



THE HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY

The Decisive Minority:

The Role of Syria's Kurds in the Anti-Assad Revolution

A Henry Jackson Society Report

Omar Hossino and Ilhan Tanir

March 2012





Introduction

Almost a year after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March, the Syrian opposition is still very much fragmented and lacking an inclusive vision which will satisfy various minority groups. One major part of this equation has been the Kurds which make up the largest ethnic minority in Syria, constituting somewhere between 10% and 15% of the population, or about 2 million people.¹ The Kurds have been divided in their response to the uprising and their approach to the opposition with representation on both the Syrian National Council (SNC), and the National Coordination Body (NCB), as well as a third body, the Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC). The factor of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) offshoots in Syria, which once were supported by the Assad regime, complicates the Kurdish issue further, as does Turkey's role.

Syria's Kurds before the uprising

Syria's Kurdish opposition began before the uprising as a collection of largely disparate Kurdish political parties, some of which were united in the "Kurdish Bloc." These parties signed the Damascus Declaration of Democratic Change in October 2005 which included the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Front in Syria, and Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir's Kurdish Future Party in Syria. During the

short lived Qamishli soccer riots of March 2004, Kurds toppled statues of Hafez Assad, lifted up Kurdish flags, and burned down Baath Party headquarters in rebellion to Bashar Assad's regime before being brutally put down with over 32 killed and 2000 arrested².

In December 2009, nine Kurdish political parties formed what became known as the Kurdish Political Congress which included the following parties:

- ◇ The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party led by Sheikh Jamal
- ◇ The Kurdish Left Party led by Muhammad Mousa
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti) led by Nasruddien Ibrahim
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Front:
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti) led by Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic National Party in Syria led by Tahir Sfook
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria led by Aziz Dawe
- ◇ The Kurdish Coordination Committee:
- ◇ The Kurdish Yakiti Party in Syria led by Ismail Hamo
- ◇ The Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria led by Mustafa Jumaa
- ◇ The Kurdish Future Movement (al-Mostaqbal) led by Mishaal Tammo

¹ Guide: Syria's diverse minorities, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16108755>

² Kajjo, Sirwan, and Christian Sinclair. "The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria." Middle East Research and Information Project. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111> (accessed February 28, 2012).

Kurdish parties attempted to form opposition alliances with the Arab opposition prior to the uprising, but the relationship between the two has always been tense. In one episode after the Qamishli soccer riots, Salih Muhammad Muslim, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), attempted to form a common front with Haitham Maleh, a prominent Arab opposition figure and now a member of the Syrian National Council, who refused the offer calling him "an agent of the Zionists and of the Americans³."

Syrian Kurds in the wake of the uprising

Kurdish cities have been active in protest since the beginning of the uprising. Qamishli, Efrin, Dirbasiya, al-Hassaka, Amuda, Ayn al-Arab, Ras al-Ayn, and Dayr al-Zawr have seen consistent protests since early on with Kurdish flags being raised alongside of Syrian ones. Kurdish youth groups and local coordination committees, rather than the traditional political parties, appear to be the strongest forces on the ground organizing the protests. Yet the Kurdish regions have been much calmer than Sunni Arab hot spots like Homs, Hamah, Idlib, Daraa, and the Damascus suburbs which have been hot beds against the regime.

The Assad regime, recognizing the danger of alienating the Kurds, attempted to co-opt the Kurdish minority through concessions by making the unprecedented move of granting citizenship to 200,000 Syrian Kurds on April 6th in the early days of the uprising⁴. Moreover, a joint delegation of the Syrian government and the Baath party came to the Newroz celebration on March 21 in the early days of the uprising in the presence of Kurdish flags, even though the year before such celebrations had been fired upon by regime

forces⁵. Finally, the violent use of force that has been witnessed by military units in areas such as Homs, or Daraa, has been more restrained in Kurdish areas⁶.

The Kurdish Bloc, and other Kurdish opposition movements, were slow to react after the outbreak of the uprising in March. By mid-April, the Kurdish political parties had not taken a clear position with regard to the uprising, and took a more cautious approach⁷. In late April of 2011, the Kurdish Political Congress, which formed in 2009, had expanded to form the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties. The new opposition movement included the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) a PKK-offshoot in April 2011. By May 2011, the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties announced its program, which included ending one party rule in Syria, rule of law and equality for all citizens, and a secular state⁸. After the formation of the Syrian National Council, and the Kurdish Syrian National Council in the fall of 2011, the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties dissolved - this was noted by the statement of the formation of the Syrian Kurdish National Council on October 26th 2011.

The Kurds were involved in attempts to unify the opposition into what eventually became the Syrian National Council (SNC) from the beginning of the uprising, though there were always problems. The National Movement of Kurdish Parties in Syria boycotted many of the meetings of the Syrian opposition in Turkey in protest of the Turkish interference in the Kurdish issue⁹. At the same time 54 Kurds attended the Antalya Conference for uniting the

3 Bruneau, Eric. "Syrian unrest: Kurds are remaining cautious." Kurd Net. <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/4/syriakurd302.htm> (accessed February 29, 2012).

4 "Stateless Kurds in Syria granted citizenship." CNN. http://articles.cnn.com/2011-04-07/world/syria.kurdish.citizenship_1_kurdish-region-kurdish-identity-stateless-kurds?_s=PM:WORLD (accessed February 28, 2012).

5 Bruneau, Eric. "Syrian unrest: Kurds are remaining cautious." Kurd Net.

6 Malas, Nour. "Kurds Step Into Syria's Protest Mix - WSJ.com." The Wall Street Journal. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203499704576620443224171146.html> (accessed February 29, 2012).

7 Kajjo, Sirwan. "Where should Syrian Kurds stand now? | KURDISTAN COMMENTARY." Kurdistan Commentary. <http://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2011/04/27/where-should-syrian-kurds-stand-now/> (accessed February 28, 2012).

8 Kajjo, Sirwan, and Christian Sinclair. "The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria." Middle East Research and Information Project.

9 "Turkish policy towards Kurds leads to boycott of Antalya Conference by Kurdish parties in Syria : Support Kurds in Syria." Support Kurds in Syria. <http://supportkurds.org/news/turkish-policy-towards-kurds-leads-to-boycott-of-antalya-conference-by-kurdish-parties-in-syria/> (accessed February 28, 2012).

Syrian opposition in July¹⁰. In one infamous incident reflective of the challenges faced in integrating Kurds into the Syrian opposition, Kurdish representatives walked out of the National Salvation Syrian opposition conference in Istanbul, Turkey on July 16th when other Arab opposition members insisted on maintaining the name "Syrian Arab Republic" which they found objectionable¹¹.

Syria's Kurds have been consistently accused by other opposition factions of not adequately supporting the uprising against the Assad regime which began in March 2011. In one infamous episode in November, the Chairman of the SNC Burhan Ghalioun compared Syrian Kurds to Arab refugees in France¹². Samir Nashar, now a member of the seven person General Secretariat of the SNC was even more explicit, in August 2011 saying "We accuse the Kurdish parties of not effectively participating in the Syrian revolution... It seems that these parties continue to bet on a dialogue with the regime. This stance will certainly have consequences after the fall of the regime."¹³ Moreover, in January, some Arab Syrian members of the Free Syrian Army as well as some activists in the Damascus suburbs said, when asked by one of these authors, that they were disappointed by the lack of Kurdish participation in the revolution.

Currently, the Syrian Kurdish opposition is divided into three groupings, all of which were originally formed in October 2011: those in the Syrian Kurdish National Council supported by Iraqi Kurdistan, those in the Syrian National Council supported by Turkey, the GCC, and the West, and those in the National Coordination



Kurdish anti-Assad protest march

Body, notably the PKK affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD), which retains ties to the Assad regime.

The Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC)

The largest Kurdish Syrian opposition group is the Kurdish Syrian National Council (KNC or Kurdnas) led by Secretary General Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria. Bashar is extremely close to Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. In fact, Bashar's party - the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria - is the Syrian affiliate of Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq, and Barzani himself appointed Bashar as the head of the Syrian KDP in 2008¹⁴. The council contains the largest number of Syrian Kurdish parties, and many of those which who are represented are members of other opposition bodies. The council formed officially on October 26th 2011 with its stated mission to find a "democratic solution to the Kurdish issue" while emphasizing that it was part of the revolution¹⁵. The formation of the council was facilitated through the engagement of Barzani who urged Kurds to unite and make their demands clear. In November, videos and reports in Kurdish media showed that thousands of Kurds in Qamishli held up banners saying "The Kurdish Syrian National Council represents me"¹⁶.

10 Ahmed, Hevidar. "Divided Syrian Kurds Ponder Unity Conference." Rudaw. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/3855.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

11 Abdulmajid, Adib. "Warning Signs for Kurds in Post-Assad Syria." Rudaw. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4228.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

12 "Dr. Abdulbasit Sayda, member of the Executive Committee of the Syrian National Council: "There is no agreement between the Syrian National Council and the Turkish government". " Kurd Watch. <http://kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview7.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

13 "Interview: Samir Nashar, Spokesman for the Damascus Declaration: "The Kurds must receive the same rights as everyone else". " Kurd Watch. <http://kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview3.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

14 Kajjo, Sirwan, and Christian Sinclair. "The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria."

15 "Syrian Kurds form their own council in Arbil." Hürriyet Daily News. <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/syrian-kurds-form-their-own-council-in-arbil.aspx?pageID=238&nID=11806&NewsCatID=352> (accessed February 28, 2012).

16 "Kurds in Syria: Kurdish National Council Represents Me." The Media Office of the

As of March 2nd 2012, the Council's membership includes:

- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti) led by Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti) led by Nasruddien Ibrahim
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic National Party in Syria led by Tahir Sfook
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria led by Aziz Dawe
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria led by Hamid Darwesh
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (Yakiti) led by Shaikh Ali
- ◇ The Kurdish Yakiti Party in Syria led by Ismail Hamo
- ◇ The Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria led by Mustafa Oso
- ◇ The Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria led by Mustafa Jumaa
- ◇ The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party led by Shaikh Jamal
- ◇ The Kurdish Leftist Party in Syria led by Mohammed Mousa
- ◇ Yakiti Kurdistani led by Abdelbasit Hamo
- ◇ Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria led by Abdulrahman Aluji
- ◇ The Kurdish Reform Party led by Faissal Yusuf
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Wifaq Party led by Nash'at Muhammad

The first eleven members of the KNC had joined in October and January, while the final four – Yakiti Kurdistani, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, the Kurdish Reform Party and the Kurdish Wifaq Party, were approved as full members during a meeting of the KNC in Qamishli on February 29th¹⁷. In fact, only two Kurdish Syrian parties are not members of the KNC: the PYD, a member of the National Coordination Body, and and SNC member the Future Party, a



Anti-regime protesters wave Kurdish flags during a rally in Qamishli, a town in north-east Syria.

member of the SNC. The KNC also includes over a dozen Kurdish Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and Kurdish youth groups on the ground in Syria¹⁸.

The structure of the KNC includes a General Assembly of 22 members, 11 of which are the leaders of the first 11 parties, and 11 of which are individuals. The assembly will allocate 4 more seats in the General Assembly to the heads of the final four parties who joined on February 29th. The assembly's task is to monitor decisions taken by the executive board which is made up of 45 members. The council includes committees for media, social relations, coordination, and youth¹⁹.

The council has noted that it supports the Syrian revolution and refuses all negotiations with the regime. Although the council's demands started out as vague and ambiguous demands for "self-determination" which Abdul Hakim Bashar noted was done for purposeful reasons²⁰, the council now lists four main demands for Kurds in the post-Assad period: (1) The constitutional recognition of the Kurdish People and their Kurdish national identity. (Insisting on word 'people' living on their historical land) (2) Recognizing the Kurdish issue as main part of

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. http://www.pukmedia.com/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10385:kurd-in-syria-kurdish-national-council-represents-me-&catid=30:kurdistan&Itemid=388 (accessed February 28, 2012).

17 Exclusive interview with Heyam Aqil, 3/2/2012.

18 Exclusive interview with Heyam Aqil, 2/21/2012.

19 Exclusive interview with Heyam Aqil, 3/2/2012.

20 "Kurdish Leader: Federalism Essential to Prevent Syrian Civil War." Rudaw. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4251.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

the general national issues of the country. (3) Lifting all the chauvinistic policies and discriminatory laws applied on Kurdish People, and finding a solution in order to treat its effects and compensate those who got affected. (4) The recognition of the national rights of the Kurdish People according to the international conventions and agreements in a politically decentralized government within the unity of Syria's land.²¹.

Relations with the SNC

The KNC made a decision that within two months of its formation, all parties affiliated with the council would freeze membership in all other Arab opposition councils. In response to this decision, the Azadi and Yakiti parties decided to withdraw from the SNC — the Council that recently has been recognized as “a legitimate representative” of the Syrian opposition by the EU and US — in mid-January, 2012.²² The decision of both parties to withdraw from the SNC came only days after talks collapsed between the KNC and SNC in Erbil, Iraq. Thus, it appears that the SNC has lost much of the small amount of Kurdish representation that it did have after its failure to make an agreement with the KNC.

Dr. Burhan Ghalioun, President of the SNC, along with Dr. Basma Kodmani, Spokeswoman of the SNC, met with Dr. Bashar in Erbil, Iraq, in January 2012 to negotiate on ways to integrate the KNC into the SNC. Ghalioun has said that the council has the same goals as the SNC and that “We have expressed our desire to effectively integrate Kurdnas to our council²³.” The talks faltered when the SNC refused to accept in written guarantees political decentralization and the right of self-determination for Kurds within Syria's

territorial framework. Dr. Kodmani noted that the SNC would not accept “radical proposals” such as federalism. The Muslim Brotherhood, the strongest single party in the SNC, has also noted through its spokesman Zuhair Salim that it rejects federalism in principle and opposes reverting the official name of the country to “Syrian Republic” instead of “Syrian Arab Republic” which was instituted in 1958²⁴.

Talks between the KNC and SNC went on until February 24th 2012, when the “Friends of Syria” conference convened in Tunis for the first time. In Tunis, even though it was not on the agenda, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with the head of the KNC, Abdulhakim Bashar for the first time, along with the head of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun, and SNC spokeswoman Basma Kodmani, to advance the calls for unification. The United States has put pressure on the SNC behind the scenes to reach an accommodation with the Kurds and recommended integrating more Kurdish opposition parties and groups into the council through meeting some of their demands²⁵.

Heyam Aqil, an adviser to Bashar, relayed Ghalioun's promises to the Kurdish minority on Feb. 24, saying “decentralization” and the “recognition of the rights of the Kurdish people” are not new. “The SNC agreed to a decentralized government which is different from politically decentralized governance” – which the KNC has asked for – Aqil said. “In fact, Syria is based on decentralized governance currently. Each governorate or province is managing local affairs. So in terms of this particular point, the SNC is not offering anything new.²⁶”

The KNC and SNC remain in constant discussion to resolve disputes. In general, Syrian Kurd leaders

21 Exclusive interview with Heyam Aqil, 2/26/2012. Also, Weiss, Michael. “Syrian Kurd Leader: Revolution Won't Succeed Without Minorities.” *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/syrian-kurd-leader-revolution-wont-succeed-without-minorities/251660/> (accessed February 28, 2012).

22 Interview with Heyam Aqil, 2/21/2012.

23 Kasem, Roshan. “The New Face of Syria.” *The Majalla*. www.majalla.com/eng/2012/01/article55228695 (accessed February 28, 2012).

24 “Zuhayr Salim, Speaker of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: “To hell with Syrian [identity]! We do not recognize Syria.” *Kurd Watch*. <http://kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview8.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

25 Tanir, Ilhan. “Syrian Kurds welcome Turkish humanitarian corridor to Syria.” *Hürriyet Daily News*. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-kurds-welcome-turkish-humanitarian-corridor-to-syria.aspx?pageID=449&nID=14695&NewsCatID=423#T0q6W8FJWHo.facebook> (accessed February 28, 2012).

26 Ibid.

believe that if the SNC does not agree to protect and secure the national rights of Kurds at this stage, then SNC may well postpone it for years after the fall of the regime. Sources close to the KNC also expressed skepticism at the SNC's proposals on self-determination calling them "vague." The United States, France, and the United Kingdom have upped the pressure privately on the KNC to join the SNC and grant it legitimacy before the Friends of Syria conference.

KNC's relations with the PYD

Relations with the PYD remain tense. The PYD attended the founding conference of the KNC after its inception in October before boycotting the group and joining the NCB. The PYD's move coincided with worsening of ties between the Assad regime and Turkey which has led some analysts to assume that the Assad regime was behind the moves attempting to divide and increase internal tensions between the Kurdish opposition, especially due to Damascus' traditional ties to the PKK. The PYD's statements that Turkey, the benefactor of the SNC, constituted a greater enemy than Assad further reinforced this view²⁷.

The KNC has signed a contract of civil peace also called "Musadaqat Silm Ahli" with the PYD in January to avoid violent clashes like those which occurred in the 'Efrin region, a PYD stronghold, which were caused by some PYD members who attacked Kurdish protesters there demanding the fall of the regime²⁸. Following the incident numerous Kurdish politicians were assassinated or were the targets of assassination, with PYD hands suspected. The KNC has elected a committee in charge of communication with leaders of the PYD. The aim of this committee is to avoid any Kurdish-Kurdish conflict which would be serving the

regime's interest in the Kurdish region²⁹. According to Alan Semo of the PYD, the reason why the PYD would not join the KNC is that the PYD believes the KNC party leaders were not democratically elected, unlike the PYD's Salih Muhammad Muslim, which they found objectionable.³⁰

The Kurdish Representation in the Syrian National Council (SNC)

The Syrian National Council (SNC) remains the largest Syrian opposition umbrella group. It is recognized as the legitimate authority of the Syrian people by Libya and recognized as an interlocutor or representative of the Syrian people by the governments of France, Spain, and Tunisia.

Kurdish integration into the SNC originally consisted of Damascus Declaration signatories and the "Kurdish Bloc" which went into its formation. Originally, the SNC contained three major Kurdish parties, which were the members of the Kurdish Coordination Committee that had formerly been in the Kurdish Political Congress formed in 2009:

- ◇ The Kurdish Future Movement (al-Mostaqbal) led by the late Mishaal Tammo
- ◇ The Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yakiti) led by Ismail Hamo
- ◇ The Kurdish Azadi Party in Syria

Out of 310 seats on the SNC, 25 are held by Kurds, although Abdul Basit Saida, a member of the SNC, notes that that number will eventually become 35 to represent 15% of the council to be reflective of the Kurds' percentage in Syria's demographics. The Kurds were represented with four seats on the 26-seat General Secretariat of the SNC. One of these four seats is held by Abdul Basit Saida, a Syrian Kurdish dissident based in Sweden who is known for his more moderate

27 "Interview with Salih Muhammad, president of PYD." Firat News. <http://en.firatnews.eu/index.php?rupel=article&nuceID=3503> (accessed February 28, 2012).

28 Interview with an anonymous source within a major Kurdish opposition party, 2/16/2012

29 Ibid.

30 Exclusive interview with Alan Semo of the PYD, 3/6/2012

views. A second seat is held by a representative of the Kurdish Future Party, while the third seat is held by a representative shared by Azadi and Yekiti. The final seat is currently unoccupied, but is reserved for Kurdish youth movements³¹.

In January 2012, Azadi and Yekiti announced their withdrawal from the SNC after talks failed between the KNC and SNC and remained members of the KNC only. After the withdrawal, the Azadi Party split, yet both Azadi parties are currently members of the KNC and not the SNC. Both Abdul Basit Saïda and the Future Party, the other Kurdish representatives, remain on the SNC³².

The SNC has given some assurances to Kurds: it has affirmed in a statement that it issued in December 2011 that Kurds will be recognized in the constitution as a distinct ethnic group, and a resolution to the Kurdish problem through “the elimination of oppression, compensating victims, and recognizing Kurdish national rights within a Syria of united land and people³³. Its chairman Ghalioun has noted that Syria will have a decentralized form of governance³⁴.

Abdul Basit Saïda, a Kurdish member of the SNC, has said that full-fledged federalism is unlikely to be supported by the SNC but that Kurdish self-determination could not be limited and that “the adoption of decentralization in Syria in general is an acceptable solution for the Kurds and other Syrians³⁵.”

Farhad Ahmi another Kurdish member of the SNC noted in January that the Kurdish members of the SNC had met before the SNC’s first conference in Tunisia on December 16th 2011, and had united their

positions and had most of their demands accepted by the SNC. Ahmi noted that the KNC was invited to the SNC’s conference yet refused to come, and that most Arab representatives were receptive to integrating Kurdish rights in the new constitution³⁶.

Kurdish Representation in National Coordination Body (NCB)

Kurds are also represented in the National Coordination Body, a mostly internal opposition coalition chaired by Hasan Abdul Azim which favors dialogue with Assad and is often accused of being close to the regime or too timid in demanding the types of more radical change wanted by the protesters. Kurds in the NCB were originally represented by four parties:

- ◇ The Kurdish Leftist Party in Syria represented by Salar al-Shikhani
- ◇ The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) represented by Khaled Issa
- ◇ The Democratic Kurdish Party in Syria (al-Parti) represented by Khaled Sino
- ◇ The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party represented by Mahmoud Dawood

In January, the Kurdish Leftist Party of Syria, the Democratic Kurdish Party in Syria, and the Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party, all concurrently members of the KNC, withdrew from the NCB at the same time that Azadi and Yekiti withdrew from the SNC, in the response to a decision by the KNC to suspend membership from all opposition councils other than the KNC. The withdrawals from the NCB came right after talks failed between the KNC and SNC. Currently, the only Kurdish party which remains on the NCB is the PYD.

31 Exclusive Interview with Abdel Basit Saïda, 1/15/2012

32 Ibid

33 “SNC Political Program” Syrian National Council. <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/component/k2/item/136-snc-political-program.html> (accessed February 26, 2012)

34 “Syria’s opposition SNC outlines post-Assad vision and reaches out to Kurds.” Alarabiya.net English. <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/24/196755.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

35 Exclusive Interview with Abdel Basit Saïda, 1/15/2012

36 “Syrian Opposition Pledges to Recognize Kurdish Rights.” Rudaw. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4292.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

The PYD is led by Salih Muhammad Muslim. The Kurdish parties of the NCB were originally represented by one member each on the NCB, however the PYD remains the only member of the body. Moreover, before the withdrawal of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti), two of the twenty six members of the NCB's executive body were Kurds: Salih Muhammad of the PYD, and Nasruddien Ibrahim of al-Parti.

The NCB, like the SNC, has made a statement which refers to the Kurdish problem. In the view of the NCB, the Kurdish nation's existence is confirmed as an essential part of Syria and part of its historic fabric. According to Alan Semo of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the NCB recognizes Kurdish national rights more than the SNC³⁷. However, the NCB uses language similar to the SNC supporting: "the creation of a just democratic solution to the Kurdish issue within the unity of the country's land and people" while also stating "this does not contradict that Syria is part and parcel of the Arab world³⁸."

The NCB had entered into discussions with the Barzani-backed KNC but without avail. According to the KNC, the NCB was not receptive to the KNC's concerns nor would it agree to the KNC's four conditions which it presented also to the SNC. In actuality, according to sources within the KNC, the SNC were more receptive to Kurdish concerns than the NCB, although both were more or less the same in their proposals.



In Qamishli and surrounding Kurdish areas there are weekly protests in solidarity with besieged city of Homs and others demanding fall of regime, release of prisoners and the support for KNC.

37 Moas, Taghee. "Kurdish Opposition of Syria speaks up." New Statesman. <http://www.newstatesman.com/middle-east/2012/02/syria-regime-opposition> (accessed February 28, 2012).

38 "The Structure of the Body" on the Syrian National Coordination Body website <http://tinyurl.com/73bad6x> (accessed February 28, 2012).

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)

Salih Muhammed's Democratic Union Party is an offshoot of the militant Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). (The PKK is designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department, EU, Turkey and many other countries.) Formed in 2003, the PYD calls not only for greater rights for Kurds in Syria's constitution - including language and education rights, and bi-national recognition - but also Kurdish "self-determination." The PYD platform says self-determination can be realized without altering Syrian political borders, but does call for the eventual formation of a confederation with Iraqi Kurdistan and other parts of Greater Kurdistan. Salih Muhammad says his party sees Abdullah Ocalan's, imprisoned leader of the PKK, vision as being the solution to Kurdish problems in Syria³⁹.

The PKK relationship with Syria goes back decades beginning in the late 1980s when Syria hosted PKK fighters fleeing from Turkey. Syria also hosted Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, and trained him in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley⁴⁰. During the 1990s the PKK was very active in Syria, including operating training camps on the Syrian-Turkish border. In 1999, Turkey backed by a threat of force against neighboring Syria, warned "the entire world" of the consequences if Damascus did not end its support for rebels of the separatist PKK. Following Turkey's demand, wishing to avoid a major confrontation, the Assad regime signed a security accord with Turkey, known as the Adana Agreement, by which Syria labeled the PKK a terrorist organization, prohibited its activities and those of its affiliates, and agreed to block the supply of weapons, logistical material and money to the PKK from Syrian territory.⁴¹ As of February 28, 2012, Syria's foreign

minister Walid al-Muallem affirmed that "we respect the Adana Protocol, the security agreement we have signed."⁴²

Since ties were cut between the Assad regime and Turkey in August of 2011, it has been speculated that the Assad regime would use the PKK card against Turkey and renew its ties with the group, and, in recent months, it is clear that some sort of understanding between the Assad regime and the PKK through its Syrian affiliate the PYD, have been reached. Murat Karayılan, a PKK commander in the Qandil Mountains, said that Assad's regime does not constitute any danger to Kurds⁴³. At the same time, both the PYD and PKK have attempted to show distance with the Assad regime and denied charges of an understanding. All the while, Karawan Azardi, Media Spokesman of the PKK in Iraq told Al-Sharq al-Awsat on November 19th 2011 that "We will not defend this tyrannical bloody regime under any circumstances" and called for the Assad regime to stop killing civilians⁴⁴.

The PYD now states that it wants the Assad regime to fall, and participates in demonstrations against the regime, however it has made claims of deep skepticism in both the revolution and most organized opposition throughout the uprising. At the beginning of the uprising, on March 26th, Salih Muhammad noted that "the people's resistance to the regime opens the door to foreign intervention" and that regime change would be pointless if the same Arab system stayed in place. The March 30 2011 the PYD released a platform dealing with the Syrian uprising entitled The Declaration of Political Resolution by the Democratic Union Party which called for abolishing the security apparatus and establishing a new constitution

(accessed February 29, 2012).

42 Hurriyet Daily News, February 28, 2012, "Syria FM expects no Turkey intervention," <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-fm-expects-no-turkey-intervention.aspx?pageID=238&nID=14817&NewsCatID=338>

43 Orhan, Oytun. "Syria's PKK Game." Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies. <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=1592> (accessed February 28, 2012).

44 Shikhani, Shirzad. "PKK will not defend Syrian regime- official Asharq Alawsat Newspaper (English)." Asharq Alawsat Newspaper (English). <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=27371> (accessed February 28, 2012).

39 "Interview with Salih Muhammad, president of PYD." Firat News.

40 Radu, Michael. "Who is Abdullah A-calan? - FPRI." Foreign Policy Research Institute - FPRI. <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/19981116.radu.whoisocalan.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

41 Kajjo, Sirwan, and Christian Sinclair. "The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria." Middle East Research and Information Project. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111>

for Syria which established a pluralistic democratic state with a resolution of the Kurdish issue through autonomy of the Kurdish regions. According to Alan Semo, a PYD official, the PYD would not be satisfied with simply Kurdish autonomy but aims to establish a full democratic state in all of Syrian territory, and therefore even if Assad offered autonomy to Kurds, the party would remain in the opposition.⁴⁵

Throughout the summer, Muhammad refused to take a clear position on the uprising, and mostly directed his criticism at the Syrian opposition parties, although he made it clear that he did not support the Assad regime. Although he fled from Syria to the Goran Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010, Muhammad was permitted to enter Syria in November 2011, and one of his first actions was joining a PYD rally against the Syrian regime in Qamishli. The fact that he safely returned without being bothered by the regime has led to accusations that he has made a sort of implicit agreement with the regime. It took until late October for the PYD to adopt to a seemingly pro-revolutionary stance. After participating in the founding conference of the KNC — although declining to become a member of it — the PYD joined the NCB and remains a party to it. Before a vote on a constitutional referendum by the Assad regime on February 26th, the PYD urged a boycott of the polls saying that the new constitution did not offer anything to the Kurds⁴⁶.

The PYD has harshly criticized the Syrian National Council, calling Kurds who joined the opposition group “collaborators” and noting that the Council is backed by Turkey which the PYD see as Kurds’ ultimate enemy⁴⁷. PYD leaders have argued that the SNC has not adequately resolved the Sunni-Alawi issue in post-Assad Syria, nor the Kurdish problem. The party also states that the purpose of the SNC is to make it easier for foreign powers, especially Turkey, to intervene

in Syria and set up moderate Islamist regimes which will oppress Kurds. On February 26th, in response to SNC statements offering decentralized governance for Kurds, the PYD’s leader Salih Muhammad called the proposal a “groundless agreement” noting that Kurds “will not believe or trust in baseless promises.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, the PYD has noted that it would not join the SNC unless the group unequivocally opposed foreign intervention in Syria and has strongly opposed the idea of Turkish buffer zones⁴⁹.

The PYD also has a hostile and tense relationship with the KNC. The PYD, inspired by Ocalan, has no love for a council backed by his rival Masoud Barzani of Iraqi Kurdistan. The two groups have tense relations: although the KNC claims that the PYD was invited to the KNC’s conference in Erbil in January, the PYD accuses the KNC of withholding an invitation. The PYD also claimed that the KNC and President Barzani were responsible for divisions among Syria’s Kurds. Yet despite tensions with the SNC and the KNC, Robert Lowe of Chatham House, an expert on Syrian Kurds, notes that the PYD is most likely the one most popular Syrian Kurdish party although it does not enjoy the support of the majority of the Syrian Kurdish population⁵⁰.

The PYD’s severe criticisms against both members of the SNC and members of the KNC have contributed to inter-Kurdish tensions. According to a study by the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies’ Oytum Orhan, the PYD attempts to distance itself from the Assad regime in rhetoric, but “strives to monopolize the Syrian Kurds by taking advantage of the current weak position of the regime”.⁵¹ Orhan calls the relationship between the Assad regime and the PYD a “tactical cooperation.”⁵² Violent attacks against demonstrators by PYD members in ‘Efrin and Aleppo have led to

45 Exclusive interview with Alan Semo of the PYD, 3/6/2012

46 “PYD to boycott constitution referendum in Syria.” Firat News. <http://en.firatnews.eu/index.php?rupel=article&nucelID=4210> (accessed February 28, 2012).

47 “Interview with Salih Muhammad, president of PYD.” Firat News.

48 “PYD to boycott constitution referendum in Syria.” Firat News.

49 “Interview with Salih Muhammad, president of PYD.” Firat News.

50 Interview with Robert Lowe, 1/5/2012.

51 Orhan, Oytun. “Syria’s PKK Game.”

52 Ibid.

allegations that the regime is employing the party as shabiha against Kurdish protesters. These attacks have also bred more accusations by other Kurdish factions such as the SNC-member Kurdish Future Movement, that the PYD are either supporters of the Assad regime, or have an understanding with it.

The first documented PYD attack against Kurdish demonstrators was in October 2011 in 'Ayn al-Arab and Ras al-'Ayn where PYD members were kidnapped and tortured Kurdish activists. Muhammad rejected PYD involvement in both incidents saying that he blamed immoral youth in Kurdish society including drug dealers, and also put his finger on foreign powers especially "Turkey's henchmen"⁵³. There have also been reports of the PYD threatening numerous Syrian Kurdish opposition members in both the SNC and KNC, some narrowly escaped these attempts and some were later assassinated including Yakiti Party member Sharzad Hajj Rashid on February 14, 2012⁵⁴.

Mishaal Tammo, head of the Kurdish Future Party, implicated the PYD in the first attempt on his life and accused its members of threatening and kidnapping its activists. After Tammo's assassination on October 8th 2011, there has been widespread speculation regarding the PYD's involvement in Tammo's death⁵⁵. Salah Eldin Bilal, a Kurdish Syrian opposition leader, and Bassam al-Din Imadi, former Syrian Ambassador to Sweden and an opposition member, have both accused the PYD of being part of shabiha forces used against protesters⁵⁶.

PYD forces have had a long record during the uprising of silencing other anti-regime opposition groups through violence. As recently as February 3rd 2012,

PYD sympathizers attacked demonstrators in Arfeen and Qamishli after they had refused to march behind their flag. The attacks injured 17 people and were captured on mobile phone video. Syrian security forces did not intervene to contain the clashes. PYD sympathizers chanted "Arfeen is the city of martyrs; supporters of Erdoğan and Barzani have no business here"⁵⁷. Again on February 8th 2012, PYD launched attacks in 'Efrin, this time injuring more than a dozen people⁵⁸, and the following week on February 17th, only the PYD, armed with light weapons, came out to protest in 'Efrin⁵⁹. Moreover, its membership in the NCB further strengthens the argument that the party has been co-opted by the Assad regime. After the Assad regime broke ties with Turkey in August, many assume that the regime is once again using the PKK card against Ankara.

One high level source from the Syrian Kurdish parties that was interviewed for this study and wanted to remain anonymous due to fear that the PYD would harm family members confirmed hearing these reports. "There is a committee in the KNC responsible of relations with PYD, but that committee's role is still very limited because they are all scared from PYD's reactions," said the source. "If those reports were true, PYD's military branch is doing so. Their military branch doesn't take commands from the PYD's political branch. It takes commands from Qandil Mountains and Assad's regime has given them the green light to put it in actions." On top of all of this, on March 6th, Today's Zaman reported that 15 soldiers of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were captured by PKK forces in Qamishli.⁶⁰

53 "Interview: Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: "Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here". Kurd Watch. <http://kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

54 "Aleppo: Body of abducted doctor found on the outskirts of the city." Kurd Watch. <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2454&z=en&cure=245> (accessed February 28, 2012).

55 Orhan, Oytun. "Syria's PKK Game."

56 "Syria Regime 'Using' PKK, Dissident Says." Journal Of Turkish Weekly. <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/130521/syria-regime-%C3%ABusing%C3%AD-pkk-dissident-says.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

57 "Afrin/al-Qamishli: PYD sympathizers attack demonstrators in Afrin and al-Qamishli." Kurd Watch. <http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2449&z=en&cure=245> (accessed February 28, 2012).

58 Ibid.

59 "Al-Qamishli: Injuries at demonstrations in the Kurdish regions." Kurd Watch. <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2456&z=en&cure=245> (accessed February 28, 2012).

60 Avci, Ismail. "Today's Zaman." Syrian defectors captured by PKK, 'Kurdish Shabiha'. www.todayzaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=273504 (accessed March 6, 2012).

How the Kurdish Opposition views Turkey's role

In addition to attacks against other Kurdish parties, the PYD opened up illegal Kurdish language cultural centers and schools in many Syrian cities after the revolution began in the summer of 2011. The party also has been largely undisturbed by the regime in its movement, according to two sources. It has established town and village councils, provides relief aid to Kurdish youth, and silencing anti-regime opposition groups. According to Muslim, the schools' goals are to help the Kurdish people reach "democratic autonomy" and that the Assad regime would not dare close the schools because it does not want to pick a fight with the PYD⁶¹. There have also been reports of armed PYD members, and camps in the 'Efrin region, Ras al-'Ayn, 'Ayn al-'Arab, and al-Malikiyah⁶², have been armed or tolerated by the Syrian regime, charges that the PYD leader Muslim says are not true.⁶³ The fact that such an infrastructure exists and is tolerated by the Assad regime however does point to an understanding between the two sides, although the relationship with the Assad regime is not always cooperative. On February 15th 2012, in Ayn al-Arab, PYD forces were involved in a gun fight with Syrian Air Force intelligence where one person was killed.⁶⁴ PYD officials claim that air force intelligence attempted to attack the home of Salih Muslim and tried to kidnap his child before being stopped by Kurdish youth. Alan Semo of the PYD states "this was a clear provocation of the brutal regime to drag peaceful Kurdish people into violence and civil war."⁶⁵ On February 27th, a military court in Aleppo sentenced four PYD supporters to a 15-year prison sentence for membership in the organization⁶⁶. These incidents counter the narrative that the PYD regime is a proxy for Assad.

61 "Interview: Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: "Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here"." Kurd Watch.

62 "PKK presence in Syria grows to fill power vacuum." Today's Zaman. www.todayszaman.com/news-271721-pkk-presence-in-syria-grows-to-fill-power-vacuum.html (accessed February 28, 2012).

63 Ibid.

64 "Ayn al-'Arab: At least one dead after gunfight between PYD supporters and employees of the Air Force Intelligence Service." Kurd Watch. <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2461&z=en& cure=245> (accessed February 28, 2012).

65 Exclusive interview with Alan Semo of the PYD, 3/6/2012

66 Ibid.

Turkey, the country which has the longest border with Syria, has been an important actor in shaping the Syrian opposition since the start of the uprising. As Ankara cut its ties with the Assad regime by end of the summer of 2011, its support to the Syrian opposition at logistical and tactical levels also were increased. Various Syrian opposition groups convened for the first time ever in a conference in the south of Turkey, Antalya, and then a second convention gathered in İstanbul.

Besides opening breathing room for the Syrian opposition to grow, Turkey's other major contribution to the Syrian crisis is its open border policy to the victims of the Assad army who fled from the country and defected armed members. Turkey hosted as many as 20,000 Syrian refugees during the summer of 2011, though the numbers have decreased substantially in the following months to 7,500, and the current number is 11,700, according to Turkey's Foreign Ministry spokesman Selcuk Ünal, after having increased in the first week of March. Even though they sought refuge in Turkey, the Turkish government has not given Syrian escapes a refugee status, instead, a "guest" status has been granted. Access to these camps is very limited and is possible only upon permission by the Turkish authorities.

Many of the Syrian activists and opposition figures, who the authors have been in contact with, recognize that the Turkish government has played a positive role, but complain that it has fallen short in fulfilling promises that the Ankara government appeared to be giving earlier. For example, FSA leaders from the suburbs of Damascus, in face-to-face interviews in January, reminded the authors of Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's "we will not let new a new Hama occur" statement and said "there have been many Hama's which occurred and Turkey is watching."

The Kurdish parties, on the other hand, viewed the Turkish involvement as “suspicious” at best and rejected it outright in other cases, depending on what part of the political spectrum the Kurdish party resides.

For example, the KNC believes that Ankara doesn't wish to see Kurds be key players within the SNC and in the post-Assad regime. The KNC also considers the limitation of the Kurdish representation within the SNC as part of the baggage that the Turkish role brings along. In addition to these points, the KNC argues that Ankara doesn't favor for the SNC to agree on a full constitutional “recognition of the Kurdish People because that would mean recognizing over 10 million Syrian Kurds.”

Several Kurdish activists interviewed for this study in all parts of the Syrian Kurdish opposition, along with some other high level Kurdish sources, stated that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is overly represented in the SNC partly due to the same Turkish influence. This is also a main assertion of the PYD who's leader Salih Muslim Muhammad accuses it of being a Turkish Muslim Brotherhood front conspiring to intervene in Syria and rob the Kurds of their rights when they take power⁶⁷. According to this school of thought, the AKP pursues the strategy of creating a mirror of itself in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime.

It indeed might be a worrisome scenario for Turkey if Syria's Kurds were to gain self-determination rights and rule their own region within Syria after the experience of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. Two Kurdish autonomies in the region in Iraq and Syria, would almost certainly increase the pressure on Turkey, a county estimated to have 15 million Kurdish citizens, almost the total population of Syria, to grant more rights to its own population.

Ankara disagrees with the idea that it favors the MB against others. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, following the “Friends of Syria” meeting in Tunisia, said, “for us, the Middle East is a place where all religions and sects should live together... we are exerting efforts for the SNC to embrace people from every religion and sect including Kurds, Alawites, Nusayris and Christians.” Davutoğlu met with the SNC delegation in İstanbul March 2nd for the fourth time and according to Spokesman Ünal, the minister repeated that the Turkish government would like the representation to be “more inclusive” and discussed the second Friends of Syria meeting which set to be held in İstanbul.

Since the Syrian crisis intensified and the regime forces' attacks on civilians displayed a sharp uptick, Turkey appeared by many as the only neighboring country that can effectively follow up the threat of force against Syria. Though, Ankara, after cutting its ties with the Assad regime, put forward two conditions for military intervention scenario: United Nations Security Council mandate or large numbers of refugee flow into Turkey from Syria.

Turkey's own problems with its Kurdish minority in political level and decades long fight with the PKK, also undercut Turkey's credibility to play honest broker in the Syrian opposition with regard to the Kurdish issue. Turkey's Islamic rooted governing AKP, whose base traditionally has closer ties with the Brotherhood movement across the Middle East, and in Syria, is another major reason that makes Kurdish parties wary about the potential involvement of the Turkish political or military involvement. These complications limited Turkey's ability to use the threat of force against the Assad regime forcefully in addition to a couple of other major obstacles that are not relevant to this study. Given the fact that the Syrian Kurds live predominantly in the north of Syria, near the Turkish border, any Turkish incursion is likely to touch Kurdish living regions.

67 “Interview: Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: “Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here.” Kurd Watch.

PKK's Syrian offshoot PYD has an even sharper stance against the Turkish involvement. An estimated 20 % of the fighters who are active in the PKK are Syrian citizens.⁶⁸ As argued in this paper, many indications suggest that the PYD, by playing a mutually beneficial role for itself and the Assad regime, sought to take advantage of the lack of security and to expand the land it currently controls. By not joining the SNC or KNC, but opting for NCB, the PYD, in many ways, fractures further the idea of the Kurdish unity. On the other hand, the PYD's sharper opposition to the Turkish incursion became a very useful tool in the hands of the Assad regime.

The role of the PYD appears; therefore, to be assisting the Assad regime's forces to focus on Sunni Arab regions by violently opposing the influence of other Kurdish political parties which has led to accusations by those parties of the PYD playing the regime's shabihās (often referred to as militiamen) in the Kurdish areas .

Future Outlook and Policy Recommendations

The fragmented Kurdish opposition is hurting the Syrian uprising as a whole. The division of Kurds into mainly three groups reflects conflicting geopolitical interests by outside actors as well as historic factors. The willingness of some Kurds within the SNC to engage within a body that is close to Ankara 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 violent 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 in the uprising to mobilize behind a united front. The KNC, backed by Barzani, seems to be doing the best job in attempting to form a common front with both the

PYD and the SNC, but has been so far unsuccessful in the task. Moreover, the KNC is in a bind, aligning with the PYD may boost its legitimacy as representing the entire Kurdish street, but would most likely further distance it from the SNC, the main Syrian opposition body.

Nevertheless, integration of the Kurdish parties with the SNC remains critical for the success of the Syrian uprising. The SNC remains criticized by the United States and Western powers for failing to develop an inclusive vision for minorities in the post-Assad period, and a deal satisfying the Kurds would be a major step towards making the SNC an inclusive body and providing a more inclusive vision for minorities in the post-Assad era.

Such a vision, even if it did not fully accept the demands of Kurdish opposition groups, could reduce the risks of both ethno-sectarian war in the post-Assad era, and of instability in the Kurdish regions if Kurds believe they are disenfranchised by the future Syrian government. It could also boost Kurdish participation in protests against Assad.

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 marginalization of the PYD, which would be the only Kurdish party not falling under this common umbrella. Although the KNC may continue outreach and engagement with the PYD after uniting with the SNC, it cannot be ruled out that the PYD, which sees Kurdish participation in the SNC as collaboration against Kurds, is likely to increase their attacks against other Kurds in response to such a move. Therefore, a deal between the KNC and SNC could marginalize the PYD by keeping them outside of the Kurdish consensus within a united opposition, and likely further violent attacks by the PYD could undermine the party on the Kurdish street.

⁶⁸ Landinfo, Kurds in Syria: Groups at Risk and Reactions Against Political Activists (Oslo, June 2010), p. 11.

A deal between the SNC and KNC would have to address KNC concerns for self-determination within Syria, a secular state, and a politically decentralized form of governance in written constitutional guarantees. Such a deal may appear difficult at the outset due to SNC support from Turkey and the Gulf, and its makeup of Arab nationalists and Islamists, but such a deal is not impossible. Creative compromises may be made by both sides which come close to meeting some of the KNC's demands. If both sides are not dogmatic, and can meet half way, a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish problem which advances Kurdish interests and makes the SNC better off, are quite possible.

An agreement between the SNC and KNC would require engagement by the foreign powers backing both groups - Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq. Such a diplomatic accord would require the facilitation of the United States

and its allies in the European Union. Recent meetings of the US, French and UK foreign ministers with the SNC and KNC delegations and their pressure on both groups to come to an accord are worth noting. In pursuit of creating an environment for such an accord, the U.S. ought to stay in close contact with the Turkish government encouraging it to be more sensitive to Kurdish concerns, and also should press the KRG to give assurances to Ankara's concerns of Kurdish separatism in Turkey. The unification of the KNC and the SNC would certainly alienate the militarized wing of the Kurdish struggle, PYD, which would be in Ankara's interests as well as Erbil's. It would also be in the interests of the U.S. for a stable and inclusive Syria after the fall of Assad and would boost the rapid overthrow of the Assad regime by strengthening the opposition and further reassuring minorities.

About the authors

Omar Hossino is a Syrian-American researcher, based in Washington, D.C. He holds an M.A. in U.S. Foreign Policy from American University where he focused on U.S. counter-terrorism policy in Syria and Lebanon. He has visited Syria more than a dozen times and has written on the Syrian opposition in outlets such as the *Hurriyet Daily News* as well as being quoted in outlets such as the *National Interest*, *La Nacion*, and *Vatan* and appearing on *BBC News Arabic*.

Ilhan Tanir is a Washington reporter for the *Turkish Daily Vatan* and is a columnist for *Hurriyet Daily News*. He has written extensively on the Syrian uprising in these outlets as well as the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Fikra Forum*. He recently returned from a two week trip to Syria where he met with members of the *Free Syrian Army* and activists in the Damascus suburbs, before he was arrested by the regime forces and deported. He received his Master's degree from *George Mason University* in 2006 in *Public Administration and International Management*, and his BA from *Ankara University's Political Science School* in Turkey.

© 2012 The Henry Jackson Society. All rights reserved.
<http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org>