



ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE

# Brief

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From the Forgotten People to World-Stage Actors

# THE KURDS OF SYRIA

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## Introduction

Before 2011 the Syrian Kurds were referred to as the ‘forgotten Kurds’ (Yildiz 2005; Gunther 2014) since they attracted very little attention from researchers and public media prior to the civil war.

The Syrian civil war placed the Syrian Kurds on the regional map as they managed to occupy and control some of the northern parts of the country. They even sparked global interest when they proved to be the most effective and loyal Middle Eastern allies to the American-led coalition against the Islamic State on the Syrian front of the battle (IISS 2016, 310).

How did the Kurds of Syria mobilise around a Syrian Kurdish identity worth taking up arms and fighting for? In other words, how did the ‘forgotten Kurds’ suddenly become ‘memorable’?

This paper will trace the development of a Syrian Kurdish political identity and point to at least three factors crucial to understanding the mobilisation of the Syrian Kurds. First, the territory which became the state of Syria after the great wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hosts many ethnic (i.e. Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians) and religious groups (Muslims, Christians, Alawites, Ismailis and Druze). The Kurds themselves do not form a homogeneous group either, but are fragmented along territorial and demographic cleavages. Second, these fragmentations have inspired different regimes in Syria to pursue a policy of ambiguous repression of the Kurds. This regime strategy has meant that the Kurds have been deprived of essential rights and been utilised as proxies towards the neighbouring countries, primarily the Republic of Turkey. Third, the Syrian Kurds have mainly employed a strategy of peaceful action and moderate policy (Tejel 2009, 5). The politically engaged Kurds have chosen complicity with the regime rather than rebellion, contrary to other parts of the Kurdish homeland (i.e. in Turkey, Iraq and Iran). Thus, it is noteworthy how the Syrian forces in connection with the current crisis in Syria withdrew from the Kurdish areas in 2012 before the YPG took control. It is also worth noting that the main enemy of the YPG is not the regime, but the Islamic State and other rebel groups.

The paper is a background study for my PhD research on the mobilisation of the Kurdish diaspora in Denmark in support of the Kurdish struggle in Syria in the context of the civil war. For the historical sections of the paper, a number of sources have been used, the main ones being Jordi Tejel (2009) and Harriet Allsopp (2015). All in all, the number of monographies on the Syrian Kurds is limited, though, cf. the title of this paper. Detailed information about the current development is derived primarily from Kurdish newspapers, social media as well as interviews with Kurdish activists. The paper draws on the concept of *complicity* originating from Lisa Wedeen (1999). Here complicity should be understood as subjection of the citizens under a ubiquitous and ambiguous autocrat.

## **The Becoming of the ‘Syrian Kurds’**

### ***The French Mandate and the Cradle of Kurdish Nationalism***

The breakdown of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I into a number of new states and mandate areas left the Kurdish population divided as inhabitants of different Middle Eastern states, mainly Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Kurds of Syria have historically lived in the northern part of the country along the borders with Turkey and Iraq. The Kurdish areas of Syria are fragmented into three principal parts, which form territorial outgrowths of the larger Kurdish territory in the neighbouring countries. The three areas are Kurd Dagh (i.e. the ‘Kurdish Mountains’) in the north-western corner of Syria, which delivers most of Syria’s olive production; the area around the town of Kobani located by the Baghdad railway; and the Jazira area in north-eastern Syria in upper Mesopotamia. The Jazira underwent a considerable transformation from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as nomads settled and became farmers, turning the area into the ‘granary of Syria’. At the same time, the area received a lot of Kurdish migrants from the turmoil that emerged in the wake of the creation of the new Turkish republic. Kurds also live in the big cities, including Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. In Damascus the Kurdish inhabitants are said to date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century invasion by Salah al-Din Ayubi, himself a Kurd. In Aleppo and the other cities the Kurdish population consists mainly of immigrants from the rural Kurdish areas. Overall, at the time of the French Mandate the Kurds made up 250,000 of the total Syrian population of 2,950,000, about 8.5 per cent (Zisser 2014, 194). By 2011 the Kurdish-speaking population constituted about 10 per cent of the Syrian population or more than 2.2 million (Gunther 2014, 2).

In accordance with the principles of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, France was granted control over Syria by the League of Nations after the World War I; the agreement was ratified in 1923. According to Jordi Tejel, the mandate period paved the way for a certain ‘political culture’ among the Kurds of Syria, characterised by ‘peaceful confrontation and accommodation of an ambiguous political scene’ (Tejel 2009, 2). I find two events crucial in this respect: the formation in 1927 of the Khoybun League, which strived for Kurdish national awakening, and the adoption of the 1936 constitution, which favouring the Arab population triggered a call for autonomy by the Jazira Kurds. This political culture translated into peaceful opposition within the country and even a degree of complicity with the incumbent regime, as mentioned above. In addition, Jazira was seen as a special case, culminating with around 120,000 Jaziran Kurds being deprived of their citizenship in 1962.

Although the Kurdish presence in the Syrian area goes way back, the Kurds were not unified as a national group before the time of the French Mandate. Traditionally, the Kurdish identity was based on local tribal affiliation and loyalty towards local notables. This also applies to the other ethnic groups of the Ottoman Empire. The goal of the Khoybun was to break these vertical ties and mobilise the Kurds around ideas of a national Kurdish community bound together by horizontal ties. The Khoybun was inspired by the nationalistic awakening that

struck the European countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Syrian context the mobilisation of the Khoybun was an immediate reaction to the newly established Republic of Turkey.

The Khoybun League was established in 1927 and included Kurdish intellectuals, ex-officers, sheikhs and tribal leaders (Tejel 2009, 17). Some of the founding members of the committee were refugees from Istanbul, where they had joined the Kurdish clubs. They had fled Turkey after the declaration of the Kemalist Turkish state or had been forced into exile after the failed Kurdish uprising in 1925. Among them were Memduh Selim, Ihsan Nouri and the Bedirkhan brothers (Tejel 2009, 144, n19). The Khoybun generally gained most support in the areas that received the most refugees from Turkey, i.e. Jazira and Damascus. The main goal of the movement was to oppose the Kemalist regime in Turkey, and as such, it did not challenge the French Mandate in Syria. Relying on a divide-and-rule strategy, the French authorities even allowed the league to meet and mobilise within Syria as it could be utilised against Turkey. The border between Turkey and Syria had yet to be finally established, and this caused some tension between the two powers. The committee supported the Ararat Revolt (1927-1930) and thereby became the core of the political and military leadership of the revolt. After the defeat in 1930 by the Turkish military, the Khoybun returned to the intellectual and cultural activities of the Ottoman period, the brothers Jaladet and Kamuran Bedirkhan playing leading roles. While the political project was elitist and short-term, the cultural initiatives had a broader and more permanent impact. Most important is the work of Jaladet Bedirkhan. He described and formalised the Kurmanji dialect and propagated the Kurdish alphabet based on Latin letters. The brothers also edited Kurdish journals and published studies on traditional music, history and Kurdish ethnography. The main purpose of these activities was to unite the Kurds. Kurdish clubs and societies emerged, where Kurds could meet to study the language and share the Kurdish history and heritage (Yildiz 2005, 29).

The old Kurdish elite of Jazira in cooperation with Assyrian notables aspired for more than cultural rights. They wanted autonomy like the one granted to the Druze at Jabal Druze and the Alawites of Latakia at the beginning of the 1920s (Tejel 2009, 29). The area of Jazira was the last area within the Mandate territory to be subjugated to the French authority, which did not gain full control of the region until 1927 (Tejel 2009, 27). Still, state presence was minimal, counting only a small number of officers and state functionaries, and the infrastructure was weak, i.e. poor roads, no hospitals and few public schools. Jazira definitely represented the periphery of Syria. The 1936 Franco-Syrian agreement, which entrusted the power to the Arab majority of Syria, was the straw that broke the camel's back. A revolt broke out in 1937, but it was suppressed immediately. The autonomous claims rested on loyalty to local notables and tribe leaders, but after 1937 a growing distrust between the Kurds and the Assyrians arose. The mutual distrust between Jazira and Damascus persisted.

Thus, the legacy of the French Mandate was a divided society. The French authorities had used a traditional divide-and-rule tactic, which created tension between the rural and the urban

populations, between centre and periphery and between the different minorities and the Arab majority (Tejel 2009, 41; Yildiz 2005, 28-29).

### ***The Post-Mandate Period and the Rise of the Kurdish Parties***

The Syrian Republic became independent in 1946 following the end of World War II. Soon after the country ‘fell into a period of great political instability and was swung between martial and parliamentary rule by successive coups’ (Allsopp 2015, 20). New urban elites emerged in post-mandatory Syria, shaping the authoritarian development of years to come. Two of the authoritarian presidents of the first decade of independence were Kurdish. Both were urban and Arabic-speaking and took no interest in specific Kurdish political issues. As a matter of fact, president Adib al-Shishakli attempted to rule out the minorities from the political sphere by promoting a Syrian national identity (Tejel 2009, 41). Other political actors attempted to unify the population of Syria around Arab nationalism. Shishakli considered the Druzes the foremost enemy of the state as they did not waive autonomy, but as Arab nationalism gained ground, the Kurds as the biggest non-Arab minority came to be seen as the most threatening contender of Syrian unity.

Arab nationalism became the most influential ideology of the time, often in conjunction with Pan-Arabism and Arab socialism influenced by regional and global events, i.e. the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, the Suez war in 1956 and the Cold War (Tejel 2009, 40; Yildiz 2005, 30-31). In 1958 Syria joined the United Arab Republic (UAR) with Egypt under the presidency of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Following a military coup in 1961, as a reaction to the Egyptian dominance of the UAR, the union was dissolved. Nationalisation of land, which was a major part of the Nasserist Arab socialism, also caused huge discontent among the Syrian elite. The ideas of Pan-Arabism and Arab socialism were not abandoned by the Syrian Arabs, though, but expressed in other ways, e.g. by the Ba’ath party.

The agricultural development in Jazira during the 1950s strengthened the local power of upcoming landowners, fertilising the political ground further for Kurdish nationalism (Tejel 2009, 39). The Khoybun leaders had already left the political scene or joined non-Kurdish parties, mainly the Syrian Communist Party (cf. Arabic: *Hizb al-Shuyu’i al-Suri*), which in the north of the country became known as the ‘Kurdish Party’ (McDowell 2004, 472; Tejel 2009, 43). Some Kurdish organisations existed, but in 1957 the first Kurdish party seeking to represent the interests of all Kurds in Syria, namely the Democratic Party of Kurds in Syria (DKPS), was formed. At the time of its creation, the party committee included Kurds from all the Kurdish regions of Syria, and it succeeded in bringing together Kurds of different political convictions. Among the founding fathers were Osman Sabri (secretary) and Nur al-Din Zaza (president). Most of the party leaders were leftist or at least did not object to this inclination (Allsopp 2015, 76). The party was affiliated to the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) created in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani, although the Syrian branch from 1958 refrained from using the proper name Kurdistan to avoid suggesting that the Kurdish enclaves belonged to an independent Kurdistan (Tejel 2009, 49). There is some contention regarding the original

name of the party, as the accounts of the founding fathers differ (Allsopp 2015, 75). Some hold that 'Kurdistan' was used in the first year, others that it was added later on. One account claims that it was added in 1960 on the insistence of Jalal Talabani, who had also supervised the creation of the Syrian branch of the party while taking refuge in Syria in the 1950s. Regardless of the various claims, the party was unravelled in 1960, and the leaders were jailed, accused of separatism (Tejel 2009, 49; Allsopp 2015, 78). While the leaders were imprisoned, two factions of the party evolved: one around Zaza, who asserted that the Kurds of Syria were a minority rather than a nation; the other around Sabri, who insisted that the Kurdish nation was the core ideal of the movement. In 1970 Mustafa Barzani tried to mediate, but the factions could not reach common ground. Instead, the original party divided into three parties.

Mustafa Barzani's mediating position came to be known as KDPS el-Partî (Allsopp 2015, 82). The leader of this central and conservative party was Daham Miro. The right-leaning wing, which followed the line of Zaza, was led by Hamid Darwish. This party, which later took the name the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KDPPS), had close ties to the Kurdish Unions Party (PUK) formed in Iraq in 1974 by KDP dissidents and led by Jalal Talabani. The connection was based mainly on personal relations between the party leaders. The left-leaning wing of the party, called the Left Party (cf. Kurdish: *Partiya Çep*), pursued the policy of Osman Sabri, who also became the party's first leader. The party also aligned with the PUK, but for more ideological reasons, as both parties adopted a Marxist-Leninist approach. These three main branches still exist in a somewhat diluted version today, although the branches themselves have been subject to numerous internal divisions. Today the majority of Kurdish parties in Syria originate from the original KDPS (Allsopp 2015, 17).

The formation of the Kurdish parties took place in a political environment dominated by Arab nationalism. After the dissolution of the UAR, Syria resurrected as an Arab republic, and oppression of the Kurds was intensified. This culminated in 1962 when 120,000 Jaziran Kurds or around 20 per cent of the Syrian Kurds were deprived of their citizenship (Tejel 2009, 50-51; Allsopp 2015, 153). This can be seen as an attempt by the Syrian regime to further dominate Jazira. Two factors explain the increased interest of the regime in controlling the Kurds. First, Mustafa Barzani had led a successful revolt in Iraqi Kurdistan and controlled most of the highlands between the Iranian and Syrian border. This made Damascus fear similar unrest in Syrian Kurdistan (Tejel 2009, 51). Second, Damascus had economic interests in the region due to its large grain production and the recent discovery of oil (Allsopp 2015, 19).

Legislative Decree no. 93 of 23 August 1962 prescribed a census for the region to marginalise those who were perceived to have obtained Syrian citizenship illegally. Thus, the identity cards of those who were considered non-Syrians were withdrawn. To regain them the Kurds had to prove they had Syrian residence prior to 1940. Failure to do so meant that a large group of Kurds were registered as *ajanib* (singular *ajnabi/ajnabiyah*), i.e. aliens. They were referred to as invaders from Turkey during the mandatory period and deprived of their rights to education, property ownership, political participation, legal marriage etc. Kurds who did not participate in the census became known as *maktumin* (i.e. concealed or hidden). They were

unregistered, and being legally non-existent they had even lower status than the *ajanib* (Tejel 2009, 51; Allsopp 2015, 154).

It is worth noting that this happened in the wake of the dissolution of the United Arab Republic, which involved the nationalisation laws being reversed and land being handed back to former landowners. It also happened at a time when European and American companies began oil extraction, and this made the regime aware of the urgency of countering the ‘conspiracy with the goal of establishing non-Arab ethnic groups within the Syrian crude-oil triangle’ (in the words of the governor of al-Hasakah province) (KurdWatch.org 2010, 6). By depriving Kurdish landowners of their citizenship and right to property, the land could instead be handed over to loyal Arabs. Thus, at the beginning of the 1970s, after the Tabqa dam on the Euphrates had been constructed, 4,000 Arab families, whose land had been flooded, were resettled (with arms) in model farms in the Jazira (Tejel 2009, 61).

## **The Ba’ath Era and the Silence of the Syrian Kurds**

### ***The Old Parties under Ba’ath Rule***

In 1963 the Ba’ath party came to power following a coup d’état on March 8. The coup was carried out one month after the Ba’athist coup in Iraq. The Ba’ath ideology became a powerful alternative to the Nasserist Pan-Arabism. The Ba’ath party was founded in 1947 in Damascus by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar and ideologically based on secularism, Pan-Arabism and Arab socialism. The subsequent coup on February 23, 1966, consolidated the Ba’ath power in Syria by eliminating other Pan-Arab and Arab nationalist groups. This caused the Ba’ath party in Syria and Iraq to split into two branches, each trying to convince the Arabs that they were the leading power of the Arab world.

After the Ba’ath party came into power, the Arabisation, and thus suppression of the Kurds, was intensified. The study by Lieutenant Muhammad Talab al-Hilal is telling in this respect. Al-Hilal was a former secret security chief in the Hasakah province, who in 1963 delivered a security report on the solution of the Kurdish issue in Jazira. The study is renowned for its derogatory attitude towards and brutal prescriptions for the Kurds. The Kurds are perceived as ‘our enemies’, and the presence of Kurds in Jazira is presented as the ‘Kurdish danger’ and a ‘malignant tumor which had developed in a part of the body of the Arab nation’ (Yildiz 2005, 34; Tejel 2009, 60-61). The proposed cure to restore Arabism in Jazira was primarily the creation of an Arab belt by deporting the Kurds along the Turkish borders. The al-Hilal plan also mentioned measures such as no education and employment opportunities and simply the annihilation of Kurdish identity by favouring Arabs in every aspect of life. Thus, these prescriptions were in line with the intentions of Decree no. 93 of 1962. Despite the seeming urgency of the Arab nationalists to control the Jaziran Kurds, the plan was not implemented until the beginning of the 1970s (Tejel 2009, 61).

Other repressive measures were implemented in the late 1960s and during the 1970-1980s to 'Arabise' the Kurds. These included the ban on the use of the Kurdish language in schools and later in workplaces, the continued ban on publications in Kurdish and omission of the Kurds from history school books (International Crisis Group 2013, 6). In addition to this, the Kurds were met with general distrust and discrimination by the public administration and subjected to arbitrary arrests by the security forces (Tejel 2009, 62-63).

On November 6, 1970 Major General Hafez al-Assad seized power after leading a coup d'état. The new regime was referred to as the 'corrective movement', as the official aim was to 'correct' or, to a minor degree, adjust the preceding Ba'ath rule. Thus, according to the constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, which was adopted in 1973, the Socialist Arab Ba'ath Party was the leading party (Article 8). However, in reality the ideological base of the Ba'ath party was abandoned or changed. Pan-Arabism became obsolete as a result of the increasing competition of the Arab states, and Arab nationalism was utilised as a mere power instrument to gain control of the Syrian people and territory. Instead of drawing on these ideologies, al-Assad (during his reign) built an autocratic regime centred around a myth about the Assad family with himself as the protective father of the Syrian Arab people. The political milieu in Syria under Hafez al-Assad has been analysed eminently by Lisa Wedeen in *The Ambiguity of Domination* (1999).

Through 'political ethnography' (Wedeen 1999, 25) she describes the social dynamics of the authoritarian rule of Hafez al-Assad, showing how the domination of the regime was enforced by means of two instruments of power. One was violent repression by the many security forces, e.g. detention, imprisonment, abduction and torture. The other was the symbolic power of myths and fictional narratives about the loving and caring paternal president. While repression was carried out secretly and far from public attention, the symbolic power was exercised in the public space through posters, statues, rituals and spectacular events. The strategy proved efficient, as both instruments were used unwaveringly. The power of the regime thereby became ubiquitous and inescapable. If the Syrians chose to oppose the regime, they were eliminated or defused, as proved by the Hama massacre in 1982; and if they chose to comply with the fiction 'imposed' on them (Wedeen 1999, 73), they became part of the repressive play themselves. Syrians were not compelled to believe in the mythical, eternal paternity of Hafez al-Assad, but to act 'as if' they believed it in certain public situations. By acting 'as if' the myths were real (Wedeen 1999, 69), the Syrian citizen became not only an object of domination, but also a suppressing subject him- or herself. This kind of system does not allow for a neutral position towards the atrocities. A person is either out or part of the game. The division between ruler and the ruled, as Wedeen explains quoting Václav Havel, 'runs de facto though each person, for everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system' (Wedeen 1999, 81). This is what Wedeen calls the ambiguity of the domination of al-Assad's Syria; and this is what characterises the political context in which the Kurdish parties tried to navigate.

The Kurdish parties, which grew out of the KDPS, claimed to pursue the same goal, i.e. the protection of the Kurdish identity for the Syrian Kurds. Achieving this involved repealing oppressive laws and securing the Kurds' political and cultural rights. What they could not

agree on was how to reach these goals. They disagreed on two specific issues. The first concerned which political solution would best protect the Kurdish identity. This issue related to an ideological discussion of who the Kurds are: a nation or a minority (Allsopp 2015, 80). The second concerned how best to interact with the regime. This issue related to the parties' assessments of the options in the political environment either for complying with the regime or for adopting a confrontational position (Allsopp 2015, 84). The three parts of the Kurdish political spectrum, established after Barzani's attempt to mediate in 1970, represented three different positions. The so-called right-wing party (KDPPS) headed by Darwish sought inclusion of the Kurds as a minority in the Syrian society. Accordingly, the KDPPS insisted on 'soft political pressure' on the Syrian regime. Darwish, who accepted the rules of the game drawn up by the regime, went as far as securing a seat in the Syrian parliament as one of the independents, which was allowed in the 1990s (The Syrian Observer 17/10/2014; Tejel 2009, 67). The two other groups of Kurdish parties claimed that the Kurds represented a unique nation. The left parties saw the Kurds as a national group entitled to constitutional recognition. They chose a non-confrontational approach, considering both political and violent opposition suicidal. The conservative centrists also defined the Kurds as a national group leaning more towards the nationalistic ideal of autonomy. By doing so, they followed the line of the KDP in Iraq. But failing to gain support from the mother party in Iraq for the internal Syrian struggle, they also chose the submissive opposition. The ambiguous domination of the regime proved efficient at silencing the Kurds. It even made them cooperate from time to time with *mukhabarat*, the secret security service, to avoid annihilation. During the 1970s the left party was ravaged by internal division due to ideological disagreements about Marxism-Leninism, resulting in an internal split in the Kurdish movement itself (Allsopp 2015, 82). The other splits within the Kurdish parties were primarily results of personal and leadership issues. By the end of 2012 17 of 20 Syrian Kurdish parties could trace their origins to the first Syrian Kurdish Party in Syria (KDPS), according to an estimate by Harriet Allsopp (Allsopp 2015, 17).

### ***The Arrival of the PKK in Syria***

In 1978 the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) was founded in Turkey. Ideologically based on Marxism-Leninism and influenced by Kurdish nationalism, the PKK strove for the liberation of the Kurdish people and the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. After the military coup in Turkey in 1980, Syria offered refuge to the PKK leadership as part of a balancing strategy against Turkey. There were several reasons why Syria wanted to keep Turkey in check. First, there was the old resentment of having lost Alexandretta in 1939; second, Syria wanted to counter Turkey's influence on the water supply through the Euphrates (Enab Baladi 2017); and third, Syria felt encircled by the upcoming alliance between Israel and Turkey (McDowell 2004, 480). The PKK presence in Syria changed the conditions for the political struggle of the Syrian Kurds once more.

The PKK became very popular, especially among young Kurds, who considered the PKK more potent than the old parties (Allsopp 2015, 103). The competition was unequal, though, as the

PKK could mobilise openly in the Kurdish areas, while the restrictions on the old parties were upheld. This was part of the deal with the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, which meant that the PKK could act freely and enrol new party members, as long as the Kurdish fight was directed towards Turkey. Consequently, around 7,000 young Kurds disappeared and presumably died in the PKK insurgency in Turkey in the 1980s. In an interview Öcalan even expressed, or saw strategic reasons to share, the perception of the Syrian Kurds as refugees from Turkey, who would gladly return (McDowell 2004, 479). Support for the PKK was strongest in Kurd Dagh and in Kobane (Allsopp 2015, 103), as the other parties still had a stronghold in Jazira.

The PKK presence had a significant impact on the Kurdish culture, as ‘the PKK took over the cultural framing of the Syrian Kurds’ by politicising the cultural expression according to the ideological base of the PKK (Tejel 2009, 104-105). While the Kurds had celebrated Newroz (i.e. the Kurdish New Year on March 21) privately in the past, the PKK organised public events in order to make the festival a collective and political awakening act. Similarly, Kurdish dance and music were expressed in Kurdish colours (red, green, yellow and white) to infuse the Kurdish community with political unity. The PKK’s activities revealed the powerlessness of the other parties. Even though they tried to imitate the politicisation of the Kurdish culture, they neither managed to continue the Kurdish awakening after the rejection of Öcalan nor succeeded in recruiting young followers. In 1998 Turkey’s patience ran out, and Syrian fear of a Turkish invasion ended the PKK presence in Syria. In early 1999 Öcalan was captured in Kenya and taken to Turkey.

### ***The Public Mobilisation in the 2000s***

The departure of the PKK combined with the distrust in the old Kurdish parties, primarily among young Kurds, left a space open for new contending parties and independent activists at the beginning of the 2000s. Two major events constitute important landmarks in this development, namely the so-called Damascus Spring and the Qamishlo Revolt. The former led to a new kind of activism by the Yekîtî party, which, although elitist, put the Kurdish issue on the oppositional agenda. The latter mobilised the Kurdish community on a broader scale, and especially young people in the Kurdish areas as well as in Damascus and Aleppo became involved in collective action. In addition, the Qamishlo Revolt exposed the ambiguous submission of the Kurdish parties to the regime as being out of touch with the Kurdish population.

In June 2000 Hafez al-Assad died, paving the way for the Damascus Spring. After the death of his father, Bashar al-Assad, an ophthalmologist living in London, returned to Syria and became president. The Syrian opposition had some hope that the new president, Bashar al-Assad, would usher political changes. In the first few months of rule the new regime allowed some critical political debate. Political salons were established and groups of intellectuals released documents asking for the state of emergency to be repealed and political pluralism to be installed (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012a). But in September of the following year the patience of the regime ran out. 10 prominent intellectuals and activists were arrested, marking the end of the

Damascus Spring (Allsopp 2015, 110). For the Kurdish Union Party in Syria, called Yekîti (i.e. Union), there was no way back, although repressive measures were implemented, for example a ban against the possession and distribution of all oppositional publications including those in Kurdish. The Yekîti party was founded in 1992 by representatives from both the left and conservative wings of the Kurdish political spectrum. They had adopted a strategy of territorial demands for Syrian Kurdistan and greater visibility of the Kurdish struggle through public campaigns and demonstration. The party was mainly rooted in urban areas and succeeded in mobilising young Kurds. Yekîti benefitted from the power vacuum left by the PKK as well as the political opening of the Damascus Spring. Thus, in the following years party members propelled political activism, arranging protests and demonstrations in Damascus advocating Kurdish rights. Some of the demonstrations were supported by other Kurdish parties as well as other parts of the Syrian opposition. In 2003 the Democratic Union Party (called the PYD, cf. Kurdish: *Partîya Yekîti ya Dêmkokrat*) was established as a successor to the Syrian part of the PKK. However, the PYD was not protected by the regime. Three coalitions of Kurdish parties emerged around the stand towards the regime. Yekîti and the PYD, among others, formed the Coordinating Committee, which took the most confrontational stand against the regime, while the Kurdish Alliance headed by the KDPPS leader Darwish was the most conceding. The Kurdish Democratic Front took a middle position on the question.

In 2004 a football match in Qamishlo escalated into a Kurdish revolt against the regime. The Qamishlo football team played a home game against the visiting team from Deir al-Zor. There are divergent witness reports on how it all started, but at some point during the match the fans from Deir al-Zor displayed posters of Saddam Hussein and chanted slogans insulting the Iraqi Kurdish leaders Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talebani. Traditionally, the Sunni Arabs of Deir al-Zor have been sympathetic to the regime of Saddam Hussein, who was ousted the year before by the US-led military intervention. The Qamishlo fans, on the other hand, responded with praise for the American president George Bush by exclaiming 'we will sacrifice our lives for Bush' (Tejel 2009, 115). A violent battle between the fans forced the security forces to open fire, killing seven Kurds. This sparked a popular uprising that spread across the Kurdish regions and even surfaced in the Syrian capital, Damascus, mobilising different social segments of the Kurdish society (Allsopp 2015, 33-36). The revolt, which lasted from March 12 to 25, was eventually brutally defeated, resulting in '43 dead (7 were Arabs), hundreds wounded, around 2.500 arrested, and more than 40 Kurdish students thrown out of Syrian Universities' (Tejel 2009, 116). The event sparked an assertive opposition among the Syrian Kurds, resulting in a new activist Kurdish identity. While the Yekîti party and the PYD induced the resistance, the majority of the other Kurdish parties missed the opportunity to play a leading role in the Kurdish awakening. Instead, they once again found it more advantageous to comply with the regime. This made them expendable in the eyes of many Kurds. Syrian opposition groups, on the other hand, embraced the Kurdish struggle, and they even added the 'Kurdish issue' to their agenda in 2005 (Tejel 2009, 126). Thus, cooperation among human rights activists both within Syria and in the West was intensified.

One of the persons who raised his voice after the Qamishlo Revolt and advocated Kurdish rights was Ma'shouq al-Khaznawi. Prior to the revolt Sheikh Ma'shouq al-Khaznawi was a well-established religious authority from Upper Jazira accepted by the regime, as he promoted a liberal reading of the Koran (Tejel 2009, 101). It seems that the repression during the Qamishlo Revolt and the time after triggered his critique of the regime. After an interview with a Canadian daily in 2005, in which he opined that the Syrian regime should 'change or be terminated' (Tejel 2009, 101), he was kidnapped and later found dead; strong suspicion pointed at the regime. His funeral mobilised around 10,000 visitors to the family's mourning tent (Allsopp 2015, 106).

In 2005, during the Kurdish awakening following the revolt, two new parties were founded: the Kurdish Freedom Party called Azadi (i.e. freedom) and the Future Movement by Mishaal Tammo. Both parties joined the Coordinating Committee, the most oppositional and activist Kurdish blocs. In 2014 the Azadi party merged into the KDPS, however (Rudaw.net 04/04/2014).

By the end of the 2000s the regime tightened its grip on the Kurdish parties, especially on the Yekiti party and the PYD. Yekiti was monitored because of its increasing oppositional stance, and the PYD because of the pressure from Turkey to execute a non-tolerance policy towards the PKK and the Öcalan supporters (Sinclair and Kajjo 2011).

The awakening during the Qamishlo Revolt led to the emergence of a new and alternative Syrian Kurdish identity, which was more confrontational and venturesome than ever before.

## **The 2011 Uprising and the Birth of Kurdish Autonomy in Syria**

### ***The Syrian Uprising***

In March 2011 the Syrian Uprising erupted as part of the so-called Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya. Triggered by the arrest and torture of a group of teenagers in Deraa and the violent reaction of the regime towards the demonstration that followed, the protests spread to other Syrian cities, including Damascus. As with the other uprisings, these demonstrations were headed by young people demanding democratic reforms and the resignation of the president.

The Kurdish youths also took part in the protests from the beginning, both in the big cities of Syria and in the Kurdish areas in northern Syria calling for regime change. The Kurdish organisers coordinated their actions with the Syrian Arab opposition to the extent that one of the protest Fridays during the spring of 2011 was called *Îna Azadi* (i.e. Freedom Friday in Kurdish) (Zisser 2014, 208; Allsopp 2015, 196; KB 2011).

Most of the Kurdish political parties remained relatively silent during the spring of 2011, however. This silence combined with the lack of media attention on the participation of the Kurdish youths outside the Kurdish areas led to discontent with the Kurds among parts of the

Arab opposition, who denounced the Kurdish parties as being loyal to the regime. The Kurdish parties were suspicious of the rest of the opposition, anticipating that the Arab opposition would pursue an Arab or Islamist agenda leaving the Kurdish issue behind, as seen before during the Qamishlo Revolt in 2004. The Syrian regime exploited the disunity of the opposition in an attempt to draw the Syrian Kurds closer by new decrees meeting the traditional Kurdish claims. Thus, in April 2011 the Syrian regime granted citizenship to more than 100,000 of the *ajanib* Kurds, whose number had grown to 300,000 in 2011 (Zisser 2014; Gunther 2014, 2; International Crisis Group 2013, 6). It also annulled Legislative Decree 49 of 2008 restricting ownership and sale of land in the Kurdish border areas (Tejel 2014, 226).

Some of the more radical Kurdish parties supported the demonstrations, though, and their leaders even participated as speakers at the demonstrations. These parties were the Future Movement and the Yekîti and Azadî parties, i.e. the very parties that had persistently and explicitly criticised the regime since the mid-2000s (Allsopp 2015, 197).

After attempts to join the newly formed oppositional group, i.e. the Syrian National Council (SNC), the Kurdish parties set up the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in October 2011 sponsored by Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012b). The Kurdish parties backed out of the negotiations with the SNC primarily because the members of the SNC insisted on Syria being an Arab state and part of the Arab nation (Allsopp 2015, 199). The KNC united the majority of the Syrian Kurdish parties for the first time. The first head of the council was Abdulhakim Bashar, leader of the KDPS. Only a few parties went their own way. Among them were The Future Movement, which for a period remained part of the SNC, and the PYD, which started to build up its own powerbase in the Kurdish areas, as the leader, Salih Muslim, returned from exile among the PKK in the Kurdish region of Iraq (Allsopp 2015, 208). The Future Movement explicitly pursued an agenda of regime change and continued its cooperation with the youths, whose vision for Syria was a pluralistic democracy. The leader, Mashaal Tammo, was later killed by the Assad regime. His funeral was attended by more than 50,000 people showing massive support for his claims (Al Arabiya 2012). After his death the Future Movement joined the KNC, though. As the uprising became more and more violent and evolved into a civil war, the PYD benefitted from having a military branch on behalf of the other Kurdish factions. The People's Protection Units (called the YPG, cf. Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*) was formed after the Qamishlo Revolt in 2004 (GlobalSecurity.org) and backed by the PKK. As such, the YPG became the PYD's strongest asset. In 2012 a female brigade, The Women's Protection Units (called the YPJ, cf. Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*), was included. When the Syrian armed forces withdrew from the northern part of Syria in August 2012 to concentrate the troops in the centre and south of the country, the YPG took control of the predominantly Kurdish areas. As the Kurdish militia gained ground, heavy tensions arose between the PYD and the KNC. The leader of the Iraqi KDP once more intervened to reconcile Syrian Kurdish factions. Thus, in July 2012 the Kurdish Supreme Committee was founded by the two contentious groups and became the ruling body of the de facto autonomous Kurdish enclaves of northern Syria. During 2013 the

Kurdish Supreme Committee became obsolete, though, as the PYD resolutely took the lead in the build-up of a new and alternative political system in line with the political ideas of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan (Gunes and Lowe 2015, 5). In November 2013 the PYD unitarily declared autonomy for the three cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Jazire (Rudaw.net 13/11/2013). The KNC was decisively outmanoeuvred. The Rojava Peshmergas, which was later formed as a military branch of the KDPS recruiting exiled Syrian Kurds in the Kurdistan Region, has never been strong enough nor even remotely close to threatening the hegemony of the YPG in the Syrian Kurdish regions, in Kurdish called *Rojava*, i.e. west(ern Kurdistan).

### ***The Rojava Revolution***

In January 2014 the ‘Social Contract of Rojava’ was proclaimed. The charter laid the ground for the implementation of a federal political system based on local self-governed administrative units. The Social Contract complies ideologically with the concept of democratic confederalism developed by Öcalan in the early 2000s. Thus, the contract represents a rejection of state-centred democracy and of the nation state per se. This contradicts what the PKK originally worked for, namely Kurdish separatism followed by an independent Kurdish state (Gunter 2014, 65). Instead, the ideology of democratic confederalism promotes bottom-up democracy, i.e. a federal system based on engaged citizenship. Accordingly, the charter is called a social contract, as it is meant to regulate relations between individuals rather than between state and citizens.

During the winter of 2014-2015 the YPG won a paramount victory in Kobane against the Islamic State, which at the time proved to be the strongest challenger to the PYD reign. The Kurds were supported by the US-led international coalition against the Islamic State, as the ground forces of the YPG became the most important allies of the coalition on the Syrian front of the battle. It is a tactical alliance, though, as the PYD is related to the PKK, which by the US and EU – not to mention Turkey – is considered a terror organisation. Thus, the PYD has been excluded from all international peace negotiation initiatives related to Syria up until the beginning of 2017. During the spring of 2015 the YPG succeeded in closing the territorial gap between the Kobane and Jazire cantons.

As the ideology of democratic confederalism does not promote nationalism or a specific ethnic agenda, but rather the opposite, it has been important for the PYD to show both the inhabitants of Rojava as well as external allies that non-Kurdish groups are part of the revolution to gain legitimacy. This has resulted in the creation of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM, cf. Kurdish: *Tevgera Civaka Demokratik*) and, subsequently, in the formation of a multi-ethnic military force called the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) – an opportune move for the international coalition, which sponsored the creation of the SDF and thus tried to distance itself from the Kurdish cause in the struggle against the Islamic State. In May 2017 the American president agreed to arm the YPG prior to the battle of Raqqa, revealing that the Americans in fact do not distinguish between the YPG and the SDF and consider the non-Kurdish elements insignificant contributions to the SDF (Stewart 2017). In line with the effort to represent itself as a multi-ethnic movement, TEV-DEM proclaimed the ‘Federation

of Northern Syria – Rojava’ in January 2016, only to abandon the Kurdish term ‘Rojava’ in November 2016. At the same time, diplomatic representatives in several European capitals were set up to gain international attention and support. The Kurdish diaspora played a prominent role in connecting the PYD and European political actors.

While the PYD seems to have embraced the non-Kurdish communities in the political life in northern Syria, relations between the PYD and the KNC are still extremely tense at the moment. The KNC is criticising the PYD for being totalitarian, which contradicts its self-image of a pluralistic and inclusive alternative to the surrounding authoritarian regimes. Thus, the current head of the KNC, Ibrahim Biro, also the leader of Yekîtî, has denounced ‘the “common practice” of intimidation of political activists and journalists in Rojava’ (Rudaw.net 16/08/2016). As a matter of fact, leading members of the KNC have repeatedly been arrested by the Asayîş, i.e. the police forces, allegedly without clear reason. The critique of the PYD also centres around the idolisation of Öcalan and the prohibition of the Pan-Kurdish flag. The PYD is rejecting all claims and is accusing the KNC of frustrating the political developments in Rojava by obstructing the work of the self-administration (ARA News 14/8/2016). This internal Kurdish conflict is also partly a result of the influence of external actors, as the Kurds have always been forced to assess who will provide the desperately needed support. Consequently, the KNC is accusing the PYD of being lap dogs of the Assad regime, while the PYD is accusing the KNC of being a helpless mouthpiece of the Barzani regime and, subsequently, in the pocket of Turkey. The Syrian regime did indeed withdraw from the Kurdish areas without a fight in 2012, and at the time it undoubtedly considered other rebel groups than the PYD stronger challengers to the power. Still, there is a sort of tacit agreement between the PYD and the Syrian regime, which became clear under the battle of Aleppo in 2016, where the Kurdish area eluded harsh bombings. In terms of the PYD’s accusations, it is also true that the KDP supports the KNC against the PYD and the Federation of Northern Syria, and that President Barzani of the Kurdistan Region has established good relations with Turkey.

Turkey has become increasingly concerned about the military and political success of the Kurdish self-government in Syria. What the Turks want least of all is a Kurdish self-dependent state ruled by the PYD, which they perceive to be the Syrian branch of the PKK and, as such, an illegal terror organisation. For this reason, Turkey has gradually escalated its involvement in the Syrian civil war. Thus, in the summer of 2015 Turkey joined the international coalition against the Islamic State, only to break the ceasefire and attack the PKK and the PYD at the same time. In the late summer of 2016 Turkish ground troops crossed the border officially to support the Free Syrian Army, but more likely to stop the Kurdish fighters from conquering the areas between the cantons of Afrin and Kobane, which would give the PYD control of a contiguous stretch of land along almost the entire border with Turkey. The operation was called Euphrates Shield to emphasise the Turkish interest in controlling the border area west of the Euphrates.

Russia, which entered the Syrian civil war in November 2015 backing the Assad regime, has shown itself to be a friend of the Kurds. Russia has thus explicitly supported the PYD, e.g. by

promoting a federal solution to Syria at the negotiations in Astana in Kazakhstan in January 2017, and by pushing to include the PYD in the UN-led peace talks in Geneva. However, the Turks have firmly denied this, and the Russians have not pushed further. To this date, only representatives from the KNC have participated in the international negotiations. In January 2017 a delegation of leading members of the KNC were invited to Astana in Kazakhstan (Rudaw.net 17/01/2017), and in Geneva, March 2017, a delegation of KNC members formed part of the Syrian opposition group, the High Negotiations Committee. They were later accused by other KNC members of failing to promote the Kurdish questions among the Arab oppositional negotiators (Rudaw.net 27/03/2017).

## **Transformation of the Syrian Kurdish Identity for the Future**

### ***How did the Kurds of Syria mobilise around a Syrian Kurdish identity worth taking up arms and fighting for?***

First of all, the Syrian Kurds represent a small community, which was cut off from the greater Kurdish community by the borders of the new states emerging after World War I. They had connections with the Kurdish movements in the neighbouring states, however. The formation of the Syrian Kurdish parties can even be said to have been instigated by foreign Kurdish actors. This explains the formation of the Khoybun League, the 'old' Kurdish parties and the PYD. In line with this, the mobilisation of the Syrian Kurds was primarily aimed at the Kurdish revolts in Turkey and Iraq and only to a smaller degree at Kurdish politics in Syria and definitely not at military resistance against the Syrian regime. Hundreds of Syrian Kurds were recruited as peshmergas to Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly by the KDP (Tejel 2014, 73), and an estimated 7,000-10,000 Syrian Kurds were killed in Turkey, fighting as PKK guerrillas in the 1980s and 1990s (Tejel 2014, 76). All of this happened with the approval of the Syrian regime, the aim being to destabilise Iraq and Turkey in the regional power play. Apparently, the Syrian Kurds, by contrast, were too heterogeneous to form a proxy themselves.

By 2011 all of this changed. A more assertive opposition was formed in the wake of the Damascus Spring and the Qamishlo Revolt, seeking a more confrontational approach to the Syrian regime. Thus, the new Kurdish opposition fought for Kurdish rights and influence in the Syrian society, leaving complicity with the regime behind. The civil war, which erupted as part of the Arab Spring, focussed more world attention on the Syrian Kurds. Two events during the civil war have greatly influenced the transformation of the Syrian Kurdish identity. The first was the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from the Kurdish areas, leaving the territories of northern Syria in the control of the YPG militia. The second event was the emergence of the Islamic State, which proved to be an enemy of both the Kurds and the international community. This event provided the Kurdish YPG with an essential international military ally, namely the international coalition fighting the Islamic State. Fighting not only for Kurdish identity, the Kurds of Rojava embraced the international cause of fighting against the Islamic State and for democracy, women's rights and pluralism, thus becoming a legitimate partner of the

international coalition. Under the name of the Federation of Northern Syria they are pushing for an invitation to the international negotiations on the future of Syria and are presenting themselves as an integrated part of a new political reality of a future Syrian federation.

Great tensions among Kurdish groups and parties continue to represent one of the biggest challenges to Kurdish self-determination in Syria, as the tension between the PYD and the KNC is not only a local phenomenon, but also involves their regional and international allies. In addition, independent Syrian Kurdish activists have raised their voices. They advocate liberal democracy and human rights, seeking support among Western intellectuals and governmental institutions.

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