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The Kurds and the Syrian Revolution

By **Bakr Sidki**

Despite endemic discrimination and oppression, Syria's Kurds have been hesitant to join the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime. A larger Kurdish participation would significantly impact the course of events, but the various Kurdish political actors have had diverging reactions to the revolution, the role of Turkey and the fate of Kurdish interests in a free Syria.

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On 3 February, 2012, a big demonstration was to have been staged in the city of Afrin, northwest of Aleppo, but before the large numbers of demonstrators could congregate at the starting point, a mob of *shabiha* (i.e. regime thugs) mounted an attack with clubs and blades. The *shabiha* carried posters of Abdullah Ocalan and the flags of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and abused the demonstrators in Kurdish, accusing them of the crime of demanding freedom and wounding more than twenty, including some leading figures from the traditional Kurdish political parties.

The demonstration against the regime of Bashar al-Assad was over before it had begun.

Unlike the neighbouring province of Jazira (Hasakah) and the Koubani district of Aleppo, Afrin had remained cut off from the Syrian revolution until the first major demonstration was held in the city on 27 January 2012. The success of this event, in which more than ten thousand people chanted for the fall of the regime and civil rights for Syrian Kurds, emboldened organizers to arrange a second protest a week later and try to establish a schedule of weekly marches in line with the rest of the Syrian revolution.

But early signs of intra-Kurd violence brought such plans to an end.

The violence of 3 February did not come out of the blue. Since the start of the revolution in mid-March 2011 young Kurds from Qamishli, Amouda and many other municipalities in Jazira had been participating in anti-regime demonstrations, bringing a Kurdish character to the event with their own chants and banners. They raised the Kurdish flag next to the Syrian national flag and called for freedom, the fall of the regime and the unity of Syrian people while demanding national rights for the Kurds.

From the outset the responses of Kurdish political forces to the revolution could be divided into three principal camps as follows:

1. The PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party)

The PKK is commanded in the field by Murad Qiralian from their headquarters in Jebel Qandil on the Iraqi-Turkish border and under the overall control of imprisoned party leader Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK has a branch in Syria known as the Democratic Union Party (PYD), led by Saleh Muslim, who also acts as deputy to Hassan Abdel Azim (Naseri), the president of the opposition National Coordinating Committee (NCC) executive committee.

When the Syrian revolution first broke out in Deraa, a deal was concluded between the leadership of the PKK and the security agencies of the Syrian regime, in which the PKK pledged not to join the revolution, in return for the regime allowing the party to operate freely in Kurdish areas. There is information to suggest that 1,800 armed PKK fighters have moved out of their base in Jebel Qandil to the Jazira and Aleppo provinces (i.e. to Afrin and Koubani) accompanied by the leader of the PYD himself, who was previously sought by the security services but is now free both to move within Syria and travel abroad.

The PKK's activities have not been confined to preventing young Kurds from joining the demonstrations. It has set up elected bodies comprised of party members, such as the West Kurdistan Parliament and other local councils, in addition to performing a direct security role, manning armed checkpoints at intersections in predominantly Kurdish areas, which perform vehicle searches, guard the entrances to villages and other security-related activities, all of which are coordinated with regime agencies.

2. Traditional Kurdish Parties

Traditional Kurdish parties have attempted to pursue a middle course, neither angering the regime and the PKK nor openly opposing the revolution.

3. The Kurdish youth-led coordinating committees and the Kurdish Future movement

The coordinating committees of the Kurdish youth and the Kurdish Future Movement are the third camp. The Future Movement was founded some years ago by the late Mashaal Tammo, whom the regime had imprisoned

in previous years, before presumably assassinating him in October 2011 as a consequence of his radical politics.

These young Kurds have been involved in the Syrian revolution from its inception, calling for freedom and the fall of the regime then constituting an umbrella body called the Union of Coordinating Committees for the Kurdish Youth. They are by and large politically independent, though some belong to traditional Kurdish parties and their participation in demonstrations is in a private capacity.

The 2004 Uprising: a Formative Experience

In May 2004 violence broke out in Qamishli's football stadium between local fans and supporters of the visiting team from Deir al-Zour, leading to the deaths of a number of the locals, with many injured.

But this was not simple football hooliganism: the incident was a deliberately provocative act with political and ethnic overtones. Inside the stadium, the travelling supporters from Deir al-Zour had brandished pictures of Saddam Hussein and chanted that Iraqi Kurd leaders Barzani and Talabani were "traitors". The local fans responded in kind and violence ensued.

At the time, the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq was a year old and it was common to accuse the Kurds as traitors who had brought the occupying forces to Iraq. On the other hand, the fall of the Saddam regime, which had committed atrocities against Iraqi Kurds in Anfal and Halabja among other places and the recent creation of a Kurdish federal state in the country, had inflamed Kurdish nationalist sentiment.

Instead of trying to limit the damage caused by the incident, the local authorities merely poured oil on the flames and protests broke out wherever Kurds were found in any numbers, from Jazira to Aleppo and Damascus. The regime met these peaceful protests with violent repression. Tens of Kurds were killed and an unknown number were wounded, detained, or fled abroad.

The Kurdish uprising took place in isolation from the rest of the Syrian population, embittering the young

generation of Kurds, which had tried to destroy statues of Hafez al-Assad for the first time since he came to power in 1970. Their political consciousness took shape in this early revolutionary experience, amidst this sense of alienation from their Syrian Arab peers: a narrow ethno-nationalist worldview trumping broader, patriotic Syrian sentiments.

The Kurds of Aleppo and the surrounding countryside came late to the 2011 revolution. Many people pondered the reasons for their hesitancy. One factor may have been the relative strength of the PKK in Afrin and Kobani compared to the other municipalities and towns of Jazira, which saw higher levels of participation.

We should also add the role of the traditional Kurdish parties, which did not attempt to encourage participation in the popular revolution and maintained their "moderate" stance towards the regime, even after the outbreak of hostilities. However, the widespread involvement of young Kurds in demonstrations inside Jazira made it difficult for these parties to face their supporters. In early May 2011 the traditional parties met together and issued a joint statement offering a reformist solution to the crisis. The regime was to halt all violence and enter into dialogue with the opposition over making a peaceful, secure transition from despotism to democracy. However, the regime continued to confront the peaceful demonstrations with unfettered violence rendering the Kurdish initiative a failure, as with so many others initiatives.

The Birth of the Kurdish National Council in Syria

In late July 2011, the Kurdish National Conference met in Qamishli. The conference comprised 250 individuals, 60 per cent of whom were unaffiliated, with the remaining 40 per cent representing one of the ten major parties of the traditional Kurdish political movement. Negotiations were held with the PYD aimed at including them in the conference, but the PYD declined to attend, preferring to work alone according to its own agenda.

The result of this meeting was the creation of Kurdish National Council, with an elected executive committee and general secretariat. In its closing statement, the conference demanded both "the right to determine

the destiny of the Kurdish people in the framework of a unified Syria” and “changing the security-based dictatorship and instituting a plural democratic state.” The conference further gave its blessing and support to the Kurdish revolutionary youth movement, set up local councils affiliated with the Syrian National Council, and called for the adoption of a decentralized political system to administer the country.

The conference’s constituent parties were to withdraw from all other opposition alliances, though they would continue to work with these bodies to further Kurdish nationalist demands. This was because the member parties were hitherto distributed across a number of such organizations, including the Damascus Declaration, the National Coordinating Committee, the forces of Democratic Change and the Istanbul-based Syrian National Council.

Following its creation, Kurdish National Council executive committee made an official visit to Iraqi Kurdistan and met with the region’s president, Masoud Barzani, who gave his blessing to the Syrian initiative. The head of the committee, Abdel Hakim Bashar, travelled to various European capitals where he met with representatives of their respective governments. The council entered into negotiations with the Syrian National Council with a view to develop common ground over the rights of the Kurdish people in Syria. Finally, the Kurdish delegation withdrew from the Istanbul conference, to which they had been invited by the Syrian National Council as part of the effort to unify the Syrian opposition, after the Syrian National Council refused to include Kurdish demands in the conference’s “National Pledge” document.

What Does all this mean?

For the most part, the Kurdish political movement feels that it is currently in the strongest position in its history. First of all, a Kurdish federal entity is securely established in northern Iraq despite the instability and factionalism that bedevils the rest of the country. This Kurdish region has given the Kurdish political movement in Syria a huge boost and revived the old dream of every Kurd, that one day there could be an independent Kurdish state.

Secondly, Syrian Kurds sense that they hold the balance of power in the current crisis; that were they to join the revolution in large numbers they would tilt the scale one way and hasten the fall of the regime, but if they joined ranks with the regime or at least not act against it, they would increase its ability to take on the uprising. However, the fact that young Syrians are active participants in demonstrations calling for the end of the regime means the second option is essentially null and void. Instead, the traditional Kurdish parties are left to manoeuvre between the various opposition formations, especially the Syrian National Council and the National Coordinating Committee.

Thirdly, the Kurdish political movement is contemplating the post-Assad era and realises that the Syrian state will soon be at its weakest ebb, allowing it to impose Kurdish demands more forcefully than at any time in the history of the modern Syrian state, a period in which their existence, culture and language have been marginalized and unrecognized.

Has the PKK backed the wrong horse?

The fact that the PKK entered into an alliance with the Assad regime at the start of the revolution came as a shock to everyone. We all remember how the Syrian regime expelled Abdullah Ocalan from Syrian territory in response to Turkish military threats in the summer of 1988. After months spent roaming from country to country and being turned away, Ocalan ended up in Nairobi, where he was arrested as part of a joint intelligence operation involving the CIA and the Turks, then flown to Istanbul, where he was placed in solitary confinement in an isolated island prison.

Ocalan’s expulsion and arrest was only the first step. Syria and Turkey entered into a number of bilateral security treaties with the aim of combatting the PKK and, overnight, its supporters and fighters went from being pets of the Syrian security agencies to their prey. Hundreds of party members were arrested, some receiving harsh prison sentences, while others were handed over to the Turkish authorities. Ties between the PKK and the Syrian regime were cut and their relationship became one of mutual enmity, after long years of the regime embracing its activities and using it to pressure

the Turks in the dispute over sharing water from the Euphrates river.

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (the AKP of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan) to power following decades of political instability in Turkey provided a glimmer of hope that the country's intractable "Kurdish problem" may be resolved. In 2003, current president Abdullah Gul made a statement in Diyarbakir (city in southeastern Turkey), which contained the first official admission by the Turkish state that there was a Kurdish issue that needed to be resolved politically, as opposed to violence and war which only exacerbated the problem.

The PKK responded by demonstrating its good intentions with a unilateral ceasefire declaration, hoping to give the new Turkish government a chance to make progress towards a political solution, which included safe passage for the party's fighters. Despite these measures, successive governments formed by the AKP over the course of the last decade have dragged their feet and failed to reach a long lasting, peaceful solution to the problem. Instead they have repeatedly resorted to the military option, resulting in even more bloodshed on both sides of the conflict.

The last round of secret negotiations between the PKK leadership and the Turkish intelligence services was held in Oslo in the spring of 2010. Media outlets close to the PKK leaked reports about the secret talks, embarrassing the Turkish government before the country's powerful secularist-nationalist opposition. Hopes for a peaceful settlement were dashed and the Turkish army resumed its attacks on PKK fighters, which itself carried out operations against army units.

This time, however, the PKK's military operations began to escalate and have been of an entirely different scale and quality than before, causing huge losses in the ranks of the Turkish forces. This has been the case since the Syrian revolution began when the Turkish government took a clear stand against the repressive tactics used by the regime.

Indeed, it seems that after decades of frosty relations, even outright hostility, the love affair between the regime and the PKK has blossomed anew.

The regime needed to keep the Kurds away from the popular demonstrations and in addition, to find some way to hurt the Turkish government. A way had to be found to stop Erdogan getting involved in Syria, especially since Turkey would be the most likely gateway for any international intervention. As for the PKK, the new deal has given it more space in which to manoeuvre in its conflict with Turkey. To sell this unpalatable deal to the Kurdish people, party members have pointed out that the main supporter of the Syrian opposition is their traditional enemy, the Turkish government. Furthermore, they say, the Syrian National Council is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is nothing less than the Syrian equivalent of the Islamist AKP. At the same time they attempt to flog their pro-regime stance by appealing to nationalist sentiments through various initiatives in Kurdish areas, from establishing cultural centres to teach the Kurdish language to electing what they call the "West Kurdistan Parliament", all under the watchful eye of the Syrian regime's security services.

It is possible that the immediate goal of the PKK is to establish military control over the Kurdish regions with the cooperation and connivance of the Assad regime, taking the opportunity to "impose a reality" both on the region's inhabitants and the Kurdish movement as a whole. It is common knowledge that PKK members have threatened, and continue to threaten, Kurdish revolutionary activists as well as assassinating Kurdish leaders. The public is well aware that the PKK are responsible for such assassinations though nobody is brave enough to openly accuse them.

As for their long term goals, the PKK's leadership knows full well that sooner or later the regime will fall, creating a power vacuum in the immediate aftermath, which an armed party such as the PKK, that already controls Afrin and is spreading its influence throughout the remaining Kurdish areas, could easily fill.

Ocalan's party is founded on leader-worship, a reverence for the imprisoned commander who still directs the party from his island cell near Istanbul. After his

arrest and the loss of their protective political environment in Syria the party underwent an existential crisis. It fractured, losing large numbers of its military wing, one third of which were Syrian recruits. In Turkey itself political and cultural heavyweights from the Kurdish community began calling for an end to a war that had been raging since the mid-1980s and asking people to work with the Turkish government to create a political solution. The party became a burden on its population base and the space within which it manoeuvred shrank. The Syrian revolution was a chance for the party to regain the initiative, starting with northern Syria.

Conclusion

Syrian Kurds are nationalists before they are patriots, a direct result of political and cultural marginalization and the very suffering they have endured over the years, most notably the 1962 census that denied Syrian citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Kurds, centralized population projects that led to the forcible demographic alteration of formerly Kurdish regions and finally, the

law that was passed a few years ago, which prevents the buying or selling of land within fifty kilometres of the Syrian border, a measure which the Kurds regard as targeting their communities.

The uprising of 2004 had the effect of making the Kurds even more insular and engendered feelings of impotent bitterness towards their Arab brethren. At the same time, the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein gave Syrian Kurds a huge morale boost. Then came the Syrian revolution, a historic opportunity to achieve what they had never been able to achieve, and restore the rights which were stripped from them.

Taken together, these factors ensured that Kurdish participation in the revolution was less enthusiastic than anticipated, especially in the province of Aleppo. The Kurdish political movement, however, was even more passive than the general population.

Translated by Robin Moger.

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