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Kurdish Political and Civil Movements in Syria and the Question of Representation

Dr Mohamad Hasan

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Legitimacy and Citizenship in the Arab World

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For questions and communication please email: Id.Syria@lse.ac.uk

Cover photo: A group of Syrian Kurds celebrate Newroz 2007 in Afrin, source: www.tirejafrin.com

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About Legitimacy and Citizenship in the Arab World

Legitimacy and Citizenship in the Arab World is a project within the Civil Society and Conflict Research Unit at the London School of Economics. The project looks into the gap in understanding legitimacy between external policy-makers, who are more likely to hold a procedural notion of legitimacy, and local citizens who have a more substantive conception, based on their lived experiences. Moreover, external policymakers often assume that conflicts in the Arab world are caused by deep-seated divisions usually expressed in terms of exclusive identities. People on the ground see the conflict differently and often perceive it as collusion against the general populace.

The project aims to bridge these gaps and advance our understanding of political legitimacy, thus improving policymaking and constitution writing to achieve sustainable peace and state-building in the Arab world. It also investigates how exclusive identities are deliberately constructed by ruling elites as a way of deflecting democratic demands and hindering the prospects of substantive legitimacy.

The project is carried out by a team of Syrian and Lebanese researchers and experts, led by Dr Rim Turkmani.

For more information visit the project's website: <http://dustoor.org/>

About the Conflict Research Program

The Conflict Research Programme is a four-year research programme managed by the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit at the LSE, and funded by the UK Department for International Development.

Our goal is to understand and analyse the nature of contemporary conflict and to identify international interventions that 'work' in the sense of reducing violence or contributing more broadly to the security of individuals and communities who experience conflict.

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This paper presents an overview of the background and motives of the Kurdish cause in Syria, the political and civil movements that have emerged so as to express the demands of this cause, and the problematic representation within the Kurdish circles as well as in international forums, especially in relation to the current political process. The paper is based on several primary and secondary sources, including some interviews conducted by the author with a number of Syrian Kurds.

1. The root causes of the Kurdish issue and its main features in Syria

The Kurds in Syria consider themselves people with a cause that gives them the right to claim their legitimate rights. They see themselves as an indigenous nation that has its own history, language and culture. In addition, they regard themselves as an essential social component, but have not obtained their rights, which they have always demanded. This has produced a great dilemma, referred to as the Kurdish cause, which needs a radical solution throughout Syria. Several historical and political studies confirm the existence of systematic long-standing persecution of the Kurds in Syria. The writer Omar Idris, for example, asserts that the history of the Kurds shows “how they were exposed, by the successive Syrian governments, to various forms of persecution continuously, aimed at the termination of their existence as a people with national constituents distinguishing it from other peoples.”¹

However, some people still question if there is a dilemma that could be called the Kurdish cause in Syria! To answer this question, we must return to the history that explains this issue by examining the reality of the Kurdish presence in Syria as well as the practices and policies adopted by the successive governments that threatened this presence, or claimed that it posed a risk to them.

1.1. The reality of the Kurdish presence in Syria?

The issue of the Kurdish presence in Syria itself has recently become a controversial matter. Accordingly, it is inevitable to shed light on this topic and to clarify and correct some of the information that are being circulated. Some people promote the idea that the Kurds do not have a genuine deep-rooted cause in Syria, and that they are immigrants who crossed the Syrian borders coming from Turkey to evade the oppression of the Turkish state, after the failure of the Kurdish Revolution led by Sheikh Said in 1925.²

Ethnically speaking, the Kurds are classified by many archaeologists, historians, and orientalist who visited the region as a people descended from the Indo-European group: they belong to this

1 Omar, Idris. Syria from Political Persecution to a Humanitarian Catastrophe. Cairo: Al-Maktab Al-Arabi Lilma'arif. 2016. p. 141.

2 After the conclusion of the Treaty of Lausanne between Kemalist Turkey and the Allied states World War I, which resulted in the settlement of Anatolia and Thrace and the international recognition of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk denied all his promises and commitments to the ethnic components and minorities, especially the Kurds. He even denied their existence, until an uprising led by Sheikh Said from the village of Piran in the Kanj Arkhani region, erupted in February 1925 to obtain Kurdish rights. The uprising spread quickly until it turned into a revolution that involved most of the Kurdish regions and cities across Amid Diyarbakir.

group ethnically and linguistically. They also conclude that the original homeland of the Kurds is located in the highlands of Western Asia between Iran, Armenia, Turkey, Iraq and Syria.³

Before the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, the Kurds and their homeland were divided into two parts according to the Treaty of Zuhab, which ended the war between the Safavid Empire in Iran and the Ottoman Empire in 1639. The first part was under the rule of the Safavid Empire and included the entire north-western part of Iran, along the borders with Iraq and Turkey. The second part was under the Ottoman rule and included the rest of the Kurds who were distributed in eastern Turkey, northern Iraq and northern Syria.⁴

After the division of the region, which took place as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and because of the Kurdish dissatisfaction, the victors in World War I realised that they had forgotten a major people in the region, the Kurds. Therefore, their demands were included in the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, which gave them hope to establish their own state on their land in line with the right to self-determination, in case they prove that they are able to manage themselves. This only applied to the area annexed to Iraq and part of Turkey, without addressing the situation of the Kurds in both Iran and Syria. These promises were not fulfilled as the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923 between Turkey and the victors in World War I. After that, the status of the Kurds shifted from international recognition of their right to self-determination as an indigenous people living on its ancient land to mere international claims to grant them cultural rights and to consider them as a minority same as the rest of the minorities that lived within the confines of the Turkish Republic and the State of Iraq later.

During the reign of Ottoman Empire, the Kurds suffered from oppression and persecution. Because of those oppressive policies, several revolutions and uprisings broke out, but cannot be addressed in this research study.⁵ The suffering continued after World War I, especially in the beginnings of the Kemalist State. Among its effects was the immigration that occurred in 1925 after the revolution of Sheikh Said; the Kurdish immigration took place from southern Turkey to the Kurdish areas in north-eastern Syria and from there to Lebanon. However, this immigration was mainly confined to the group which was being prosecuted as a result of its activities, interest in public affairs, and struggle for the rights of the Kurdish people. This group was very limited, and most of the immigrants were activists who returned after the amnesty issued in Turkey in 1950.⁶

Some people believe that some of the Kurds who fled from Turkey after the Sheikh Said Rebellion resorted to the French State, not Syria. Moreover, they lived in Kurdish areas amongst their Kurdish families and countrymen, especially since the entire Kurdish region of Derik was part of Turkey until 1930, when the borders between the Turkish and French states were redrawn, and it was annexed to Syria, which was under the French mandate at the time. There are also strong lineage relations amongst the population on both sides of the borders: some Kurdish tribes have

3 Minorsky, V. F. *Kurds: Notes and Impressions*. Translated by Maruf Khaznadar. Beirut: Kawa Association for Kurdish Culture, 1987. p. 123. For more information, see: Lerch, B. *Studies on the Kurds and their Northern Khalidi Ancestors*. Translated by Dr. Abdi Haji. Aleppo: Khani Library, 1st floor, 1994.

4 For more information, see: Zaki, Muhammed Amin. *History of the Kurdish States and Principalities*. Translated by Muhammad Ali Aouni. Lebanon: Zein Eddein Press, 1945.

5 For more information, see: Zaki, Muhammed Amin. *The Summary of the History of the Kurds and Kurdistan since Ancient times till Present*, 1931. Translated by Muhammad Ali Aouni. Lebanon: Zein Eddein Press, 1936.

6 Besikci, Ismael. *International Colony Kurdistan*. Translated by Zuhair Abdulmalik. Sweden, 1988.

existed for a long time in the region, and only the artificial borders between Syria and Turkey are what separate them today.

In regards to the same subject, Mohammad Talib Hilal⁷ conducted a study about Al-Hasakah Governorate, and presented it to the authorities to urge them to take instant measures that may reduce “the risk of the Kurdish presence in the region.” He asserts that “this northern strip inhabited by the Kurds corresponds to a similar strip in Turkey also inhabited by Turkish Kurds. They are blood relatives: you can find a Kurdish clan divided and distributed between Syria, Turkey and even Iraq. They are brothers and cousins distributed in that region.”⁸Hilal continues, “The Kurds are concentrated along the northern strip next to the Turkish borders in Al-Jazeera Governate in depth towards the south, ranging between 15 km to 35 km. Moreover, the fertile lands across the area Ras al-Ain in the west to the borders of Al-Malikiyah region [Derik] in the east was densely populated by Kurds, to such an extent that it is difficult for you to find a small Arab pocket in some areas especially in the regions of Al-Malikiyah, Qubur al-Bid, Tirbespiyé, Qamishli and Amouda.”⁹

This study, which is originally prepared as a reference and a method for the successive Syrian governments to terminate the Kurdish presence in the region, recognises the antiquity of the presence of the Kurds in the region and the modernity of the Arab presence, which resulted from relatively recent migration of nomadic clans to the region.¹⁰Hilal states in his study that the Kurds “live in the rainiest areas in Al-Malikiyah and Qamishli regions, ranging between 400 and 500 mm of rain, where the lands are fertile and cultivable. However, the Arab element lives in the south of the governorate where the rainfall rate does not exceed 200 mm. This may be due to the fact that the Arab element, in that region, to have not experienced urban life until recently as they always lived in constant mobility.”¹¹

As for the position of the Kurds in the Syrian political map, which is the subject of this research, it must be recalled that Syria has been distinguished as a country of diversity and multiple cultures, languages, religions, sects and nationalities since it was established. Therefore, coexistence among its citizens has been a characteristic of this country, and the situation remained the same after the final demarcation of the border between Turkey and Syria in 1939, based on an agreement with France, which was the mandate state at that time. After the evacuation of French troops from Syria on April 17, 1946, the manifestations of independence and state formation began to appear as many governments were formed in Syria. However, the process of founding constitutional institutions did not produce strong institutions capable of preserving the state and the rights of citizens. The successive governments started to cling to power in order to serve the interests of the ruling class, which brought the country into a phase of military coups, accompanied by authoritarian, racist and chauvinistic policies as a means of staying in power. This racist tendency clearly emerged during the era of the unity government between Syria and Egypt between 1958

7 Muhammad Talib Hilal was a Syrian first lieutenant officer and head of the political branch of the Arab Socialist Baath Party in Al-Hasakah when he conducted a study in 1963 entitled “A Study on Al-Jazeera Governate from Ethnic, Social, and Political Aspects”. In the study, he designed a number of measures as part of a project to terminate the Kurdish cause and presence in Syria, for “they posed a threat to the security of the state,” which will be discussed later in this study.

8 Hilal, Muhammed Talab. A Study on Al-Jazeera Governate from Ethnic, Social, and Political Aspects. Al-Hasakah, 1963, p.28. Available at: <https://bit.ly/31zHaqi>.

9 Ibid., 28.

10 Seeda, A. “Kurdistan of Syria or Kurdish Areas in Syria”, Sweden Kurdish Center website: 2017. Available at: <https://www.nlk-s.net/>.

11 Hilal, M. T. p.28.

and 1961. This government embraced pan-Arabism and employed these policies against non-Arab ethnic groups, especially the Kurds, eventually leading to officially prohibiting the use of the Kurdish language.

After the separation, the new authority did not change this hostile mentality towards the Kurds and other components. This was clearly demonstrated, especially through the decree issued in 1962 instructing to conduct an exceptional population census only in Al-Jazeera Governate, which will be addressed later in this study. These policies continued, reaching the peak after the Ba'ath Party seized power on March 8, 1963. The party took the country to another more repressive direction, as state institutions started to implement the racist policies adopted in the previous period against the Kurds, which led to deepening this repressive mentality and chauvinism in a way that the country had never seen before. Practices, in reality, indicated that the provisions of Mohammad Talib Hilal's project turned into a quasi-governmental work program in Al-Jazeera region targeting the Kurds. The secessionist government committed to this project in all its details and then the Ba'ath party implemented it after seizing power in 1963. The aim was to Arabise the Kurdish region and displace the Kurds, as well as to urge the Kurdish society to embrace pan-Arabism in line with a systematic policy mainly implemented by the state security and intelligence services.

Below is a list of proposals outlined by Mohammad Talib Hilal in his study about Al-Hasakah Governate, targeting the Kurds and their presence in the region:

- 1) The state should carry out displacement and redistribution operations towards internal Syria starting with the most dangerous groups successively at first. It is acceptable if the plan spanned over two or three years and should start with the most dangerous groups and end with the least dangerous, and so on.
- 2) The state is to adopt a policy to spread ignorance amongst the Kurds by refraining from building schools or scientific institutes in the area because this clearly has proven blatantly and strongly to have results contrary to what was intended,
- 3) An overwhelming majority of the Kurds who reside in Al-Jazeera hold Turkish citizenship. Therefore, civil registers must continue to be corrected, which what we are doing now, but we demand that anyone whose nationality has not been proven should be displaced and handed over to the state that they belong to. In addition, those with proven nationality should be allowed to access a reasonable level of education only and to note how their citizenship was acquired because a citizenship can only be acquired by a presidential decree. Any citizenship acquired without a presidential decree should be discussed: the least dangerous people can keep their citizenship, while the rest should be striped of their citizenship and deported to their homeland.

There is also the issue of multinationals. i.e. those who hold two or even three nationalities. In this case they should only retain their first nationality. In any case, the significance of the census and verification lies in the actions resulted, as displacement operations should follow immediately.

- 4) Prevent employment: we also have to plan how to deprive the Kurds from work opportunities, which, firstly, puts them in a situation where they cannot move, and secondly, makes them feel so insecure that they become willing to immigrate at the earliest opportunity. This should be taken into account when implementing agrarian reform in Al-Jazeera in the first place, so it should prevent the Kurds from renting or owning lands, and thankfully, there are plenty of Arabs around.

- 5) Launch a widespread propaganda campaign among the Arabs against the Kurds in order to prepare the Arabs for any future scenario, and to disturb the position of the Kurds, so that they can never settle down.
- 6) Withdraw religious titles from the Kurdish clerics and set a plan to replace them with pure Arab clerics, or displace them towards internal Syria, because their ceremonies are not by any means religious, but rather plainly Kurdish. They never abide by our instructions, and their prayers are not directed against Barzani, but rather against shedding Muslim blood. What kind of language is that?
- 7) Create clashes amongst the Kurds themselves, which is easy to achieve and could happen by inciting those of them who claim to have Arab origins against the dangerous groups. This would also be a good test for those of them who claim to be Arabs.
- 8) Settling Arab and pan-Arabist groups in the Kurdish areas on the borders to form a future barrier fortress and carry out surveillance of the Kurds at the same time until they are displaced. We suggest that these groups should be from the tribe of *Shammar* as they are amongst the poorest tribes in the area, and they are faithful pan-Arabist.
- 9) Transform the northern strip in Al-Jazeera into a military area as a front zone, with military forces whose duties are to settle the Arabs and displace the Kurds in line with any plan drawn by the state.
- 10) Establish collective farms for the Arabs resettled by the state in the northern strip, but these farms should be armed and militarily trained just like Jewish settlements on the borders.
- 11) Never allow those who do not speak Arabic to exercise the right to vote and run in election in the mentioned areas.
- 12) It is absolutely forbidden to grant Syrian nationality to those who want to reside in that region, whatever their previous nationality was (unless it was an Arab state nationality).

In fact, these proposals are not sufficient, but we only wanted to let the officials benefit from our experience, so that it becomes the beginning for a project with a radical plan taking this reminder into account.¹²

1.2. Racist practices against the Kurdish people

The most prominent racist practices practiced by the state institutions against the Kurdish people since 1962 can be summarised as follows:

- Large segments of the Kurdish people were stripped of Syrian nationality and considered as foreigners. In “the era of separation between Syria and Egypt, a project for stripping some of the Kurds of Syrian nationality in the Al-Hasakah Governate

¹² Hilal, M. T. p. 48, 49, 50.

was launched through conducting an exceptional census that took place on October 5, 1962.”¹³ Legislative decree No. 93 was issued on 8/23/1962, which stated that an exceptional census was to be carried out in Al-Jazeera Governate. The decree to conduct a census in Al-Hasakah Governate was based on legislative decree No. 1 issued on April 30, 1962 and cabinet resolution No. 106 issued on August 23, 1962. The decree, which is now known as *Al-Hasakah Census of 1962*, states the following in its first article:

A general census is to be conducted in Al-Hasakah in one day, the date of which will be determined by a decision made by the minister of planning following a proposal put forward by the minister of interior.

The government indeed conducted the census in one day, and the Kurds had to prove that they had lived in Syria at least since 1945; otherwise, they would lose their Syrian nationality. The residents were not given sufficient time to prove their status. Moreover, the authorities neither publicise the census to inform the local population, nor did they publish sufficient information about the process, objectives and regulating procedures.¹⁴

The census was carried out on 5/10/1962, and between 120,000 and 130,000 Syrian Kurdish citizens, “out of 400,000 Syrian Kurdish citizens, the total population of the governate at the time, were stripped of their Syrian nationality and identity. They are later to be known as *the foreigners of Al-Hasakah*, and some of those who were stripped of their citizenship were even serving in the military at the time. The case of the Syrian chief of staff, Tawfiq Nizam Al-Din, who was stripped of his citizenship, represents one of these strange paradoxes.”¹⁵ Accordingly, those stripped of their nationality is deprived of all citizenship rights such as real estate ownership, employment, possession of national passport, traveling outside Syria, staying in hotels, free medical care, registration of child birth, obtaining a family record book, and in many cases, the right to education and the right to vote and run in election. By 2011, the number of the Kurds who had been stripped of citizenship had reached 350,000, in addition to approximately 75,000 unregistered. According to recent estimates, the number of those affected by the withdrawal of nationality exceeded 500,000 Kurds with new births taken into account.¹⁶ This means that the number has doubled.

- Fertile lands in Kurdish areas passed into state ownership on the pretext of *the agrarian reform project*. Arab clans were settled in those areas after forcing their native Kurdish inhabitants to emigrate after their right to ownership was denied, especially farmland ownership, in addition to imposing many obstacles to Kurdish employment, particularly for those who have been stripped of nationality and who have not been registered in government departments.

13 Al-Youssef, A. S. *The Syrian Explosion: Identity, Belonging, Kurds, National State and Historical Settlement*. Ashti Center & Dar Al-Zaman, 1st floor, 2017. p. 171.

14 “Syria: Ten facts about the exceptional census of Al-Hasakah in 1962”, a study issued by Syrians for Truth and Justice, October 4, 2019.

15 Rasoul, O. “The Kurdish Presence in Syria between the Facts of History and the Falsity of Ideology 2016,” a paper published on the Medaratkurd website on September 10, 2016.

16 “The total number of people stripped of Syrian nationality from 1963 to 2011 amounted to more than 517,000 Syrian Kurds.” “Syria: Ten Facts about the Exceptional Census of Al-Hasakah in 1962,” a study published by Syrians for Truth and Justice, on October 4, 2019.

- The names of all Kurdish cities and villages were changed in line with the policy of implementing a demographic change in Kurdish-majority areas. The authority deliberately changed the names of such cities and villages and gave them names unrelated to the history, culture and heritage of these cities and villages, aiming mainly to Arabise the region and falsifying its characteristics by giving them artificial names enforced by security forces. A systematic plan was put in place to Arabise the names of a large number of villages in Al-Hasakah Governate and the regions of Afrin, Kobani – arabised as Ain Al-Arab – and Al-Bab from late 1970s to late 1990s.
- Model villages were founded for some Arab tribes dispatched from Al-Raqqa and Aleppo under the pretext that the water of the Euphrates Dam flooded their lands. Consequently, they were settled in the fertile areas of the Kurdish-majority populated region of Al-Jazeera in line with demographic change policies. This is what is known as the *Arab Belt Project*, “which had been planned since early 1960s along with other chauvinist schemes that successively started to be implemented on the ground. Instead of settling the residents of villages submerged by the water of the Euphrates Dam in the vast areas which were irrigated by the reservoir, they were compensated with sums of money, and then they were deported to Kurdish areas in the north. The state founded for them model villages separating the Kurdish villages, which is to be known as the Arab Belt, along the Turkish-Syrian border from, stretching for more than 200 km from the far east to Kanya Ghazala / Gire Spi, arabised as Tell Abyad. In early 1973, the arrangements to bring it the so-called *Maghmurin* (the Arabs affected by the flood) to Al-Jazeera were under way. Therefore, a committee was formed to achieve this purpose. The committee was headed by Muhammad Jaber Bahbouh, Assistant Regional Secretary of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, and Abdullah Al-Ahmar, member of the Regional Command. Those two were in charge of the plan, which was due to be fully implemented within a year.”¹⁷

In this regard, Abdul Samad Dawood states in his book *The Arab Belt in Al-Jazeera* that in the winter of 1974-1975 “settler convoys successively started to arrive in Al-Jazeerah. They gathered at Qamishlo airport, wherefrom they were moved to tents set up for them around the villages that had been being built for them for months. In 1959-1960, during the era of the United Arab Republic, settlers were brought from the governates of Daraa, Al-Suwayda, Hama, and Idlib; settlements were built for them in the areas of Sere Kanye, Darbasiyah and Derek. The number of settlements along Syrian-Turkish border, from the Tigris River in the far north-east to the southwest of Sere-Kanye, reached 40 settlements. They all extended on the borderline as a human barrier separating our Kurdish people on both sides of the border: 12 settlements in Derik, 12 settlements in Qamishlo and 16 settlements in Serre Kanye.”¹⁸ Subsequently, the lands once owned by Kurdish farmers were seized by the state in the context of the so-called Agrarian Reform plan and then distributed to the Arab deportees or *Maghmurin*, (in reference to those whose farms were flooded by the water of the Euphrates Dam Reservoir).

- The Kurds considered the process of the Arab Belt as “a racist project set up by pan-Ara-

17 Dawood, A. *The Arab Belt in Al-Jazeera*. Syria: 2015, p. 53.

18 Dawood, A. p. 67, 70, 78, 79.

bists in Syria, who started to promote it since the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963. This project is only a part of a larger project aimed at changing the demography of the Kurdish region in Al-Hasakah Governate. At one of its regional conferences, the Ba'ath Party defined the project as forcible dispossession of the Kurds' lands along the border-line with Turkey, 375 km long and 10-15 km wide, starting from the borders of Al-Hasakah with Raqqa in the west to the Tigris River in the east. The conference also decided that the Kurds were to be evacuated from this region without compensation.”¹⁹

- Many obstacles were created to limit the chances of the Kurds to run and vote in parliamentary and municipal elections. It was also made difficult for be employed in key institutions, or to be recruited as officers in the army. Under the rule of the Ba'ath Party since 1963, none of the Kurds, except for some of those who were Arabised, has been appointed as minister, governor, district manager, or subdistrict manager, or even appointed as deputy, leading member of the party or in a high military or security position. It must be noted that, from time to time, some Kurds were recruited in the security services or the army, but these constitutes rare cases and only happened within very particular condition, exclusively on the recommendation of higher authorities.
- The Kurdish language and culture were considered as a threat to state security; systematic security and cultural measures in this regard to prevent the Kurdish people from using their native tongue at public places and schools. Security measures were adopted to impose Arabic and Arab culture on the Kurds.
- The Kurdish people were prevented from celebrating their special Kurdish and Kurdistanian national holidays, such as Nowruz.
- Kurdish shop names had to be changed to Arabic ones, while other foreign names were still allowed. This was a clear evidence of the hostile attitude towards everything related to the Kurdish people, language and presence. In addition to all of this, newborns were not allowed to be given Kurdish names.

These were the practices of successive governments that adhered to the broad Ba'athist policy drawn against the Kurdish people, mainly aimed at denying the Kurds all human, political and national rights and terminating the presence of the Kurds in the region.

1.3. Some exceptional orders, decrees and laws against the Kurdish people in Syria

The state resorted to the implementation of new exceptional laws against the Kurdish people in addition to the previous exceptional laws, including the following examples:

¹⁹ Al-Youssef, A. p. 175, 176.

- Amend the Technical Services Department's plan in Al-Hasakah Governorate on February 15, 1978, as 136 Kurdish villages and towns were arabised.
- The Real Estate Solicitor General's order No. 287 CZ6, on 5/6/1996, issued by the Real Estate Court in Qamishli for the confiscation of residential real estates and houses that are still registered in the names of the Hasakah foreigners (those stripped of citizenship according to the census of 1962).
- On December 3, 1989, the governor of Al-Jazeera, Muhammad Mustafa Miro, issued Decree No. 1865 dated on December 3, 1989, which banned Kurdish songs and music in weddings as well as in national and religious festivities.
- Minister of Interior's order No. 122 issued in 1992 banned giving Kurdish children Kurdish names, and linked the child birth registration to security services. Similarly, order No. 1212/p / 25 dated on November 11, 1986, prohibited the use of the Kurdish language in the workplace.²⁰
- Legislative Decree No. 49 dated on September 10, 2008 restricted the right to private ownership of property, especially for the Kurds. Accordingly, the rights to own, sell, buy, rent and mortgage in the border areas were abolished. This covered the whole Hasakah Governate, and the northern part of the countryside of Aleppo. Obtaining a license can be possible only by entering into security transactions.²¹

1.4. Consequences of anti-Kurdish policies in Syria

The state has continued to follow these policies, and state agencies were able to penetrate some Kurdish bodies and organisations; all cards have become exposed for all to see and the state itself created local players and reacted to foreign players concerned with the Kurds in Syria. Despite all of this, security apparatuses did not give up racist policies and continued to increase the feelings of hatred among the Kurds themselves and between the Kurds and other components of the Syrian people, until the Qamishlo Uprising erupted on March 12, 2004. The uprising took the lives of a large number of Kurdish youths: 37 were killed and more than 160 were injured, while more than 2,500 were detained. Most of the detainees were prosecuted at military courts, a practice permitted under the Emergency Law. Most of them were tried on false charges such as "provoking sectarian or ethnic strife" (Article 307 of the Syrian Penal Code) and calling for "parts of the Syrian land to be annexed to a foreign country" (Article 267 of the Syrian Penal Code).²²

This uprising unleashed the great suppressed rage of the Kurdish people at the practices of the state security apparatuses, revealing the extent of suffering and the deep roots of cause. The Kurds in all of their cities rose up against these policies, but the power of the repressive machine and

²⁰ Al-Hamis, G. "Roots of the Kurdish Cause in Syria," Al-Hiwar Al-Moutamadin. Issue no. 448. 29/5/2004.

²¹ The decree is published on the website of the People's Council of Syria. Available at: <http://parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index>

²² Human Rights Watch "Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria." November 26, 2009, Human Rights Website. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2009/11/26/256004>

the fear that massacres could be committed against the Kurds prevented the uprising to continue, which soon had negative consequences for the Kurds. Ending the uprising had reverse consequences for the Kurds who have become wanted by the state apparatuses more than ever before. As a result, some fled abroad while many others were arrested. Furthermore, many Kurdish students and teachers were dismissed from schools, institutes, and universities and many employees lost their jobs too. Accordingly, the uprising had repercussions which negatively affected the Kurdish people in Syria whether in Derek, Kobani, Afrin, Aleppo, Damascus or other areas. “The Kurdish people were deprived of all basics and conditions of coexistence and participation at all levels, such as freedom, equality, preservation of dignity, equal opportunities, and human rights. Even when the 1973 Syrian constitution was drawn up, Kurdish views were not taken, and the Kurdish component was not considered as a key partner in the country.”²³

Since the 1960s, numerous events and explicit and implicit practices have proven that the successive Syrian governments have adopted a systematic policy on dealing with the Kurdish people, mainly aimed at erasing their identity and eliminate their presence in Syria. It can be argued that these methodology, measures, and injustices, in addition to historical, geographical and demographic facts, support the evidence of the Kurds that they are an indigenous people of the region in which they have a history, land and deep roots. If this were not the case, all these policies and measures against the Kurds, in particular, would not be necessary.

The situation has remained as it was because of these policies. The immigration of the Kurdish youth, especially those stripped of citizenship, continued to happen in pursuit of a living, identification papers and simply a normal life same as that of other peoples. A Human Rights Watch report, issued in 2010, confirmed that the Kurds in Syria were deprived of the most basic human rights and that the Kurds, the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in Syria, are still “subject to systematic discrimination, including arbitrary deprivation of citizenship affecting 300,000 Syrian-born Kurds, according to estimations. The authorities also suppress the expression of Kurdish identity and continue to ban teaching the Kurdish language at schools.”²⁴

These policies have not changed over time, but on the surface, they appeared to be more flexible, as it seemed possible to alleviate these strict measures, but only for individual cases due to corruption that widely spread in before 2011. However, Syrian state did not change its attitude although officials started talking about the Kurds as part of the Syrian people, but still not as a people with featured characteristics and rights. This was confirmed by the Head of State following the Kurdish Uprising in March 2004: The Kurds are “part of the fabric of the Syrian society.” This statement was first interpreted as a declaration that the Kurds had been integrated into the Syrian Arab society, and they no longer enjoyed the national peculiarity they had been calling for, and had always demanded the state to recognise along with all claimed rights. However, this statement in a way or another recognised the existence of the Kurds in Syria. After all, that was only a statement, representing an incomplete recognition, because only recognised the problems without acknowledging the Kurdish issue as a cause which has to be addressed and resolved by the state. The statement did not address compensating the Kurds for all the damages resulting from chauvinist and oppressive policies followed by state security apparatuses.

23 Al-Youssef, A. p. 152.

24 Human Rights Watch. Syrian Kurds. 2010 Report <https://www.hrw.org/ar/world>

2. Kurdish political movement in Syria

First Kurdish political or civil activity in Syria began during the French mandate with the foundation of an organisation called Xoybûn, (literally translated as *Independence*) in 1927. Following this, Secret Cultural Association was established in Aleppo in 1951, and then the Association for the Revival of Kurdish Culture in Damascus in 1955. These associations were aimed at reviving Kurdish culture and art. At the same time, they aimed to represent the national political thought of the Kurds, so the formation of Kurdish parties was not long overdue. The first Kurdish party Syria, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), was founded on June 14, 1957. It called for preserving the national identity and peculiarity of the Kurds. Its policies were aimed at struggling for the liberation and unification of Kurdistan, being a divided nation under occupation. Kurdistan here meant the Kurdish land divided among Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party rapidly expanded because it included well-known Kurdish figures in its ranks. It managed to include members of all classes since it was influenced by the methods followed by the Iraqi branch of the KDP which was founded in 1946 under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani.

2.1. Destabilisation of the Kurdish political movement

As Newly established, the KDP, came up against many obstacles, especially after the unity between Syria and Egypt was achieved in 1958. The unity government issued a decree dissolving all political parties in Syria. The KDP was among the parties which rejected this decree; some of its members and leaders as a result. As some of the leadership members were in prison and others outside, a disagreement arose amongst the party as to the status of struggle and the party's objectives at that stage. During the trials, there was a view supported by a majority in the party to abandon the liberation and unification of Kurdistan slogan and to strive towards obtaining political, cultural and social rights for the Kurdish people in Syria, in addition to establishing a link between national and class struggles.²⁵

“Disagreements continued until 1965 when the KDP split into two parties. One of the wings kept the original name, and added the word “left”, and since then referred to the other wing the ‘right-wing’²⁶,” so the first split in the party took place in that year, leading to the formation of a left wing and a right wing. As the party had been affected since it was founded by what was happening in Iraqi Kurdistan under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani at the time and his revolution, he attempted to heal the rift in the KDP in Syria in 1970.

Indeed, the two wings were invited by Barzani to hold a conference in order to unify the two wings leading to forming a unified command to be led by Daham Miro. However, this only resulted in founding a third movement under the KDP name. This was caused by disagreements concerning the relationship with the Kurdish revolution in Iraq at the time and unhealthy environment for democratic freedoms in Syria. This was in addition to poor public political awareness, and degradation of Kurdish society in all fields. Therefore, three Kurdish parties existed in Syria: Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Daham Miro, Kurdistan Left Democratic Party led by

25 A telephone interview with Mr. Abdul Rahman Sheikhi, member of the advisory board of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Syria PDK-S, on May 19, 2020.

26 Omar, I. p.130.

Osman Sabri, and the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party led by Abdul Hamid Haj Darwish until he died in 2019.

This split was not the last one. In 1975, Kurdish split started to appear, resulting in new parties. The Left Kurdistan Democratic Party split into two parties: the Kurdish People's Union Party and the Kurdish Left Party from which a group split and formed a new party called Kurdish Workers' Party in 1978. In early 1980s, other parties emerged, including the Kurdish Democratic Labour Party that split from the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), as well as the Kurdistan Socialist Party, and the Kurdish Democratic Party. In 1978, a new party was formed under the name of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party.

After 1987, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), led by Abdullah Ocalan, was founded. The PKK started its struggle for the liberation of all of Kurdistan in Turkey. The leadership of the Syrian state used this party against Turkey, offering its leader a safe haven in Syria and Lebanon. However, after 1998, the party was banned in Syria after Ocalan had been forced to leave the country. Eventually, he was arrested by the Turkish authorities.

In early 1993, the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party was formed as a result of the unification of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Kurdish Labour Party, the People's Union Party, and the Worker's Party. However, in the same year, another party under the name of the Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria split from the newly formed party. In 2003, Democratic Union Party, known as PYD, was formed. Many believe that PYD is only a façade of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Syria.

As a result of the frequent splits, other parties emerged in Syria, such as the Kurdish Equality Party in 1992, the Kurdish National Democratic Party in 1998, and the Kurdish Reform Movement in 2011. All of these parties split from the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria, which emerged from the split of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria in 1965.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDP) also split into several parties, some of which remain within the Kurdish National Council in Syria, and others left it and joined the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, as it will explained later. Then another party was formed under the name of Azadi Party, which later split into two parties that joined, in 2014, the political union consisting of four Kurdish parties led by the KDP. As a result, a new body was formed under the name, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria.

In 1996, the Kurdish Left Party in Syria was founded, and then split into several parties because of internal disagreements between its leaders. A new party emerged under the name, Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria, which later split into two wings, too.²⁷

In 2005, the Turkish Future Movement in Syria was declared under the leadership of Mashaal Tammo, who was later assassinated in 2011. This movement was among the parties that participated in Damascus Spring, and it was known for not being connected to any other Kurdistani parties.

The Syrian government generally took a hostile stance towards the Kurdish parties that were founded in early 1990s. This was evidenced by continuing its policy of repression and preventing these parties from democratic activism. The government also attempted by various ways to disas-

²⁷ An interview in Erbil with Mr. Musa Uske, former Syrian Kurdish politician, who witnessed all the events that took place as part of the Kurdish political movement in Syria, November 10, 2017.

semble, disperse and isolate them and keep the Kurdish public away from them.

2.2. Kurdish political movement after 2011

After the uprising erupted in Syria in March 2011, the Kurdish issue again took the centre stage in the Syrian scene and became the focus of attention at all national, regional, and international levels. Therefore, it was imperative for the Kurds to join forces and form alliances to obtain the rights for which they have been fighting for decades. The Kurds had no choice but to consider establishing Kurdish alliances in the first place to a collective effort and project a strong image of themselves to Syrian and international public opinion, and then enter into alliances with non-Kurdish Syrian political parties and blocs. In line with this, the Democratic Union Party, for instance, joined the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. Similarly, the Kurdish National Council joined the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces which was officially formed in Doha on 11/11/2012.

2.2.1 Forming alliances

After the Syrian crisis got complicated and internal disagreements arose within Kurdish political frameworks, new alliances have emerged between the Kurdish parties. The following is an overview of the most important alliances since 2011.

2.2.1.1 Kurdish National Council in Syria

The Kurdish National Council in Syria was established on October 26, 2011. It was formed by political parties and key independent figures influential in Kurdish public affairs. “It included ten Kurdish parties with a total of 100 members and 152 independent figures, who formed an executive board and a general secretariat.”²⁸ The roles played by independent figures in the council have soon become insignificant due to differences and disagreements with the parties as to how to address the new situation and the requirements of the stage. The parties attempted to influence and control the council resolutions, preventing independent figures from exercising an effective role in the council. “Party leaders monopolised all resolutions and marginalised the influence of independents and intellectuals who were eventually excluded and not allowed to perform an effective role in the Kurdish National Council. All decisions were made by certain party leaders within the council presidency and general secretariat.”²⁹ The Kurdish National Council consists of the following parties:

- Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
- Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria
- Kurdish Equality Party in Syria

²⁸ Bashar, Abdel Hakim. Syria: To where? Edition 1. Erbil / Hawler: Al-Thaqafah Press, 2017. p. 74.

²⁹ A telephone interview with Mr. Khaled Jamil Muhammad, former founder independent member of the Kurdish National Council and former vice-president of the Kurdish National Council, on May 23, 2020.

- Kurdish National Democratic Party in Syria
- Kurdish Reform Movement in Syria
- Kurdish Future Movement in Syria
- A split wing of the Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria
- A split wing of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria
- The Party
- Kurdistan Democratic Union Party

It is important to note here that the Kurdish National Council included other parties in its membership when it was first formed, such as the Kurdish Left Party in Syria, which withdrew from the council in 2013 and joined the Autonomous Administration, and the Democratic Progressive Party in Syria, which withdrew from the council in 2015 and has remained out of all the alliances since then. The council also dismissed three member-parties in 2014 due to their dealings with the Democratic Union Party and the Autonomous Administration after the cracks between the Kurdish National Council and the Autonomous Administration had increased.³⁰ Those parties were the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDP), the Kurdish Accord Party, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Yekiti), which witnessed a split in 2015. The split resulted in the emergence of the Kurdistan Democratic Union Party, which remained within the Kurdish National Council.

2.2.1.2 Democratic Autonomous Administration

The Democratic Autonomous Administration was first established in the Kurdish regions³¹ in Syria on December 21, 2013 and expanded to include areas in the north and east of Syria. Then it announced the federal project on March 17, 2016.

It is noteworthy that the Autonomous Administration as a project has not been proposed on a pure-

³⁰ Despite the last attempts of reconciliation between the Autonomous Administration, represented by the Democratic Union Party, and the Kurdish National Council in order to reach a comprehensive political agreement in line with a potential American-French initiative to unify the Kurds in Syria, there are still considerable disputes between the two parties. Since the Democratic Union Party (PYD) seized power on the ground, and the Autonomous Administration was formed, the PYD has banned all political activity of the Kurdish National Council. Some members of the Kurdish National Council were exiled while others were put on trials in absentia on various charges.

³¹ The term, “Kurdish regions”, is used to refer to Kurdish-majority areas, which are considered by the Kurds as historical land where they have always lived. This expression is widely used, even in some opposition circles at times, and was also used before 2011 by Syrian government itself. The term “Kurdish regions” was mentioned many times in correspondence, reports and studies, such as the aforementioned study by Muhammad Talab Hilal who frequently used this term in his study. It is worth noting that this topic has sparked controversy recently. That is, non-Kurdish majority seem to prefer to call these areas the Autonomous Administration areas or the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration, avoiding using the term “Kurdish”, especially after recent changes in the region brought about by the Turkish occupation of some of these areas, such as Afrin (since March 2018) and Girê Spi/Tell Abyad and Serê Kaniyê/Ras al-Ain (in October 2019). Moreover, by removing the term “Kurdish” from the names of its institutions and activities, the Autonomous Administration aims to convince other Syrian components that its project is not a Kurdish national project. Therefore, it changed the name of the areas it controls from “Western Kurdistan – Rojava” to “the Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria”. Then it changed it again, dropping the term “Rojava” to “the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria”. The name was changed one more time to “Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria” after the expansion in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. This caused confusion amongst the Syrian, Kurdish and even international circles although most Western countries still use “Rojava” to refer to these areas.

ly Kurdish national basis, with an aim to resolve the Kurdish issue only, as it includes Syriac and Arab blocs too.³² It must be admitted that the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was the initiative owner and is still the backbone of the Autonomous Administration, which consists of the following parties:

- Democratic Union Party
- Kurdish Left Party in Syria
- Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party
- Kurdistan Liberal Union Party
- Green Party of Kurdistan
- Communist Party of Kurdistan
- Kurdish Democratic Peace Party in Syria

It should be noted that, from time to time, new small parties appear while others disappear. They in fact seem auxiliary parties for the PYD, and it can even be argued that the PYD makes up these parties only to show that there are numerous parties that recognise the Autonomous Administration and support its project. Therefore, not all the member parties can be listed here.

2.2.1.3 Kurdish Patriotic Alliance

Apart from the two previous blocs, other parties sought to form their own political framework to join forces and work to achieve their common goals. After extensive consultation amongs these parties, a founding conference was held in February 2016, in which a newly formed coalition was declared: the Kurdish Patriotic Alliance, including the following parties:

- Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Yekiti)
- Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDP)
- Kurdish Left Democratic Party in Syria
- Kurdish Accord Party
- Kurdish Reform Movement in Syria.³³

This alliance chose to be a Kurdish political coalition non-aligned with any of the two main blocs: the Kurdish National Council or the Autonomous Administration, represented by the PYD. Despite this, many, especially in the National Council, still believe that this new alliance is closer to the Autonomous Administration and the PYD in particular, and that it recognises the administration and cooperates with it and seeks to develop it. The alliance also acknowledges the role played by the People's Protection Units (YPG) to defend the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration.

³² The Autonomous Administration includes non-Kurdish blocs and parties, such as the Arab National Authority, the Syriac Union Party, and the Assyrian Democratic Party.

³³ This party split from the Kurdish Reform Movement.

3. Kurdish civil movements in Syria

The position of Kurdish civil movements is not much different from that of other civil movements in Syria in terms of development, but some of these are sometimes said to be closer to the Kurdish parties. Kurdish civil movement in Syria mainly fall under two types:

3.1. Civil society organisations (CSO)

Initially, it must be pointed out that Kurdish civil organisations in Syria existed, albeit rather restrictedly, before the public uprising in March 2011. They operated secretly due to the policies exercised against the Kurdish people, mainly aimed at jeopardising their existence on their land and integrating them into pan-Arabism. They were also subjected to other repressive measures generally exercised against any civil movement in the country. To resist these policies, organisations and associations concerned with the Kurdish language were established. These organisations were mainly interested in the revival and development of Kurdish language, and also in the history of the Kurds within Syria in particular. They also took interest in traditional Kurdish arts, dance and costumes. However, it should be noted that some of these associations and organisations were closely affiliated to political parties. They often worked under their auspices to develop democratic thought in Syrian society as a whole as this would positively affect the Kurds and their presence and history, and help them reach a fair solution to the Kurdish cause in Syria.

After March 2011, most Kurdish civil society organisations were formed in the Kurdish regions, and some were founded outside Syria. Most of these organisations did not interfere in politics; they understood civil society as charities and relief organisations working at times of war and providing services, food, medicine and medical services for free. Such organisations rarely took interest in developing capabilities, expertise and skills, or monitoring government or administration performance.

After the Autonomous Administration was formed, effectively controlling its region, civil society organisations found in this region a new and safe place to work, especially if they did not have political agenda or criticised the policies of the administration. Organisations operating in this geographical area enjoyed a position generally better than that of their peers in regions controlled by either the opposition or the regime. The role played by these organisations developed both qualitatively and quantitatively. They doubled in number dozens of times, and they became diversified and varied in terms of orientation, interests, and specialty. New organisations appeared, interested in women empowerment, children, orphans, families of war victims. On the other hand, organisations concerned with capability building and expertise development also became active. However, they lacked support because they were local, operating within the regions of the Autonomous Administration opposed by Turkey, and thus they were deprived of all forms of support from international organisations that found in Turkey a centre for operations in Syria.³⁴

³⁴ Some foreign organisations used to provide financial and logistical support to the Syrian organisations operating inside the country, but this support was not often received by Kurdish organisations, and if received in rare situations, the support was very limited and offered indirectly. That is because Turkey has been exerting pressure on foreign organisations to prevent them from dealing with Kurdish organisations in any form since Kurdish organisations operate within the areas of the Democratic Autonomous Administration. This negatively impacted their performance as they did not receive support from the administration either. There are also significant restrictions, inside the regions controlled by the Autonomous Administration, imposed on organisations and initiatives that are not close to the administration as well as any bodies believed to be affiliated to the Kurdish National Council.

3.2. Independents and civil activists

Independent Kurdish figures took the initiative and served the Kurdish issue. They tried to promote it in all forums, such as international organisations interested in Syrian public affairs, and the Civil Society Chamber of the UN Special Envoy for Syria consisting of representatives of Syrian civil society organisations and a group of technocrats and constitutional jurists. The UN Envoy showed special interest in forming a special constitutional working group. It is also noteworthy that some independent Kurdish civilians worked within the Civil Society Chamber while others worked independently. Their significant contribution to public affairs lacked visibility. They paid the price of being independent from parties and state actors in Syrian affairs.

In summary, Kurdish community, and Syrian society in general, are still dominated by the pattern of civil society, with all its different formations and values. Civil society attempted to the uprising that erupted in 2011, but this attempted was foiled by both the regime and the opposition as well as the intervention of neighboring countries and the hesitation of supporters. This is in addition to the ongoing bloody and violent conflict, which, at times, turned into an internal conflict amongst civil society formations affiliated to either the regime or the opposition. Both strived to demonstrate their eligibility for the protection of the values of civil society, which hampered and prevented cherishing these values. The activity of civil organisations concerned with relief or documentation of violations cannot define the mission of civil society in its broadest sense.³⁵

4. Effectiveness of ethnic based advocacy in serving the Kurdish issue

Do the Kurds politically press their demands on ethnic grounds, and would this serve the Kurdish issue? This topic excited controversy among those concerned with Syrian affairs, and particularly Syrian Kurdish cause. Thus, it is vital to study the development and historical context of the Kurdish role in Syria after 2011 and the evolution of their demands.

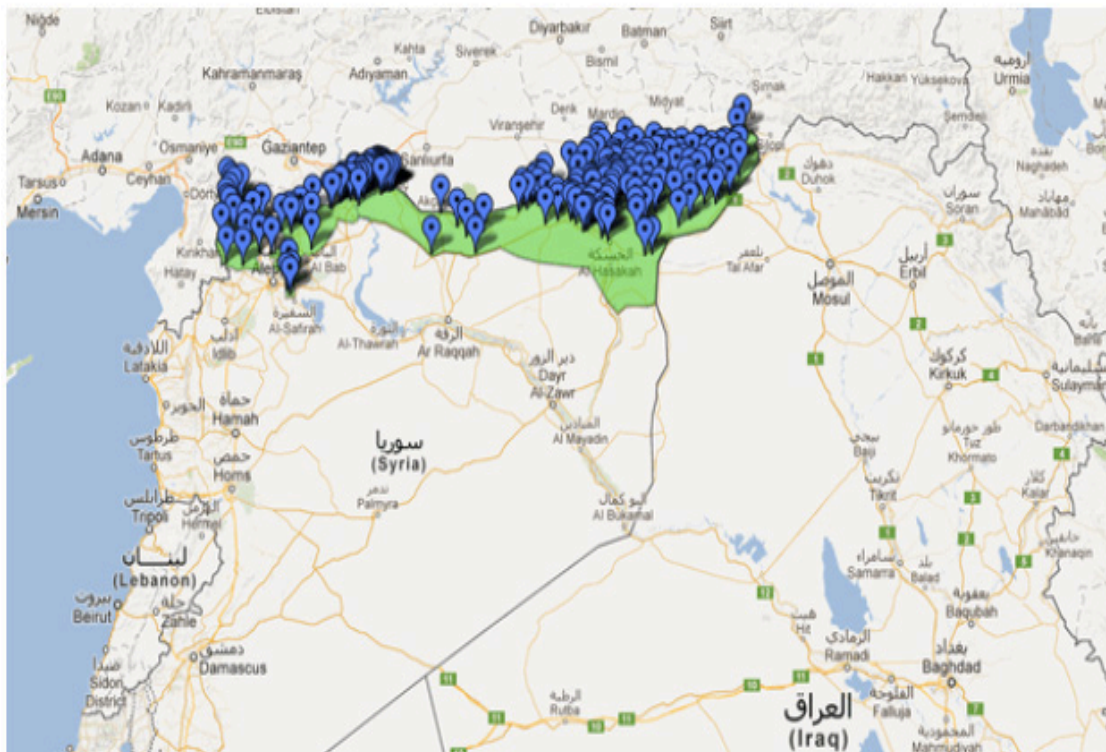
4.1. The role of the Kurds and the evolution of demands

The Kurds consider that their unquestionably Kurdish-majority regions extend from the city of Derek in the east to Afrin in the west passing through Amouda, Darbasiyah, Sera Kani, Kanya Ghazala and Kobani. These geographic areas are called by some, Syrian Kurdistan or Rojava Kurdistan (literally, Western Kurdistan). Both names suggest that this region is part of Greater Kurdistan, which was divided after the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 into four parts respectively annexed to Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

The following map shows the distribution of the Kurds among their regions. It represents how the

³⁵ A phone interview with Engineer Zuhair Ali, writer and civil activist, on February 3, 2020.

majority of the Kurds perceive the borders of Rojava (Western Kurdistan) or Syrian Kurdistan. ³⁶



Despite the undeniable Kurdish national feeling amongst the Kurdish public in Syria, they have always called, and are still calling, for their cause to be considered as a Syrian national issue that must be resolved within the Syrian framework. Thus, the Kurds, especially the youth, participated in the uprising since it broke out by forming coordinative groups, and then more broadly through the parties that understood the importance of forming a single political body that represents them in all forums, especially after the Syrian National Council was founded in Istanbul on October 2, 2011. Thus, the Kurdish National Council was formed on October 26, 2011, in the city of Qamishli, Syria, as the first Kurdish political body to be formed and included several parties. Subsequently, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) founded the Council of Western Kurdistan in December 2011.

At first, Kurdish demands were limited to democratic change through political and economic reforms and constitutional recognition of the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people. However, after the Syrian regime adopted security measures to suppress the uprising, slogans calling for the overthrow the regime has started to appear in different areas of Syria, and were adopted by the majority of the Syrian opposition.

In parallel with their participation in the uprising, the Kurds monitored all projects of reform and change suggested to save Syria. Some of these projects have indeed started to be implemented and developed hoping that they will meet the demands of all the components of the Syrian society, including the Kurds.

The Kurds want to ensure that any new regime will not adopt the same previous racist poli-

36 Swedish Kurdish Centre for Studies. Available at: <https://www.nlk-s.net/>

cies against them shall a fundamental political change takes place. To restore their trust in the state in its new form, a sound and fair constitution should be drawn up, guaranteeing their rights as Syrian citizens and a central component in Syrian society; the situation should be rectified and those affected by previous racist policies should be compensated. This could protect the Kurds from chauvinist and exclusionary practices. However, things did not turn out as the Kurds wished; the mask has soon fallen off, as experience showed that most of the projects were not aimed, in essence, at producing a comprehensive solution to the Kurdish issue. Rather, most of the main and important Kurdish demands were marginalised while prioritising the overthrow of the Syrian regime. Some in the opposition even believed that asserting Kurdish rights as an indigenous people in Syria was a separatist or divisive call; many statements were issued denying the historical presence of the Kurds in Syria, and accusing them of separatism and treason.³⁷

All Kurdish calls and initiatives were overlooked by many Syrian parties as well as the government in Damascus, which refuse to conduct any direct talks in this regard. Decree 49 issued by government in April 2011 granting the (Kurdish) foreigners of al-Hasakah Syrian citizenship was only an attempt to gain their support and calm the situation at a very critical stage for the regime.³⁸ Most of the Arab opposition in Syria dealt with the Kurds in the same way. Most of the Kurds believe that the Arab opposition did not adopt a positive stance towards the Kurdish cause. They tried to approach the Kurds only at times when they needed to reflect a positive image of united opposition and Syrian mosaic before international public opinion; they often expressed ostensible situations by signing agreements with some Kurdish political parties to buy time and gain international support. That was the case when the PYD joined the National Coordination Committee and when the Kurdish National Council joined the National Coalition and signed the declaration of principles in 2013, but it failed to include federalism in the declaration.

These negative stances did demonstrate a genuine Syrian intention, whether on the part of the regime or the opposition to resolve the Kurdish issue internally and offer the Kurds adequate reassurance on their future status in Syria. Therefore, they were left with no choice but to call for a new political system that gives them security and some economic powers and resources. To ensure the unity of the country, while preserving a degree of Kurdish privacy, and protecting them against any further injustices in the future, all Kurds agreed to call for a decentralised system in Syria.

The Kurds simply wanted to press demands that could protect them from future injustice and preserve their rights in Syria: the Kurdish National Council decided to demand political decentralisation (federalism) and the right to self-determination within a united Syria. The Autonomous Administration had a similar proposition, based on the brotherhood of peoples and democratic nation. Each side in its way called for federalism for Syria.

Each Kurdish party promoted its project in its own way, so that their demands are not projected as merely Kurdish. The Kurdish National Council called for the cooperation of all components to adopt the federal system. The Autonomous Administration, supported by Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes elements from the various components in the region but with a Kurdish majority, have promoted a system of government based on collective participation that is not limited to the Kurds.

37 There are several examples of similar statements by Syrian opposition figures, such as those issued by Asaad Al-Zoubi, Atta Kamel, Ahmed Kamel, and others.

38 The decree is available for access on the website of the People's Council of Syria website: <http://parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index>.

4.2. The proposal of federalism for the future of Syria

The proposal of federalism was met with disapproval and resentment by most of the Syrians, especially the government and the opposition. Federalism, which rather has the sense of union, not separation, was unfamiliar to them, a relatively new system of administration for the Middle East. There were also other reasons that led to that rejection. The Syrian regime, being a centralised system, refuses to share any of its authorities with regional administrations. Some parties rejected the proposal, not because it was put forward by the Kurds, but rather also because they had an objective view of federalism: they did not believe in the ability of the Syrian regions to be autonomously managed away from the control of the centre. Furthermore, other Syrian (non-Kurdish) regions have not called for the federal system. They also feared that this system could be used as a tool to force what they call a demographic change and sectarian isolation, which indeed took place at some point during the war. They believed that this could also empower warlords and populists in the areas under their control. However, this argument is not objective, because the federal system does not mean division or interruption of communication between Syrian regions. The Kurds have not proposed this system because they have a de facto authority in place. Rather, they, like the others, demanded a new administrative system for the whole of Syria.³⁹ It is worth noting that some reject federalism because they fear it would restore the division enforced during the French Mandate.

These reasons remain officially unstated by most of the opposition parties, often because they are considered objective reasons that can be debated and refuted. Nevertheless, the majority of Syrians, especially on the opposition side, have chosen to reject federalism mostly because they see it as a Kurdish proposal. Some in the opposition rejected the federal system on the grounds that it would result in dividing the country, wondering why only the Kurds called for it.⁴⁰ On the other hand, it must be noted that despite this strong objection, some opposition parties occasionally organised some workshops exploring this system amongst other workshops on administrative decentralisation advocated by the majority of the opposition.

4.3. The vision of the Kurdish parties for the future of Syria

On the Kurdish side, there are two main parties that have suggested federalism as a system to administrate the Syrian State, namely the Kurdish National Council and the Democratic Union Party, represented by the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Council.

4.3.1. The vision of the Kurdish National Council

Since it was formed, the Kurdish National Council has considered itself as part of the Syrian

³⁹ There are some non-Kurdish parties, blocs and figures who support the federal system for reconsidering the current administrative division of the country, including those who have joined the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Council, in addition to some independent figures who submitted studies on this subject to the office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, “de Mistura”, such as politicians, Jamal Karsali and Talal Jassem.

⁴⁰ Turkey has played a crucial role in promoting this narrative to show the Kurds as separatists, and this is evidenced by frequently using terms such as separatists when referred to the Kurds by parties and figures supported by Turkey.

revolution and opposition in general. The council has been effective, as it has undertaken several activities through its local councils, whether inside or outside Syria. Later, it joined the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and signed a document, calling for the National Coalition to adopt political decentralisation. However, the latter rejected this call, and then The Kurdish National Council expressed its reservation about that. Since the opposition delegation to the Geneva talks was formed, the Kurdish National Council, has failed to press its demands on the table, or even include the Kurdish issue in the agenda of any of the eight rounds of the Geneva talks although two of its members were included in the delegation.

The Kurdish National Council failed to reach an agreement with the opposition to ensure that Syria will be a federal state; therefore, its propositions were only presented through the media although some of the demands were, in fact, approved by the opposition. The opposition, for instance, agreed that those who were stripped of Syrian citizenship after the exceptional census in 1962 should restore it, and those affected by racist policies of the Ba'ath regime should be compensated. They also approved other demands such as offering identity documents for the Kurds who are unregistered in addition to demands for obtaining Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights. Apart from this, Kurdish National Council did not put forward its proposition clearly or officially to express its view on of the distribution of powers, administrative division of provinces or regions, the judiciary system, power sharing between the regions and the centre, and other essential aspects that determine the nature, form, and institutions of federal state.

The vision of the Kurdish National Council can be summarised in the following statement: Syria is a multi-national and multi-religious state, a decentralised federal state that ensures constitutional recognition of the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people in accordance with international law, while preserving the unity of the country.

4.3.2. The vision of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the backbone of the Autonomous Administration project. It believes that nationalism has aggravated the crisis in Syria, and that the Kurdish-Arab brotherhood lays the ground for the solution. Accordingly, the party “renounced nationalism” and supported “the democratisation of Syria leading to a democratic nation” that can be self-managed, hence the project was launched in the Self-Administration regions with a view to expanding this experience across Syria.

The PYD put forward its own project, the Democratic Autonomous Administration, more broadly in late 2013, when it formed the Constituent General Council for Interim Administration and then divided Rojava into three cantons (districts): Al-Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin. By the end of 2014, an executive board was formed in each province, along with a judicial council and a legislative council. An executive board, in turn, consisted of several bodies providing services to citizens. A legislative council was elected for each province. People’s municipalities were formed and cooperated with *communes* set up in villages and neighbourhoods to manage citizen affairs.

In the beginning, the PYD founded People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) primarily aimed at defending Rojava, and also formed the police and Internal Security Forces known as Asayish. Then, in October 2015, the PYD, along with some other parties and components in the region, formed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a predominantly Kurdish multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance. YPG and YPJ constitute 60% of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Nevertheless, the SDF included various non-Kurdish Arab, Assyrian and Syriac groups. It declared that they aim to establish a secular, democratic and federal Syria, following the example of the revolution of Rojava in northern Syria.

They PYD sought to gain the Syrians' approval of the project and thus abandoned nationalist character, heavily criticised by non-Kurds. Subsequently, on January 9, 2015, along with several Arab, Assyrian, Syriac and other formations founded Syrian Democratic Council (MSD), which declared the Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava. It is worth noting that the MSD constitutes the political umbrella and supreme authority for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as well as the Syrian Democratic Forces. In effect, it has the required authorised to conduct any negotiation process. The MSD considers negotiation as the only way to reach a political solution and save the country.⁴¹ In 2016, the PYD introduced the Federal System in Syria that consists of regional autonomous administrations. The constitution of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, which was amended in December 2016, regards the Syrian Democratic Forces as the official federal defence force.

Following many failed attempts to include the PYD in the Geneva talks, the Autonomous Administration had no choice but to declare, along with most of the components of its regions, in March 2017, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, deliberately dropping the word “Rojava” from the name, and thus abolishing any indication of the Kurdish nationalist nature of the project. This was in accordance with the vision of the project leaders and the rest of the components. The Autonomous Administration refuted by doing so all unfounded allegations of adopting a Kurdish separatist project. That declaration was perceived as a message to those assembled in Geneva at the time that no solution can be reached without the Kurds, especially since the Syrian Democratic Forces occupied more than 30% of Syria at that time. This federation included three regions, namely Al-Jazeera, Kobane and Afrin.

As for Afrin, since March 2018, has not been under the control of the Autonomous Administration since it was occupied by Turkey and some Turkish-backed military factions, such as the Army of Islam, which had been deported to Afrin from Ghouta around Damascus in the south. This shows it did not, in any way, belong to the region. Their practices and violations, which were documented by different human rights organisations, have widened the Kurdish-Arab rift. Shortly thereafter, the Autonomous Administration and Syrian Democratic Forces lost control of Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abyad following an offensive launched by Turkish military accompanied by Turkish-backed factions, in October 2019. As a result, Ras al-Ain and Tell Abyad were occupied, and appalling human rights violations and public assassinations of Kurdish leaders took place, such as the assassination of Mrs. Havrin Khalaf.⁴² A large number of population was displaced to Qamishli, Deir ez-Zur and other nearby areas as well as Iraqi Kurdistan. Once again, these crimes have consider-

41 For more information about the Syrian Democratic Council, visit the council's official website at: <https://m-syria-d.com//>

42 Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish politician and Secretary General of the Future Syria Party since 2018 until assassinated by the armed factions on October 12, 2019.

ably deepened the rift between the Kurds and Arabs.

The Autonomous Administration has proposed the federal system as a form of government for all of Syria, and this proposition did not concern Kurdish national rights in the country. However, considering the current situation and the views of other Syrian parties, it is difficult for this project to succeed if it is not supported by the rest of the Syrians as a system of government. However, this does not seem to be possible at present, or at any time soon. The Autonomous Administration represents only a regional government in Syria, which cannot succeed as it stands without without having to restructure the entire Syrian state including all state institutions and mechanisms. It provides a more radical model than the Communist model of nation and society building.⁴³

4.4. Deficiencies in the Kurds' projects and programs

Federation as proposed by the two parties may not be based on ethnic grounds. However, the way it was unprofessionally presented has not helped the project to gain in popularity and caused considerable misunderstanding or lack of understanding amongst most of the Syrians.

The Autonomous Administration proposed a project that covers all of Syria and promotes the notion of peoples' brotherhood and the democratic nation which does not recognise ethnic nationalism. It believes in participation with all other components of the region, sometimes at the expense of the Kurds as the main component.⁴⁴ However, it has not been successful in persuading all Syrians that its project is purely Syrian national because of the close relationship of the Democratic Union Party, the founder of the Autonomous Administration, to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The Kurdish National Council, on the other hand, has not proposed federalism on a national, but rather on a geographical basis; however, similarly, has not managed to persuade the Syrians that the federal proposition is in fact a Syrian national project leading to the best form of government for the future of Syria, and will not, by any means, be similar to the federal experience in Iraqi Kurdistan only because that the Kurdish National Council is linked in a way or another to the administration of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The way federalism was proposed and promoted by projects lacks clarity. The absence of a clearly defined project at the Syrian national level has produced many questions concerning the two projects.

The deficiencies can be summarised as follows:

- The federal project was not promoted in the ideal way, which fueled fears of partition among most of the Syrian parties.

⁴³ Ali, Zuhair, previously referenced.

⁴⁴ This is what happened in Afrin when Afrin region was declared within the federal project. Plenty of non-Kurdish components participated in the process and were included in the Administration, while the Kurds who did not support the Autonomous Administration or those who criticised the PYD's policies were excluded.

- There is a lack of international support for the Kurdish position and the projects that have been proposed.
- Irresponsible chauvinist and racist views adopted, and statements made, by some of the Syrian opposition parties.
- The close relationship the PYD to the PKK listed as a terrorist party, actively in war with Turkey.
- Implicit and sometimes explicit agreements were reached between Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria to stand against any form of Kurdish autonomy similar to the Iraqi Kurdistan model, which may bring claims for independence on day.
- Majority of the Kurdish political elite generally have little experience and awareness of the methods of political action; they often rely on moral and humanitarian principles based on the the legitimacy of their demands.
- The absence of a serious and meaningful Kurdish-Arab dialogue, especially about adopting a suitable form of governance for the country, has produced independent plans that lacked cooperation and consensus.

5. Political representation of the main Kurdish forces in the Syrian Peace Process

Since talks were held and the Higher Negotiation Committee was formed by Syrian opposition, aimed at finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the most important question for the Kurds has remained: Are the Kurds genuinely represented in these talks?

We can say that Kurdish representation in the Negotiation Committee is rather modest and does not live up to the level of real, effective and fair representation. The Negotiation Committee includes several opposition parties; each is linked to a specific regional power. This explains why there are many Syrian platforms. Similarly, on the Kurdish side, there is not one Kurdish platform that represents all the Kurds. This negatively affects their representation, demands, and their case.

5.1. Kurdish political representation

It can be argued that, Kurdish representation in the Syrian peace process, aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria, mainly falls under four main categories:

5.1.1. Kurdish National Council

The Kurdish National Council is poorly represented in the opposition or international forums, platforms and conferences. It is present in the opposition as a component of the National Coalition

of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, but it inadequately represented in the Negotiation Committee, which includes most of the opposition spectrum, especially the Arab ones. Each of its member parties sought to increase the number of its representatives, but it seems that the Kurds are the weakest party in the Committee as their presence is limited to two representatives only.

5.1.2. The Autonomous Administration

The Autonomous Administration and its parties are entirely excluded from the endeavours of the political process in Geneva, including the Civil Society Chamber, and they are also excluded from security and military opposition committees taking part in Syria Peace Talks in Astana although 30 percent of Syria had been under its security control before 2018. Turkey strongly opposes representation of the Autonomous Administration in any international or Syrian conference or forum that seeks to find a solution to the Syrian conflict. This is because Turkey considers that the Administration consists of the PYD only, and sees, as a branch of the Turkish-designated terrorist PKK.

5.1.3. Independent Kurds and civil society

This group is marginalised and not organised within a defined and comprehensive organisational framework. It includes Kurdish independents and civil society organisations. Although the Kurds have considerable experience and abilities, only a few of them have been allowed to attend and participate in international forums, and this group is not considered amongst the prominent independent Kurdish figures which could ensure a satisfactory and effective representation for the Kurdish people.

5.1.4. Representation of the Kurdish people in Syrian government

With regard to the representation of the Kurds in the existing Syrian regime, it should be noted that some Kurdish figures support the regime, and thus are given limit space and authority to promote the regime as non-exclusionary of any of the Syrian components. Furthermore, the government ensured including some Kurdish figures in the Constitutional Committee, although they do not seem to have credibility or effective role amongst the Kurds.

5.2. The effects of poor Kurdish political representation

Excluding part of the Kurds from political representation of the Kurdish people, marginalising another part, and poor representation of the third part have exerted significant effects on Kurdish political presence, especially regarding the formation of the Constitutional Committee in late September 2019. The inclusion of representatives of the Autonomous Administration has not been approved by any means. Furthermore, Kurdish civil society has been unexpectedly underrepresented in terms of experience and number. As for the Kurdish National Council, it is represented by only two, out of fifty, members within the opposition list for the Constitutional Committee.

This poor representation has provoked extremely negative response from the Kurdish people in Syria regarding the Constitutional Committee and the political process in Syria as a whole. The Kurdish people no longer trust, this process, which has lost credibility among the Kurds. It is worth noting that Kurdish civil society organisations have objected to the way the committee was formed, and to the poor representation of the Kurds in the civil society list. Similarly, members of the Kurdish National Council have objected to their inadequate representation in the opposition list, arguing that it is not commensurate with the percentage of the Kurds in Syria, as the second largest ethnic group after Arabs: 15% of the population according to Kurdish sources.

It is worth mentioning that some Kurds believe that Kurdish representation is not as important as the demands of the Kurdish cause, as previously explained in this study. They wonder about the benefit of allowing some Kurds to attend the Geneva Talks when their demands are not put forward on the negotiating table due to the rejection of the matter by both the opposition and the regime.

On the other hand, as a result of the misleading practices and statements about the Kurds, most of the Kurds can no longer differentiate between the position of the regime and the position of the majority of the opposition on the Kurdish issue in Syria. Both sides evade putting the issue forward on the negotiating table, or even worse: Both sides sometimes issue statements and carry out practices, aimed at abolishing the Kurdish presence in Syria, based on false data stemming from their exclusionary views about the Kurdish people and rights.

The growing Turkish influence over the official representatives of Syrian opposition who mostly live in Turkey has greatly contributed to foiling any attempt to reach a consensus amongst Kurdish and non-Kurdish Syrians about the form of future government. Turkey has ensured that all chosen opposition leaders are extremely loyal to it. Some of them even hold Turkish citizenship and consider themselves Turkish in the first place.⁴⁵

This reality has had a great impact on the Kurdish people's cause, the entire political process, and generally the future of Syria as a diverse country. Syria is undoubtedly and undeniably diverse. Kurdish citizens feel, out of responsibility, that they must participate in public life and contribute to establishing the rules for coexistence away from racism, tyranny and exclusion. First and foremost, the Kurds are Syrian citizens, and by when exposed to marginalisation and exclusion, they cannot trust the state and other Syrian components. This could negatively affect the stability of the country in general. The Kurdish people can never accept to be excluded from the future of Syria again, especially after all the sacrifices they have made fighting against tyranny, racist policies, and terrorism during all phases of the conflict in Syria.

45 Khaled Al-Khoja, head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces stated in an interview on Sky News Arabia: "I am originally Turkish, and in Syria we are Turks and among the Turks of Syria." The transcript of the interview is published on the Hansa News website, available at: <https://hanza.news/>

6. Discussion and recommendations

If recent history of the region is reconsidered, we find that the region including Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria have experienced a state of instability. This is due to the political conflict between these countries and the internal ethnic and sectarian conflict, in addition to dictatorship, tyranny and some racist and exclusionary policies practiced by governments towards their peoples and social components. All of these countries are diverse, yet ruling powers have not expressed clear determination to recognise this diversity. They have not either pursued appropriate policies to protect this diversity, or considered it a factor of power rather than weakness. By adopting racist policies, they have tried to undermine this diversity whether through nationalism or religion. Instead of seeking to establish national cohesion principles, governments have widened the social rift and damaged the confidence between various social components, by reshuffling the cards and provoking internal conflicts between ethnic and religious groups and sects. This is all to justify interference and repression and thus sustaining power. Some foreign powers have also supported these practices.

In light of this, we need to search for commonalities among the Syrians which could unite, rather than divide, the society. Trust and social cohesion must be built within the inclusive framework of national state, away from national, individual, religious or sectarian ideologies.

The Kurdish movement in Syria lacked a clear and applicable Kurdish project, and suffered a problem of representation within the Kurdish political elite. The opposition and the regime rejected most propositions put forward by the Kurdish parties, especially with regard to the form of the state. Some foreign countries adopted aggressive stances against Kurdish rights while other countries dismissed these rights and chose not to hold serious discussion with the Kurdish parties. Therefore, it has become imperative to try and find other ways to protect individual and public rights of all Syrian components in the future, while respecting ethnic and sectarian peculiarities and ensuring that neither local or central dictatorships nor future parliamentary majorities can dominate government and repress others under the pretext of democracy and majority rule.

This can be made possibly by seeking to reach consensus on a set of supra-constitutional principles among all Syrian parties, manifested in a general political agreement that guarantees the rights of everyone and calms the concerns of all parties. This can be the basis and starting point for drafting the prospective Syrian constitution. These principles are the unity of the country, decentralisation of state, form of state and type of government, separation of religion and state, separation of powers, judicial independence, women quota and protection of basic rights of minorities and different social components.

In order to reach a consensus and then apply these principles without which we do not believe that comprehensive solutions can be found in Syria, a serious and new dialogue must take place based on the premise that all Syrians are concerned with the common Syrian interest, and that patriotism is not limited to one social component. It should be a Syrian dialogue aimed first at restoring confidence and establishing rules for coexistence to prevent foreign, especially regional, interventions. Such a dialogue should include everyone because there is no future for a political process unless everyone is included, and everyone's demands and concerns are up for discussion. It should be a dialogue that brings together all components without exception, based on a new tolerant mentality,

while compensating all those oppressed and affected by the consequences of wrong policies. It should be a dialogue aimed at considering what can bring all components together and guarantee a better life for future Syrian generations. It should be a dialogue, based on recognition of the other, respecting privacy, and preservation of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, which in turn can help build the national societal fabric in Syria.

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An interview in Erbil with Musa Uske, former Syrian Kurdish politician, who witnessed all the events that took place as part of the Kurdish political movement in Syria, November 10, 2017.

A telephone interview with Khaled Jamil Muhammad, former founder independent member of the Kurdish National Council and former vice-president of the Kurdish National Council, on May 23, 2020.

A phone interview with Engineer Zuhair Ali, writer and civil activist, on February 3, 2020.



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The London School of Economics
and Political Science
Houghton Street, London
WC2A 2AE

Contact:

Dr Rim Turkmani,
Principal Investigator
Tel: +44(0)20 7955 6419
Email: info@syrianconstitution.org

Conflict Research Programme

The London School of Economics
and Political Science
Houghton Street, London
WC2A 2AE

Contact:

Tel: +44 (0)20 7849 4631
Email: intdev.crp@lse.ac.uk