third, separate pole of the Syrian opposition. Upon the council's founding in October 2011, its charter set a two-month deadline for parties to withdraw from other opposition groups. As a result, the Yassar Party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria led by Ibrahim Nasriddin (a breakaway faction of Abdulhakim Bashar's PDKS) and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party led by Jamal Muhammad Baki froze (rather than cancelled) NCB memberships. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian Kurdish party representatives, Erbil, January 2012.

<sup>177</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 January 2012.

<sup>178</sup> For example, an analyst with SETA, a think-tank close to the ruling AKP, said, "there should be a way to incorporate the KNC into the SNC by giving them a certain amount of seats. If something like this can be done, it will be a turning point and will topple Bashar Assad faster. If the KNC joins the SNC now, it will have more to say in a post-Assad Syria. Joining the SNC will give the KNC a more tight-knit organisation and a platform from which to talk to international powers". Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, Ankara, 16 March 2012.

included decentralised governance, constitutional recognition of the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group and recognition of Kurdish as one of Syria's official languages.<sup>179</sup>

The SNC continued to try. While its founding document did not mention decentralisation, it produced a new document two days after the Cairo conference that confirmed its "commitment to constitutional acknowledgment of the national identity of the Kurdish people, the consideration of the Kurdish issue as a fundamental concern in the country, and the recognition of the national rights of the Kurdish people within the framework of the unity of Syria's land and its people", and called for the "expansion of the powers of the local government".<sup>180</sup> This new overture to the Kurds did little to advance SNC-KNC negotiations, however, in part because immediately following its publication, former SNC head Ghalioun insisted that the Kurds should not hold on to the "illusion" of federalism, equating it with a demand for secession.<sup>181</sup>

Nor did the election of Abdelbasit Seyda, a Kurd, to replace Ghalioun as head of the SNC in June 2012 do much to bring the KNC and SNC closer. Seyda's exile in Sweden since 1994 had left him out of touch with the protest movement, as well as Kurdish political factions; his close relationship to Turkey raised suspicions even among Kurds not aligned with the PYD; and as an intellectual and moderate, he could not compete with the more populist Kurdish factions that cater to the Kurdish street's demands for "Kurdish rights", a concept that has been stretched to include the "right" to a federal system of government.

The Kurds found Seyda's pronouncements on federalism particularly problematic. He told Crisis Group in March 2012, before being elevated to head the SNC: "I'm with the idea of decentralisation, but federalism is going too far. Masoud Barzani agreed with us that our case is different from theirs. We cannot aim to imitate Iraq".<sup>182</sup> A representative of the KNC-affiliated Azadi said:

We have demanded that an agreement be signed with the opposition recognising the legitimate Kurdish right to self-determination and supporting federalism. Both the SNC and NCB reject this, however. The opposition will not be able to unite [ie, convince the KNC to join] as long as they refuse to recognise the Kurdish right to a federal system.<sup>183</sup>

Still, the KNC and SNC maintained communications as a result of their respective relationships with Ankara.

The Kurds' relationship with the Syrian opposition did not markedly improve with the creation of the new SNC umbrella opposition group, the Syrian National

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<sup>179</sup> Adib Abdulmajid, "Kurdish parties walk out of Syrian opposition conference in Cairo", *Rudaw*, 5 July 2012.

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in *Al-Hayat*, translated by *Al-Monitor*, 5 April 2012. Mustafa Mohammed, a Kurdish SNC member, said the Kurds are "realistic in their goals and recognise they must work within Syria and with the central government". Consequently, "they do not aspire to an autonomous or semi-autonomous Kurdish state under the present circumstances; nor do they hope to achieve such a goal anytime in the near future. They are more concerned with their rights within the Syrian state". He added that Syrian Kurds "do not expect to have the same autonomy that the Kurds in Iraq have". Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, October 2012.

<sup>181</sup> The SNC has stopped short of calling the Kurdish region in Syria "Kurdistan", equating this with the experience of autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan. Former SNC head Burhan Ghalioun said, "there is no such thing as Syrian Kurdistan. This is duplicating Iraq's experience". Quoted in *Rudaw*, 17 April 2012.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 12 March 2012.

<sup>183</sup> See *El-Khabar*, translated by *Al-Monitor*, 13 January 2012.

Coalition founded on 12 November 2012.<sup>184</sup> KNC members and even Masoud Barzani himself travelled to Qatar to participate in the talks on forming a more broadly representative opposition alliance; however, the PYD was not invited. The Kurdish delegates put forward four conditions for their participation: that one of the three deputies to the coalition's president be a Kurd; that 15 per cent of its members be Kurds; that agreement be reached on what the Kurds understand to be their rights in the new constitution; and that the word "Arab" be dropped from the name "Syrian Arab Republic".

Though no decision was taken on these matters during the coalition's formation, the Kurds soon received a message from its leader, Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, who explained that participation was welcome, but the demands on the constitution would only be discussed after the regime's ouster.<sup>185</sup> The KNC rejected this as "unsatisfactory", and the PYD reacted similarly: "Kurds will participate only if our demands are satisfied".<sup>186</sup> This apparent stalemate in the debate over Arab-Kurdish relations echoes the pre-2003 situation between Kurdish and other opposition groups in Iraq. Internal KNC divisions appear to further narrow the possibility for agreement. The creation of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union in December 2012 increased disagreements among KNC members; SKDU leaders took the lead in negotiations with the non-Kurdish opposition, sidelining other Kurdish parties. Their strategy may be to first push for Kurdish integration within the opposition; then, having secured their seat at the table as the sole legitimate Kurdish interlocutor for the rest of the opposition, insist on a federal solution in Kurdish areas.<sup>187</sup>

A KNC member shared fears of such an evolution:

After Doha, the Syrian opposition rejected almost all our demands and postponed negotiations over the future status of Kurds until after the regime's fall. But they [the SKDU] are pushing at any cost to say that they have joined the Syrian opposition. They want to take the lead in the entire process of negotiations and speak on behalf of the entire Kurdish people of Syria. If they will do so, they will lose their seats within the KNC. The Supreme Kurdish Committee [including KNC and PYD members] alone exercises authority over Kurdish demands.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> The group is officially called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

<sup>185</sup> Asked about how the coalition intended to deal with the Kurds, a senior leader said, "they are a problem, but the real problem is among them. They have around 30 groups and are deeply divided. There is not much we can do". Crisis Group interview, Cairo, December 2012.

<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group interviews, KNC official; Mohammed Rasho, PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan; both Erbil, 27 November 2012.

<sup>187</sup> The SKDU has already declared that it represents 70 per cent of Syria's Kurds. See [www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5562.html](http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5562.html).

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 9 January 2013. He added: "The KNC is preparing a meeting with the opposition during which we will negotiate the Kurdish participation [in] the opposition according to specific demands. In the first meeting only the KNC will participate in negotiations, while the PYD will be included as of the second meeting".

## VII. Conclusion

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Kurdish politics in Syria are in flux and likely will remain so even if the Assad regime falls, and probably for a good time afterwards as well. The vacuum created by the regime's withdrawal in effect from Kurdish areas in July 2012 was filled by groups that have competing interests, some closely aligned with the PKK in Turkey, the others with the KDP-dominated regional government in Iraq.

This situation presents both threats and opportunities to Syrian Kurds. The FSA itself presents a threat, not only because of its ability to attract regime reprisals by its presence in some Kurdish or mixed areas along the Turkish border, but also because in many ways it represents a new form of Arab nationalism hostile to the Kurds' expansive notion of Kurdish rights in a post-Assad Syria. If the current conflict descends into all-out civil war, Kurdish and Arab militias also could end up fighting each other in a local struggle removed from any vision of a state-to-be. Equally, rivalry between the PYD and KNC, currently contained as a result of their uneasy cohabitation in the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), could erupt into open conflict.

Yet, by and large, the Kurds already have made major strides in their quest for greater rights by being masters of their own areas for the first time in the history of modern Syria. They intend to parlay their newfound freedoms into constitutional guarantees in the new order that sooner or later will emerge. They see this as a time to strengthen themselves by building up local militias able to police their areas and, should the need arise, protect these from whatever force Damascus – current or future – might send their way.

In forging this path, they will need to tread carefully, lest they alienate the non-Kurdish opposition or provoke external intervention. Ultimately, their best option lies in becoming full partners in the political struggle to forge a new order. That will entail reaching agreement among various Kurdish actors on a political platform that formulates a clear vision for the future and then negotiating on that basis with non-Kurdish counterparts. In this respect, Kurdish independent youth groups could play an important role in strengthening social ties between Kurds and other components of society – both Arabs and minority groups – and promoting the Kurdish cause as part of a larger struggle for recognition of citizenship rights. Compared with where they were before, it would be enormous progress if Kurds could say in hindsight, some years from now, that their decision to join that political struggle earned them a position as full citizens with their rights protected under the constitution.

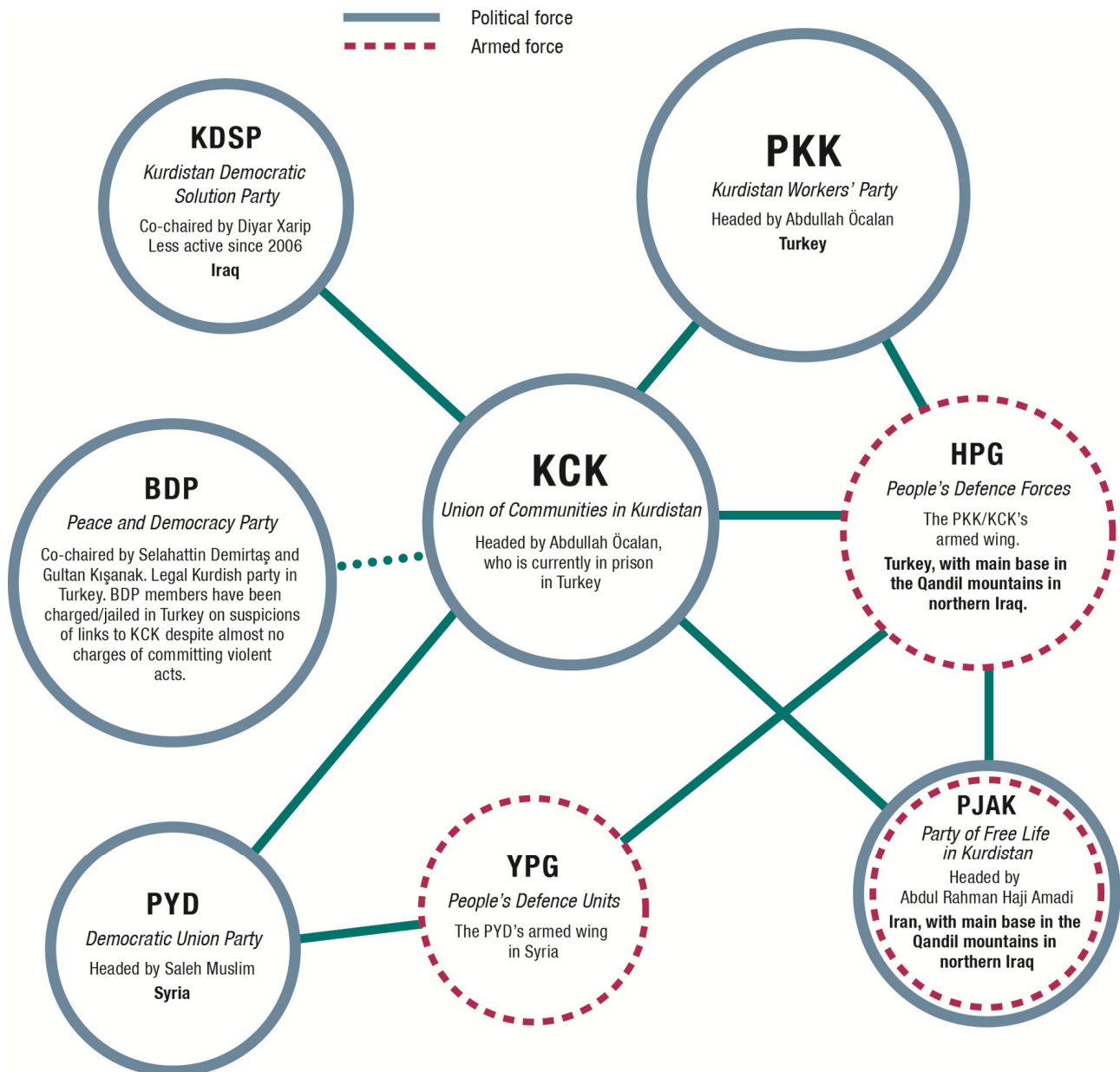
**Erbil/Damascus/Brussels, 22 January 2012**



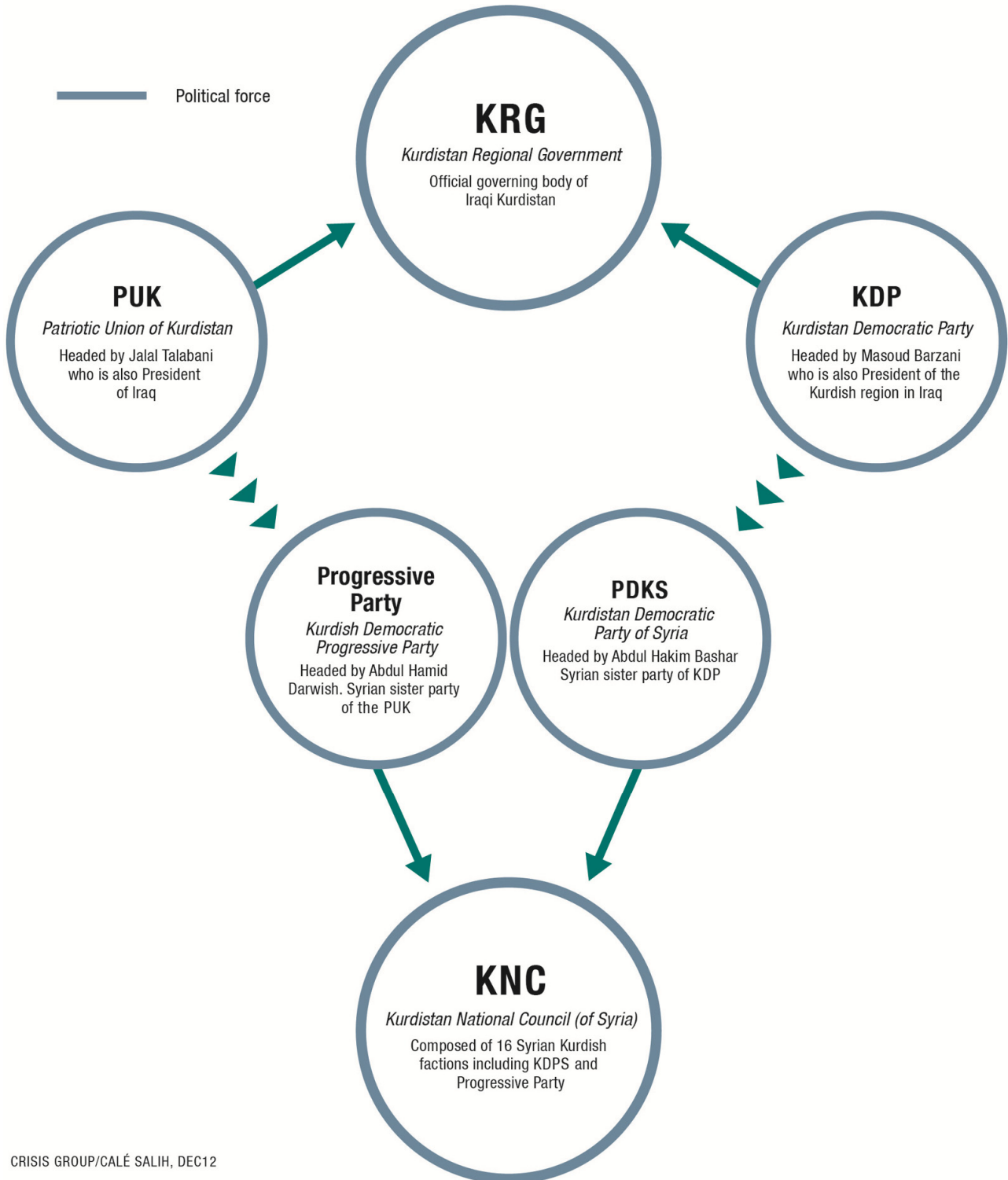
Appendix A: Map of Syria



Appendix B: Diagram of PKK-related Parties



Appendix C: Diagram of KRG-affiliated Parties



## Appendix D: Glossary of Abbreviations

**AKP or AK PARTY** – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party): Turkey's ruling party, led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

**BDP** – Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (Peace and Democracy Party): a Kurdish political party in Turkey, represented in parliament.

**CCC** – Central Coordinating Committee: A governance body established by the PCWK in Kurdish areas of Syria. It coordinates the work of People's Local Committees.

**FSA** – Free Syrian Army: the main Syrian armed opposition group (in reality, a very loose coalition of groups) to emerge from the 2011 uprising.

**KCK** – Koma Ciwakên Kürdistan (Union of Communities in Kurdistan): an umbrella organisation created by the PKK in 2005-2007 for its affiliates in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the diaspora. The PYD is formally a member.

**KDP** – Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan): one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, founded in 1946 and headed by Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdish region.

**KDSP** – Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party: Iraqi affiliate of the PKK.

**KNC** – Kurdistan National Council: founded in Erbil in October 2011 under the patronage of Masoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdish region, it comprises sixteen Syrian Kurdish political factions not aligned with the PYD. The most influential parties are direct sister parties of Talabani's PUK and Barzani's KDP in Iraq.

**KRG** – Kurdistan Regional Government (Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan): the official governing body of the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq. The president of the Iraqi Kurdish region is Masoud Barzani; its two largest parties – the KDP and PUK – have ruled since the KRG's inception in May 1992.

**KDPSPS** – Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê), or simply Kurdish Progressive Party: Syrian sister party of Jalal Talabani's PUK in Iraq, headed by Abdulhamid Darwish.

**NCB** – National Coordination Body for Democratic Change: a Syrian opposition alliance.

**PCWK** – People's Council of Western Kurdistan: PYD-affiliated elected local assembly in Syria's Kurdish areas that provides social services, established in late 2011.

**PKKS** – Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria): Syrian sister party of Masoud Barzani's KDP in Iraq, headed by Abdulhakim Bashar.

**PJAK** – Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Party of Free Life for Kurdistan): PKK/KCK sister party founded in 2004 and focused on Iran.

**PKK** – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party): Kurdish party in Turkey founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan. It started an armed insurgency there in 1984 and currently maintains around 3,500-5,000 insurgents based in the Qandil mountain range of northern Iraq, as well as in Turkey. The PKK is considered a terrorist and drug-smuggling organisation by Turkey, the EU, the U.S. and a number of other countries.

**PLCs** – People's Local Committees: local governance bodies established by the PYD in Kurdish areas in Syria.

**PUK** – Yeketî Niştîmanî Kurdistan (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan): founded in 1975, one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, headed by Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq since 2005.

**PYD** – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party): the Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK/KCK, founded in 2003.

**SKC** – Supreme Kurdish Committee: transitional governing body comprising the PYD and KNC, based on the power-sharing "Erbil Declaration" signed by the two parties under the tutelage of Masoud Barzani on 11 July 2012.

**SKDU** – Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union, a group of four Barzani-leaning KNC members established in December 2012.

**SNC** – The Syrian National Council, formerly the main formal Syrian political opposition group to emerge from the 2011 uprising. It has been superseded by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly referred to as the Syrian National Coalition or Syrian Opposition Coalition.

**TCK** – Tevgera Ciwanên Kurd (Kurdish Youth Movement): association of Kurdish youth activists in Syria who have organised and recorded demonstrations largely using social media.

**YPG** – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defence Corps): the PYD's armed wing in Syria, established in 2012 and deriving from the PKK. It is the dominant armed Kurdish force in Syria.