Borders, People and the Kurdish Political Situation in Syria
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Authors

Eric Gentz
Pushba Kaur
Conner Monaghan
Alex Negad
Yasmin Parkes
Robert Pilkington
Introduction

As Syria faces its third year of uprisings and civil war, the political and social dimensions within the country and its neighboring states are increasingly difficult to make out. This report will outline the Kurdish angle in the conflict by looking at the actions and intentions of the main Kurdish groups. The position of the regime forces, opposition elements, and the bordering countries in relation to the Kurds will also be outlined. Finally, there will be a focus on the impact of supply routes and refugee camps on the wider conflict.

Kurdish organisations, their numbers and intent

The confused picture has emerged because of the numerous Kurdish groups that exist within Syria. The Kurdish National Council acting is the umbrella organisation of these groups. The division of Kurds into three main groups reflects conflicting geopolitical interests of outside actors as well as historic factors.

The willingness of some Kurds within the main Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Council (SNC), to engage within a body that is close to Ankara (the PYD) has led to a loss of support on the ‘Kurdish Street’ and allegations of collaboration with the Turks by other Kurdish parties. The PYD’s aggressive stance against other Kurdish factions, and “tactical cooperation” with Assad, is a major factor contributing to the fracture of the Syrian Kurdish parties, and of the ability of Kurds to mobilize as a united front. The Kurdish National Council (KNC), backed by Barzani, seems to be making the most effort to form a common front with both the PYD and the SNC, but has so far been unsuccessful in the task. Further integration between and within groups is necessary. The three main groups are as follows:

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3 Ibid.
The Kurdish National Council (KNC) - Kurdish National Council in Syria is an amalgamation of around ten Kurdish parties in Syria, formed in October 2011. The KNC attempted to join the Syrian National Council (SNC) but its demands were not met and so it left the SNC shortly after its establishment. The KNC is under the control of Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan and is a more moderate Kurdish party representing a wider range of Kurds. It is at odds with the other major group, the PYD but they cannot afford to antagonise each other in light of their reliance and feeble agreement to avoid internal civil war. If the KNC did align with the PYD, its legitimacy would be boosted, representing the entire ‘Kurdish street’, but would most likely further distance it from the SNC, who remains critical for the success of the Syrian uprising. The SNC has been criticised by the West for failing to develop an inclusive vision for minorities in the post-Assad period and so a deal satisfying the Kurds would be a major step towards making the SNC an inclusive body. Due to the PYD’s tactical cooperation with Assad, and its violent attacks against protesters, the two groups likely to come to an accord are the SNC and KNC. A union of both groups could also assist in the marginalisation of the PYD, which would be the only Kurdish party not falling under this common umbrella.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS) - Linked with Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq. It has not been recognized by the Syrian government. 2000 Kurdish fighters defected from the Syrian army and are training in Iraqi Kurdistan. It is the second strongest political party and is also a member of the Kurdish National Council.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) - Founded in 2003 as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the PYD is one of the most prominent Kurdish opposition parties in Syria. It is also a member of the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC). Among the PYD’s stated goals is ‘the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights’ and ‘democratic autonomy’ for the Kurdish region. While the number of members is unknown, the PYD is one of the largest parties in Syria, the strongest (being the only party with an armed wing) and best organised in the Kurdish region. Having the most effective militia highlights a degree of autonomy that displays functioning self-governance; this allows them to have active power and autonomy within areas that can be claimed by combat. The PYD’s armed wing, the YPG (Popular Defense Committees), controls almost all Kurdish towns and villages and is estimated to have an armed force of about 20,000, half of which are female fighters.

In recent weeks Kurdish militia have been particularly strong and successful in functioning governance, with the removal of Islamist groups from towns and villages, emphasising the Kurdish militia’s strong hand.

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4 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Much of the Kurdish controlled north eastern areas successfully provide basic services, such as keeping schools open, which is not seen in other areas caught up in the conflict. The PYD regional police force called Asayish also runs newly established Kurdish schools across the region and provides public services. Although, the PYD has been accused by the Kurdish Azadi party and Kurdistan Democratic Party for having ties with the Ba’th regime in Damascus, it has always rejected such allegations. The FSA also regards the PYD as being close to the Assad regime, but the two have reached a “cold peace” and, notwithstanding the occasional clashes, do not fight with each other. In addition, in the course of 2012 and 2013, it took on the Syrian army around the Kurdish Neighborhoods of Aleppo and Qamishli and has been fighting jihadi rebels in the Kurdish region. The PYD is represented at the Kurdistan National Congress in Brussels and is a founding member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). The PYD enjoys good relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). According to a recent Financial Times report, at a party youth rally in Hasakah, a speaker relayed a message from imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to the Syrian Kurds: “You must not be with Assad, you must not be with the opposition, you must be the third power in Syria”. The PYD realises that the post-Assad period is uncertain, so there is a great incentive to avoid the wrath of the Turkish military and deny any links with the PKK, as the leader Salih Muslim currently does.

Less prevalent groups include, but are not limited to:

**Azadi: The Kurdistan Freedom Party** - There are now two different Azadi (Iranian for freedom and liberty) parties in the Kurdish region, one led by Mustafa Cuma and the other by Mustafa Hidir Oso. It joined the Kurdish Supreme council (KSC) with other smaller Kurdish parties and signed the Erbil Agreement under Barzani’s auspices. It is opposed to the PYD and its armed forces, the YPG and will fight them if necessary.

**Yekiti: The Kurdish Union Party** - Yekiti believes in dialogue and democratic means to achieve its objectives. It stands for democracy, free and fair elections, freedom of press, political pluralism, and respect for individual rights and national groups. It does not have any known military force. It is another member of the Kurdish National Council.

**The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KDPP)** - The KDPP strives for a decentralized Syria and an inclusive government that recognizes the political and cultural rights of the Kurds and other minority groups in the country. It maintains good relations with the PKK’s off-shoot, the PYD.

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15 L. Morris. ‘Syria’s Kurds prepare for life after Assad.’ *Financial Times*. 2 Oct 2012, [online]. Available at: [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/707b7fa8-0bf2-11e2-8e06-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2nNJmiS6W](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/707b7fa8-0bf2-11e2-8e06-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2nNJmiS6W) [Accessed 27 Nov 2013].


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.
Group formation and SSF involvement

The SSF are the state security force. While the Kurds have considerable autonomy in Qamishli, Syrian soldiers still control about 20% of the city, although it is rare to encounter regime troops outside this area. The regime keeps a presence, controlling certain neighbourhoods, the airport, and the main road and square but there is lack of open conflict. "They know not to attack us, because we are strong. But there is no peace," according to Giwan Ibrahim, a senior official with the Kurdish security forces, "There is only a balance of power." Assad withdrew his forces from much of Syria’s Kurdistan early in the civil war to focus on the uprising elsewhere but the SSF remain.

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The Syrian state apparatus maintains a noticeable presence; however, the Kurds ignore these government functionaries when it comes to their everyday lives, basic needs and services. They instead go to their own new local Kurdish authorities that have been created from the ground up by volunteers and activists drawn from different political factions or from no factions at all. The establishment of parallel local governance has a longer-term purpose too: the Kurds hope the Syrian state apparatus will wither away through public neglect.

The PYDs recent gains show the Kurdish group has drifted into a regional Shi’ite axis behind Assad, whose Alawite sect is a Shi’ite offshoot. Assad has exploited the minority issue to try to get support and divide people against the rebels as the worse of many evils whilst still maintaining an SSF presence.

Borders issues and the Kurdish population in Tri-border area

Kurdistan is a potential land bridge for many of the conflicts in the Middle East. There is also a confused angle with the Kurds due to the competing interests of backers, such as Iraq, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. It has been claimed, “Whichever power can control the tri-border area between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey will be able to control Kurdistan’s supply corridors.”

**Iran** - A senior Iraqi politician has said that Shi’ite power Iran, Assad’s main regional ally, was actively backing the PYD. Iranian Kurds have announced they are ready for battle in support of Barzani, who has threatened to intervene.

**Iraq** - The Kurdistan regional government of Iraq’s position has been complicated by the PYD and its calls for autonomy. The Iraqi Kurds want to maintain relations with Turkey which has helped develop Iraqi Kurdistan. Since 2007 the Iraqi Kurdish region’s economic integration with Turkey has paved the way for exceptionally strong ties between Ankara and Erbil.

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
The president of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, threatened to intervene on behalf of Syrian Kurds.\(^{30}\) He pledged to do everything in his power to defend the Kurds from al-Qaeda rebels.\(^{31}\) Divisions in Syrian Kurdish politics are determined by whether a faction is aligned with the PKK or sees Iraq’s Barzani as the transnational standard-bearer of the Kurds.\(^{32}\)

**Syria** - Syrian Kurds view themselves as part of the Syrian state and so there is little support for outright independence or total autonomy.\(^{33}\) However, they do want to be part of Syria within a framework of democratic autonomy or political decentralisation, most likely federalism.\(^{34}\) The Kurds are attempting to drive out foreign fighters, avoid provoking Assad and start establishing a pocket of stability.\(^{35}\) The north and particularly the north east of Syria is where the Kurdish strongholds are situated in what is known as Kurdish Syria or Rojava. They control three main cities; Ras al-Ayn, Qamishli and Yarubiya.\(^{36}\)

**Turkey** - Turkey began digging foundations for a wall along part of its border with Syria in October 2013, citing security reasons but prompting protests from Kurds who said it was aimed at preventing closer cross-border ties between their communities.\(^{37}\)

Following the PYD’s seizure of Syrian towns, Erdogan issued this threat: “We will never tolerate initiatives that would threaten Turkey’s security.” He said Turkey would “intervene” in Syria should the PKK set up camp there and control towns with terrorist tactics.\(^{38}\) Turkey has an open border policy for victims of the Assad army who have fled and those who have defected. Numbers of refugees have recently decreased to 11700 due to security concerns. None have been given a refugee status but instead a guest status has been granted.\(^{39}\)

**Lebanon** - The Kurdish groups have little influence along the Lebanese border, which is currently the battleground for regime and Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces. The two sides are fighting for the control of crucial supply routes along the strategic Damascus-Homs highway, specifically between Qara and Yabroud.\(^{40}\) The FSA have exploited refugee routes to smuggle weapons,\(^{41}\) with the Sunni majority village of Arsal, Lebanon acting as a key route into the Qalamoun areas.\(^{42}\) Recent weeks have seen the regime gain advantage along the border, capturing the town of Qara on the 19th November.\(^{43}\) The FSA maintain strongholds in Yabroud, Asal al-Ward, Rankous, and Talflita.\(^{44}\) It is likely they will try to strengthen their supply routes from Tripoli, Lebanon to Talkalakh, in northwest Syria.\(^{45}\) With increasing pressure coming from both the regime and the Lebanese government, the rebels will be forced to look south near Jordan and use the key crossing points that they control in and around Dara’a.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{32}\) Dettmer, Op. Cit.


\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) Dettmer Op.Cit


\(^{45}\) Ibid.

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Humanitarian Situations within the Refugee Camps

In December, the overall number of people registered in refugee camps reached 2.3 million.\(^47\) Having camps like the Za’atari camp in Jordan, which holds approximately 114,800 people,\(^48\) means that guaranteeing security and safety increasingly becomes a concern for the supervising UNHCR, NGOs, and the host states. There are tensions over sanitarian concerns, psychological stress and rivalry between self-appointed street leaders who predominantly are former fighters, sheiks, elders who have begun to establish a more reliable system of governance.\(^49\) So far, efforts to establish a sustainable system of governance have been met with strong resistance from groups who have benefited from their authority or from the black markets and smuggling systems in the midst of public disorder.\(^50\) Also, given the proximity to the permeable borders in the region, opposition fighters of all factions see the advantage of the refugee camps and use them frequently as retreat areas and places for recruiting.\(^51\) Concerns of deterioration in the already fragile internal relationship between Shi’ite, Druze and Christians, has led Lebanon (where the majority of people look for refuge – about 832,000 Syrian people) to run a strict “no camp policy” which allows fleeing Syrian Sunnis to cross the country but not permanently to stay.\(^52\) In Turkey there is a border policy for victims of Assad who have fled and defected. None have been given a refugee status but instead a guest status has been granted.\(^53\)

Conclusion

Kurdish politics in Syria are in flux and are going to remain so even if the Assad regime falls, and for a good time in the aftermath too.\(^54\) The hole created in the withdrawal of the regime from Kurdish areas was filled by groups that have competing interests, some closely aligned with the PKK in Turkey, the others with the KDP-dominated regional government in Iraq.\(^55\) The KNC, KDPS, PYD are the main Kurdish organisations in Syria, with lesser-known groups also vying for influence. This situation presents both threats and opportunities to Syrian Kurds who want to remain a part of Syria as well as being Kurd. Kurds in Syria have achieved some level of autonomy that they are unlikely to relinquish. The importance of Kurdistan and of the tri-border area is clear, but the Kurdish groups have little influence along the Lebanese border, which is currently the battleground for regime and FSA forces. While refugee camps have become recruitment areas from all factions there is currently little evidence that the camps are breeding grounds for extremism.

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.
Bibliography


