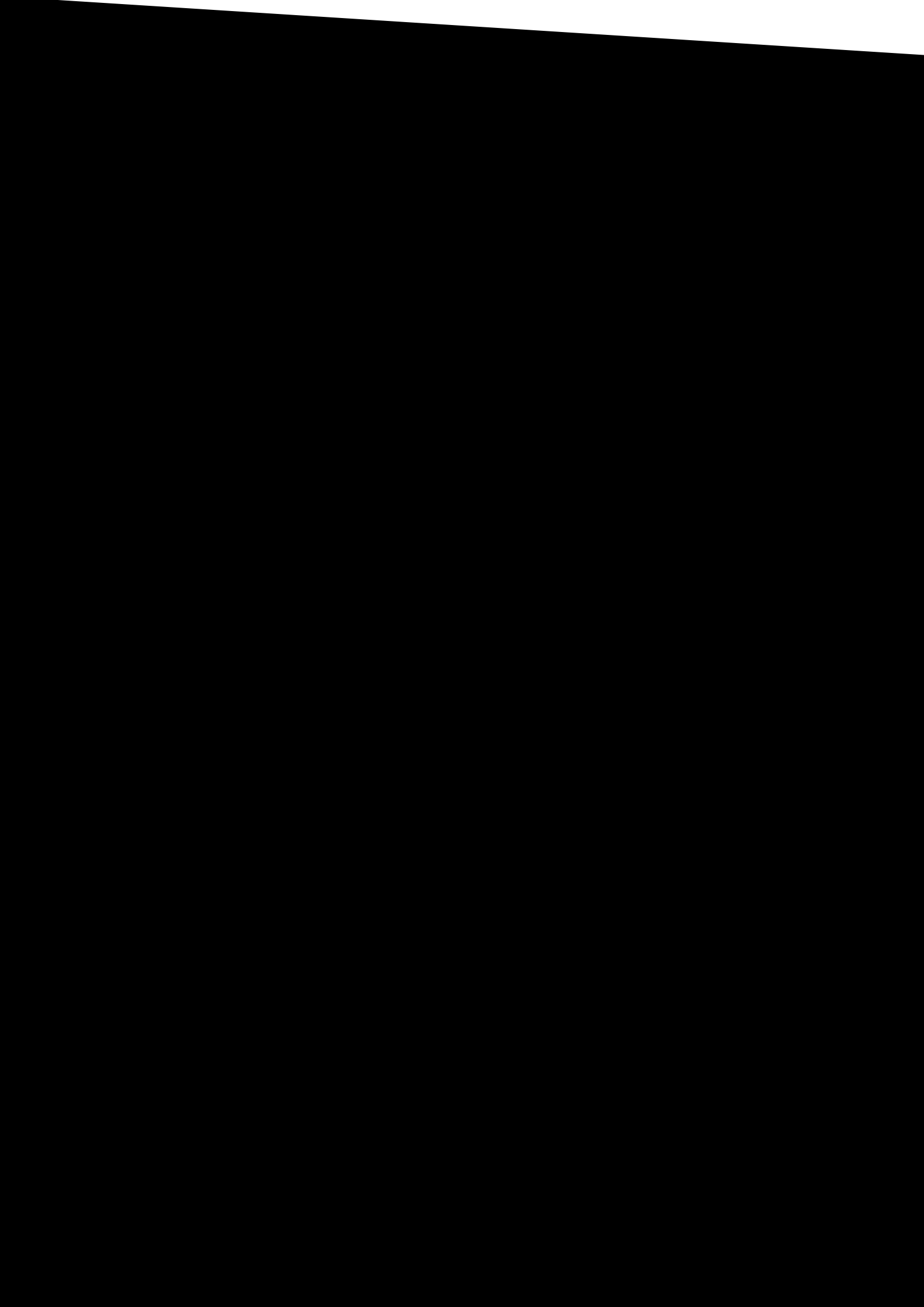


# UNITY OR PYD POWER PLAY?

## SYRIAN KURDISH DYNAMICS AFTER THE ERBIL AGREEMENT

BY ILHAN TANIR, WLADIMIR VAN WILGENBURG, AND OMAR HOSSINO





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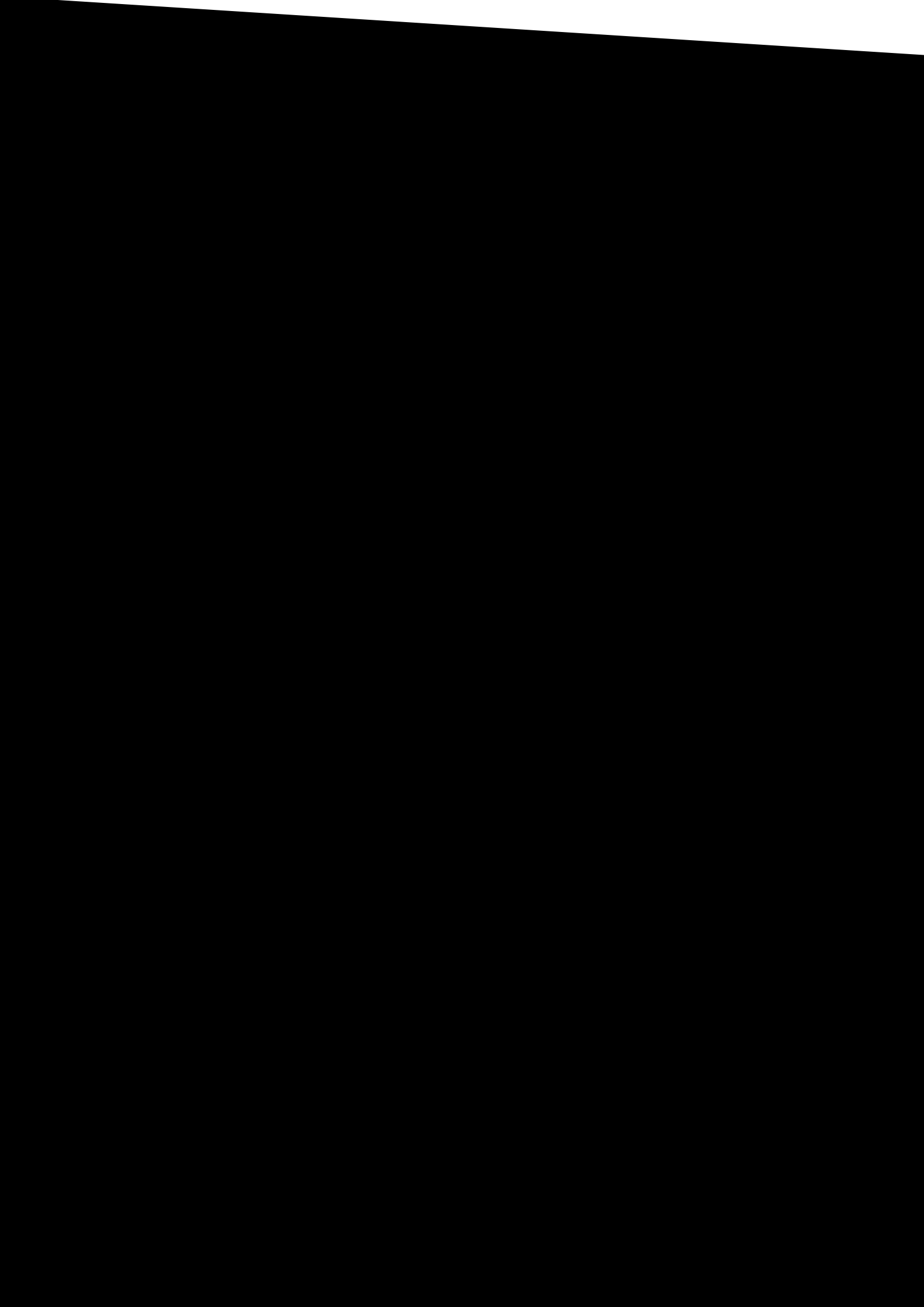
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This paper is written in the author's personal capacity and the views expressed are theirs alone.



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# Executive summary

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- With moderate Kurdish forces failing to reach an agreement with the Arab-Syrian opposition, Syria's Kurds have been pushed to unite among themselves via the Erbil Agreement, which mandated the creation of a Supreme Kurdish Council. However, the effect of the Erbil Agreement has been the empowerment of radicals in the PKK-linked Democratic Union Party (PYD).
- On a regional level, the presence of armed Kurdish fighters in northern Syria, who are known to be affiliated with the PKK in southern Turkey, has gravely worried and exercised Ankara. It has also increased the geopolitical profile of Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), who has been heavily involved in supporting and mediating crises between the Syrian-Kurdish factions.
- The withdrawal of the Assad regime's security forces from crucial Kurdish regions is helping Syria's Kurds attain dramatic levels of self-governance and semi-autonomy. This will have a decisive impact on the course of the Syrian civil war and the post-Assad era.
- While the PYD is uneasy about the connections between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Turkey, and while it further fears that Ankara might prompt the rebels into fighting the PYD, the suspicion is mutual. Some FSA statements have indicated hostility towards the PYD, hostility which the latter group sees as orchestrated by its Syrian-Kurdish rivals.
- Ambiguity persists as to the level of FSA-PYD engagement, and it is unclear how much cooperation exists between the militant groups under the rapidly changing wartime circumstances.
- Without engagement by the United States and European Union in coordination with Turkey, Syria's unresolved Kurdish problem could lead to devastating consequences, including increased PKK terrorist activity and the unintentional emboldening of the Assad regime. Specifically, the lack of pressure in pushing the Syrian-Arab opposition toward a political concordat with moderate Kurds is a major cause of the PYD's gains in power and influence.

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# Introduction

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On 11<sup>th</sup> July, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is affiliated with the militant Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC; a group of 15 Syrian Kurdish groups in Syria), signed an agreement to prevent Kurdish infighting and to jointly administer the Kurdish areas of Syria with the newly-created Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC). Following this accord, henceforth referred to as the Erbil Agreement, fighters associated with the PYD took over the Kurdish districts and areas of the Hasakah and Aleppo governorates.

These developments, which took Turkey and the international community by surprise, have serious implications for Syria's future, both nationally and regionally. On a national level, they further complicate a problem which has been left unresolved since the beginning of the Syrian uprising: Kurdish demands for federalism or autonomy ahead of the backdrop of a general failure of the Arab opposition to agree to a decentralized post-Assad political system. (Syria's Kurds make up anywhere between 10-to-15 percent of the national population.) On the regional level, the presence of armed Kurdish fighters in northern Syria (known to be affiliated with the PKK in southern Turkey) has gravely exercised Ankara whilst also increasing the geopolitical profile of Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), who has been heavily involved in supporting and mediating crises between the Syrian Kurdish factions.

This report will first examine the external and internal effects that the Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC) and the Erbil Agreement have had on the Syrian uprising and to what extent the Agreement has been implemented on the ground. The report will then take a closer look at the regional and international actors involved in resolving Syria's Kurdish Question, and then offer policy recommendations. As an update on intramural Kurdish dynamics in Syria, this report can be seen as a sequel-of-sorts to a previous Henry Jackson Society publication: *The Decisive Minority: The Critical Role of Syria's Kurds in the Anti-Assad Revolution*.



# 1.1 The Erbil Agreement

On 11<sup>th</sup> June, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the People's Council of West-Kurdistan (PCWK), and the Kurdish National Council all came together to sign an agreement to prevent Kurdish infighting at the margins of the protracted Syrian uprising.<sup>1</sup> Intramural conflicts among Syria's Kurdish community rival those of its Arab counterpart, so this agreement proved no easy task. Some parties in the KNC did not explicitly accede to entering into any theoretical or practical compact with the PYD; in fact, certain members accused the PYD of kidnapping activists and KNC members, such as the head of the Azadi Party, Mustafa Jumu'ah. Some KNC members also accused the PYD of having assassinated Nasiradeen Piro, a senior leader of the party. According to former head of the KNC, Dr. Abdulhakim Bashar, there is "plenty of evidence that the PYD killed [Piro]".<sup>2</sup> The PYD, meanwhile, claimed that KNC parties were working in concert with Turkish intelligence services and had engaged with Syrian rebels (based in Turkey) in order to attack the PYD.<sup>3</sup>

The Kurdish National Council was at a decided disadvantage throughout the Erbil Agreement negotiations. A newer and weaker alliance consisting of Kurdish political parties, youth groups,

## FACTBOX:

**The PYD's relationship with the PKK is less opaque than some analysts have suggested. The former is, technically, a part of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), which was founded by the imprisoned PKK-leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 2005 and is now led by rebel commanders of the PKK in Iraq's Qandil Mountains. The KCK was formed by Öcalan to establish an independent confederate Kurdish region on the basis of federal regions in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Historically, any documented differences that may have existed between the Syrian PYD and the Turkish PKK should be taken as tactical, not strategic.**

and independent figures, this umbrella organization lacks the grassroots support or paramilitary apparatuses that have made the PYD the most formidable Kurdish political actor in Syria. Furthermore, Kurdish youth groups, which have led their own anti-Assad demonstrations and grassroots campaigns, have more mobilizing power than the traditional parties within the KNC, and often act more independently. Nevertheless, the KNC has benefited from its inclusion of two main Kurdish political blocs within Iraq: Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), both of which are represented through sister or affiliate Syrian parties in the KNC's ranks.

1. 'New Document: Cooperation agreement between the People's Council of West Kurdistan and the Kurdish National Council', <http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2570&z=en&cure=245>, Kurdwatch.org, July 1st, 2012.

2. 'KNC Leader: Syrian Kurds are Disappointed by PYD's Actions', <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/5030.html> July 1, 2012.

3. Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, 'PYD-KNC Agreement Step Forward', <http://vvanwilgenburg.blogspot.nl/2012/08/rudaw-column-pyd-knc-agreement-step.html> (Accessed 30th August, 2012). NEW COMMENT: Footnote No. 3 gives the date when the source was 'Accessed', does the same need to be done for Footnote No.1? See others after this.

The KNC's existence owes primarily to a dual fear among Kurdish groups inside Syria that the PYD was becoming an all-powerful player, and that the Syrian National Council (SNC), established in Istanbul in August 2011, was a Turkish-created vehicle for advancing an Arab-Islamist agenda via the Muslim Brotherhood, which predominates in the upper echelons of the SNC and controls the body's media and finances.

A main incentive in unifying Kurdish parties in Syria is to create a joint security force for the country, tantamount to Iraqi Kurds' *peshmerga* paramilitary forces. In late July, Barzani confirmed that his *zerevani* – military police operating in the KRG as part of the *peshmerga* – trained anywhere from 600-to-3,000 Syrian-Kurdish fighters in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Barzani said, in an interview with al-Jazeera, that “[a] good number of the young Kurds who fled [Syria] have been trained. We do not want to interfere directly in the situation, but they have been trained.” In a more recent interview, with French magazine *L’Essentiel*, Barzani clarified: “[T] here are 15,000 refugees from Syria and a part of these refugees gets arms training.”<sup>5</sup> These fighters, he added, would be answerable to a higher council for security that was being created in accordance with the Erbil Agreement.<sup>6</sup> It is not a condition of the agreement, however, that such fighters be trained by the KRG, raising questions as to what pre-existing forces inside Syria would be responsible for this task.

Bowing to Barzani's intercession, both the KNC and the PYD signed the Erbil Agreement in July to jointly govern the Kurdish areas of Syria. According to Falah Mustafa Bakir, the KRG's head of foreign relations, Barzani was the linchpin in

ensuring Syrian Kurds developed a united voice and refrained from succumbing to internal conflict.<sup>7</sup>

The Agreement stipulates that two sides had agreed to form a Supreme Kurdish Council, which consists of ten members, five from each existing group. Within this council are three subcommittees, each of which also contains five KNC and five PYD members:

- a) A foreign relations committee;
- b) A services committee, dealing with food, fuel, gas, and equal distribution among individuals;
- c) A security/protection committee, ensuring safety in the Kurdish regions.

Throughout the negotiations over the Erbil Agreement, the KNC's inexperience was manifested in its inability to win concessions from the PYD. For instance, it has not been able to agree on the return of the soldiers who defected from the Assad regime, and who were then trained by Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party in the KRG (these defectors are distinct from the above-mentioned Kurdish fighters, who were trained by the *zerevani*). In an exclusive interview for this report, Salih Muslim, the head of the PYD, confirmed that the defectors' return was being blocked because the PYD wants to have exclusive control over all Kurdish armed groups in Syria: “They will [be] let in when they are ready to join the ranks of the People's Defense Units”, Muslim told one of the authors, referring to the paramilitary forces that were formed in 2011 under the PYD's auspices. Clarifying – or perhaps confusing – this point, Muslim stated that the People's Defense Units do not take orders from him directly, but are beholden to the authority of the Supreme Kurdish Council. However, the credibility of these claims is in doubt due to the fact that the Council has no command over these units.

4. 'Syria's Kurds Build Enclaves as War Rages', <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443862604578032381512705730.html>, 3rd October, 2012.

5. 'Barzani: 15 bin Suriyeli Kürt'e silahlı eğitim veriyoruz', <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1103108&CategoryID=81> [Date?]

6. 'Syrian Kurds given training in Northern Iraq says Barzani', <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-287475-syrian-kurds-given-military-training-in-northern-iraq-says-barzani.html>, Daily Zalam, 24th July, 2012.

7. Speech by Falah Mustafa Bakir, Amsterdam, lecture organized by Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20th September 2012.

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## **THE RECENT SYRIAN SHELLING OF THE TURKISH-BORDER TOWN AKCAKALE, WHERE FIVE CIVILIANS WERE KILLED, AND TURKEY'S REPRISAL ATTACKS ON SYRIAN MILITARY TARGETS, INDICATES THAT TWO FORMER ALLIES MAY BE GRADUALLY SLIDING INTO A STATE OF LOW-BURN WARFARE WITH ONE ANOTHER.**

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### **1.2 KURDISH OR PYD SECURITY?**

The withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Kurdish territories began in mid-July. On 19<sup>th</sup> July 2012, fighters affiliated with the PYD overran border checkpoints in the city of Kobani, Syria, taking the city without a fight. By 21<sup>st</sup> July, the regime had withdrawn from – and the PYD had claimed control of – the cities of Afreen, Amude, Derik, and parts of the largest Kurdish city in Syria, Qamishli.<sup>8</sup> In total, by the end of the month, the Assad regime had withdrawn from fourteen Kurdish cities, including the major towns of al-Ma'abde, Ayn al-Arab, Ras al-Ayn, Dirbasiyeh, as well as the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh districts of the city of Aleppo.

The PYD itself states that there was no actual fighting involved in taking over the cities, claiming that Syrian security forces withdrew in response to an ultimatum issued by the party: “[W]e are warning all the pro-Assad forces in the Kurdish areas to either defect from this regime and withdraw peacefully, or they will

be forced to leave against their will.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that the regime ceded such large swaths of territory to the PYD without a struggle raises suspicions that this was a tactical move designed to strengthen the PYD in order to enervate Turkey, which views any build-up of a PKK apparatus in northern Syria as a direct national security threat. Since Ankara has hosted, financed, and armed the Syrian opposition, its relations with Damascus have deteriorated rapidly. The recent Syrian shelling of the Turkish-border town Akcakale, where five civilians were killed, and Turkey's reprisal attacks on Syrian military targets, indicates that two former allies may be gradually sliding into a state of low-burn warfare with one another. Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has not only petitioned NATO for a no-fly zone over northern Syria (only to be rebuffed), but has said that he reserves the right to intervene militarily, if the PKK establishes bases of operations there from which they would coordinate terrorist attacks inside Turkey.

Analysts and scholars have speculated as to whether or not the Assad regime withdrew independently from Kurdish

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8. 'In Syria, role of Kurds divides opposition', [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/in-syria-role-of-kurds-divides-opposition/2012/08/18/a841e1c2-e896-11e1-936a-b801f1abab19\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-role-of-kurds-divides-opposition/2012/08/18/a841e1c2-e896-11e1-936a-b801f1abab19_story_1.html), 18th August, 2012.

9. 'Kurds Give Ultimatum to Syrian Security Forces', <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/4979.html>, 21st July, 2012.

areas, or whether it did so in direct collaboration with the PYD. Salih Muslim denies the latter claim strongly: “We have no relations with the Assad regime and we want it to fall”.<sup>10</sup> It is true that, as far back as November 2011, Muslim articulated the PYD’s intention of consolidating power once the regime vacated Kurdish territories: “Our party is busy establishing organizations, committees [that will be] able to take over from the Baath administration the moment the regime collapses.”<sup>11</sup>

There is tremendous ambiguity between what the PYD does unilaterally and what it ascribes to the Supreme Kurdish Council; for instance, it now refers to the Council as the chief decision-making body for all Kurdish security measures, when in fact, the Council does not even recognise the People’s Defense Units. According to the KNC, the Units continue to operate entirely outside the scope of the Erbil Agreement. However one interprets it, the article that calls for the joint administration of border points and security forces has clearly been a non-starter.<sup>12</sup>

For its part, the PYD has only confirmed suspicions that it has used the power-sharing protocols of the Erbil Agreement as a pretext for waging a not-so-subtle power seizure in Syria. On 18<sup>th</sup> September, the People’s Defense Units stated that they would not abide by the decisions of the Supreme Kurdish Council.<sup>13</sup> Two days later, PYD militias raided the offices of three KNC parties in a village near Qamishli, warning that they would block all non-PYD militias from operating there in order to defend their own political

demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> The People’s Defense Units also attempted to use the regime’s bombing of Aleppo’s Sheikh Maqsoud district, in which 21 Kurds were killed, in order to recruit more fighters to their own ranks. This directly undercuts the Erbil Agreement’s call for a broader Kurdish gendarmerie.<sup>15</sup>

On 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2012, the KNC’s local committee in Amude claimed that it had suspended its membership in the Erbil Agreement, accusing the PYD of demanding bribes for the sale of fuel and of abusing its control of state infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> Following this, the PYD’s committees arrested three KNC-affiliated activists and recruits from Amude, which resulted in a demonstration against the PYD in which several people were injured.<sup>17</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> September, the PYD released the activists, as ordered by the Supreme Kurdish Council.

Whatever its original intentions in signing the agreement, the PYD has been able to expand its monopolistic interests into the Kurdish areas of Syria. It now controls fuel supplies, food distribution, borders in the Kurdish areas, and earns revenue from tax and border controls through the People’s Defense Units and various armed committees. Graver accusations abound. Mustafa Jumu’ah, the Vice-President of the KNC, was kidnapped in June. Jumu’ah had alleged that, two days prior to his kidnapping, the PYD collected \$200 million from smuggling, although the PYD denies this.<sup>18</sup>

10. ‘PYD Leader: “We Have no Relations With Syrian Regime, We Want it to Fall”’, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/5242.html>, 25th September, 2012.

11. ‘Kurdish Leader: “We Oppose Foreign Intervention in Syria”’, Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4142.html>

12. Author Interview with Heyam Aqil, September 10th, 2012

13. “We decided not to abide to the decisions of the Supreme Kurdish Council”, ANF, <http://ar.firatnews.com/index.php?rupel=nuce&nucelID=3882>, 19th September YEAR?

14. ‘Raiding party offices (KDP - Yekiti - Progressive) in the village of Karki Zera by masked and armed elements belonging to the popular protection committees’, <http://welati.net/nuce.php?ziman=ar&id=5505&niviskar=1&cure=3&kijan=>

15. ‘PYD Kills Syrian Soldiers in Revenge Attack’, Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5180.html>

16. ‘Amude: Local committee of the Kurdish National Council suspends cooperation with the PYD’, Kurdwatch.org, <http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2630&z=en&cure=245>, 11th September DATE?

17. ‘Amude: Further PYD kidnappings’, <http://kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2626&z=en&cure=245>, Kurdwatch.org, DATE?

18. ‘PYD Accused of Abuse of Power in Kurdish Areas of Syria’, Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5214.html>, DATE?

Several KNC members interviewed for this report were highly critical of the PYD, although fearing the consequences of publicizing their criticisms, they declined to be quoted on record.

### 1.3 SALVAGING ERBIL

Owing to the stark implementation failure of the Erbil Agreement, at the beginning of September, Syrian Kurdish parties again visited the KRG capital and spoke with Fuad Hussein, chief of staff to President Barzani. The parties reached an understanding, at least provisionally, and further agreed that:

- (1) Qamishli would be the headquarters of the Supreme Kurdish Council, with ancillary offices in Derik, Amude, Kobani, and Efrin;
- (2) Borders would be jointly administrated, and run on orders from the Council exclusively;
- (3) A meeting would be held to reconcile the KNC and PYD;
- (4) A humanitarian aid committee would be formed;
- (5) A justice committee would be established to manage the law system in Kurdish areas.

The deadline for these regulations is

15<sup>th</sup> October, 2012.<sup>19</sup> According to the Supreme Kurdish Council's spokesperson, Ahmed Suleiman, the Syrian Kurds have no choice but to implement the protocol this time.<sup>20</sup> Already the Council has opened five new offices,<sup>21</sup> established joint PYD-KNC security control in Kobani, and replaced individual political party logos and flags with the sole logo of the Council.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the conciliatory rhetoric of this third summit in Erbil, many KNC members still insist that the July agreement is a dead-letter. All they can acknowledge, for the moment, is that the KNC cannot confront the PYD by force and that both sides must prevent a Kurdish civil war in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

19. Mustafa Jumu'aha 'Welati': "We agreed on the important things in our meeting in Hawler to put all the armed groups of the two councils under the dome of the Supreme Kurdish [Council]" Welati, <http://welati.net/nuce.php?ziman=ar&id=5346&niviskar=1&cure=3&kijan=>, 15th September, 2012.

20. 'Ahmed Suleiman: Setting a timetable for the implementation of all the terms of the Hawler [agreement] completed by October 15', Dimoqrati.info, <http://dimoqrati.info/?p=18551>, 9th September, 2012.

21. 'West-Kurdistan: High Kurdish Council opens five centres', DieKurden.de, <http://www.diekurden.de/news/westkurdistan-hoher-kurdischer-rat-eroeffnet-fuenf-zentren-4713845/>, 16 September, 2012.

22. 'Reporter Welati: Security Committee of the Kurdish Authority proceeds with the Supreme [Council] in Kobani' <http://welati.net/nuce.php?ziman=ar&id=5564&niviskar=1&cure=3&kijan=>, 26 September, 2012.

23. 'Kurdish leaders of Syria urge parties to implement Erbil agreement', AKnews, <http://aknews.com/en/aknews/4/327397/>, 22nd September, 2012.

# 2. Local Impact: Relations between Syrian opposition and Kurds

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## 2.1 NON-ARMED OPPOSITION

From the onset of the Syrian uprising, talks on the Kurdish demand for autonomy or federalism have stalemated between the Syrian opposition blocs. After months of failed discussions between the Arab-dominated Syrian National Council and the KNC, the SNC finally elected, on 10<sup>th</sup> June, Abdul Basit Seida, a Kurd from Amude, as its head in what appeared to be an act of outreach to the Kurdish minority. KNC and PYD leaders dismissed Seida's appointment, claiming that he has not supported mainstream Kurdish calls for autonomy or federalism. Seida's election was further unsuccessful in establishing a productive dialogue, as is clear by the Cairo meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, which ended in disarray.

In the run up to the Cairo meeting, Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar, the then head of the KNC, told two of the authors, after talks with U.S. officials in Washington, that the KNC was willing to compromise on its demands for federalism and now only wanted political decentralization in Syria. Bashar had also proposed creative solutions for a post-Assad government, such as bicameralist legislature with an upper house that equally represents all governorates. Moreover, Bashar noted

that while he would defend political decentralization as the only system that could save Syria from civil war, the KNC was willing to forego the demand in a final agreement with other opposition groups, on the condition that the overwhelming majority of its other demands were met. The demands included calls for recognition of the Kurdish minority in the Syrian constitution, a secular state, constitutional equality between men and women, and the removal of all repressive laws against Kurds put in place by the Ba'ath regime, along with compensation for property that was taken by the Arabization policies by the former regime.<sup>24</sup>

The softening stance of the KNC came in the wake of Barzani's meeting with Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in May 2011, and the KNC's meeting with U.S. and E.U. officials around the same time.

Nevertheless, the Supreme Kurdish Council's declaration – that it was administering the Kurdish regions – has been met by the scorn of much of the Arab opposition. Although both Kurdish and Arab opposition groups share the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime, both

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24. Author interview with Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar, Washington D.C., 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2012.

have largely differing visions over Syria's future. The announcement of the PYD's liberation, in mid-August 2012, of Amude, Kobani, and Efrin, came as a surprise to Arab opposition groups, who have since said that the Kurdish takeovers of these regions was due not to conflict with the regime but cooperation with it. As Assad's forces withdrew, the PYD assumed the mantle of security.

As one of the co-authors of this report has seen through three different trips, in 2012, to Damascus, Aleppo, and Idlib, it is clear that the Syrian-Arabs on the ground are in no mood to let Syrian-Kurds claim autonomy or independence in their own territories, and, for that matter, on their own terms.

Spokesmen from Local Coordination Committees, in areas like Idlib, Hamah, Aleppo, and Damascus, have faulted the Kurds for not sufficiently participating in the revolution, adding that they strongly oppose their attempts to hijack the uprising and obtain autonomy. Ibrahim Zaydan, an Idlib LCC spokesman, told one of the authors:

The mood on the ground is overwhelmingly against Kurdish attempts at separatism and the PKK, although we do not find many Kurds in our region. Basically, there is a frustration and anger at the Kurds for not sufficiently participating in our uprising, and many of the Kurds actually did work with the regime and against the revolution at many points.<sup>25</sup>

Salih al-Hamwi, spokesman of the Higher Council for the Revolution in Hamah Province, said: "The PKK is a separatist party that wants to leave the Syrian nation and we have no connection with them. We are for a united modern civil country and against ethnic or sectarian

statelets."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the strongest statement made in opposition to the Supreme Kurdish Council was that of Adnan al-Arour, the firebrand Syrian-Salafi cleric based in Saudi Arabia, who has played an influential role with Islamist and Salafi elements of the Syrian opposition throughout the uprising. On 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2012, Arour said that Kurds wanting to declare autonomy should be given the message: "Do what you wish but we will not permit, we will not permit, we will not permit, the division of Syria into ethnic regions."<sup>27</sup> Arour's statement has echoed the sentiment of not only the Muslim Brotherhood, but also many Arab opposition members on the ground.

It is important to note that Kurds have their own priorities which many times run counter to those of Syria's Arab opposition groups. The KNC failed to reach an agreement with the SNC, as was demonstrated in the July Istanbul meeting, and the PYD refused to even attend. According to one senior aide to Dr. Bashar, the former head of the KNC, a senior official of the Turkish Foreign Ministry told him (the aide) to "take it or leave it" when the debate over the wording of the "recognition of the Syrian Kurds" did not meet the expectations of the Kurdish delegation. The failure of an agreement was, as previously discussed, followed by the Erbil Agreement between the PYD and KNC.

According to Heyam Aqil, the UK representative of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, the KNC's

"relations with the SNC are relatively better than the rest of the opposition parties, but there are contentious issues between the SNC and the KNC. The SNC has still not met the

25. Author interview with Ibrahim Zaydan, 5th September, 2012.

26. Author interview with Salih al-Hamwi, 5th September, 2012.

27. 'Kurdish Leader Detained by PYD and Accused of Turkish Plot', Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4898.html> 29th July, 2012.

national aspirations of Syria's Kurds as represented by the historic and geographical presence of the Kurdish people in Syria which is deliberately ignored by all Syrian opposition groups, including the SNC."

## 2.2 THE FSA AND THE KURDS: COOPERATION OR ANTAGONISM?

Because the Free Syrian Army (FSA) does not have a central command structure and, instead, consists of loosely aligned scores of brigades and units, there are many discrepant statements about its relationship with the Kurds. Therefore, there is not a standard FSA policy for engaging with Kurdish militias. Take, for example, FSA commanders Abdel-Malik al-Kurdi and Riad al-Assad, both of whom were, until recently, headquartered in southern Turkey. They have issued multiple statements against the PYD, which the latter has variously interpreted and mis-interpreted.<sup>28</sup> PYD head, Salih Muslim, said: "Those who live in Istanbul and Antakya make declarations against Kurds but in my opinion they do not represent anyone – neither the FSA nor the Syrian revolution."<sup>29</sup>

Mustafa Jumu'ah, of the KNC's Azadi Party, suggested that Syrian Kurds seek help from the FSA to counter the rising power of PYD; but then, in August, he noted that the presence of the FSA in Kurdish areas is unacceptable. This ambivalence is characteristic of broader relations between the predominantly Arab rebel army and Kurdish groups.<sup>30</sup> Many in the FSA accuse the PYD of working with the

Syrian government, while the PYD regards the FSA as being controlled by Turkey and/or Islamists. The PYD argues that they do not want an FSA presence in their cities, since they fear that this will draw the military wrath of the regime. Most Syrian Kurds also seem to oppose an FSA presence in the Kurdish regions, despite the fact that they often sympathize with FSA fighting in the Arab districts.<sup>31</sup>

In interviews, in August 2012, with FSA leaders on the ground in Aleppo and Idlib, the use of cautious language was apparent when it came to Syrian-Kurdish issues. An activist named Abu Ahmed, who helped one of the authors enter Idlib in August, spoke of losing his older brother – formerly an FSA fighter – during clashes with the PKK near Afrin at the beginning of July.

While the PYD is uneasy about the FSA's connections to Turkey and fears that Ankara might prompt the rebels into fighting the PYD, the suspicion is mutual. Some FSA statements – coming out of its headquarters in Antakya – have indicated hostility towards the PYD, hostility which the latter group sees as orchestrated by its Syrian Kurdish rivals.

The PYD has accused the KNC of using the FSA to wage a proxy war against the PYD in Syria. Threats and statements by the FSA against the PYD are seen as the handiwork of the KNC; one episode of fighting in Efrin between the two forces, from 29<sup>th</sup> June–3<sup>rd</sup> July, led to the deaths of Hannan Naasan and Abdulnasan Ali (both of whom were pro-FSA) and Ahmet Cekdar (formerly a member of the PYD).<sup>32</sup>

Mustafa Jumu'ah was arrested in June by the PYD near the Syrian-Turkish border,

28. Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, "Cold PKK-FSA Truce in Syria", Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/science/columnists/5063.html>, 8th August, 2012.

29. "The PYD has weapons and we don't. They will kill us all.", Kurdwatch.org, [http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria\\_article.php?aid=2612&z=en&cure=240](http://www.kurdwatch.org/syria_article.php?aid=2612&z=en&cure=240), June 22nd, 2012..

30. 'Mustafa Juma Bakir: No Decision to Change the Kurdish Flag', Welati, <http://welati.net/nuce.php?ziman=ar&id=4694&niviskar=124&cure=3&kijan>, 14th August, 2012..

31. Report Welati: 'Free Army saviour of the Syrian revolution, do not want to repeat the new tragedies of the opposition to the regime and be safe', Welati, <http://welati.net/nuce.php?ziman=ar&id=5048&niviskar=1&cure=5&kijan>, 1st September, 2012.

32. Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, 'Danger of Kurdish Civil War in Syria', Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/science/columnists/4931.html>, 8th July, 2012.



accused of being part of an Ankara-hatched plot against the group.<sup>33</sup> Prior to his arrest, an alleged leak from Turkey's consulate in Iraqi-Kurdistan indicated that

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**CONFLICTING STATEMENTS PERSIST AS TO THE FSA-PYD ENGAGEMENT, AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH COOPERATION EXISTS BETWEEN THE GROUPS REMAINS UNCLEAR UNDER THE RAPIDLY CHANGING WARTIME CIRCUMSTANCES.**

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Turkey had plans to limit the influence of the PYD, which it acknowledged had popular support in Kurdish areas of Syria.<sup>34</sup> This raised fear among PYD supporters that Turkey was preparing to enjoin rival Kurdish parties or rebel groups against the PYD.

What seemingly legitimated this fear was the formation of a strictly Kurdish brigade called Salah-ad Din Eyubi, based in Efrin, which threatened the PYD while demanding better relations between and among Kurdish groups.<sup>35</sup> After skirmishes in Efrin between the family of Sheikh Nasaan and the PYD, Salih Muslim headed to Iraqi-Kurdistan to consult President Barzani and high-level

KDP representatives. According to PYD sources, it is only with Barzani's pressure and the Turkish PKK's backing that the KNC and PYD agreed to come to the table on the Erbil Agreement. However, other incidents have noticeably jeopardized its implementation.

For instance, on 10<sup>th</sup> July, the FSA attempted to enter the heavily Kurd-populated areas of Efrin from Azzaz (which is dominated by Arabs and Turkmen), and resulting in clashes with the PYD's People's Protection Committees.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, on 1<sup>st</sup> August, the PYD's armed militia banned the FSA from erecting checkpoints at the Kurdish village of Robarliq, in Aleppo.

Yet despite these conflicts, FSA-Kurdish relations have, at times, been cooperative. For example, when regime forces at an army checkpoint shot at a PYD convoy to Aleppo, which had succeeded a prior FSA checkpoint, the PYD killed six regime forces in response.<sup>37</sup> Also, according to *The Los Angeles Times*, a contingent of FSA fighters from Aleppo's devastated Salaheddin district traveled to the PYD-controlled Efrin to mourn the deaths of 21 people who were killed in a bombing. They could not have made the journey without the express permission of the PYD. Salih Muslim even displayed a positive attitude towards the FSA in a recent interview for this report.<sup>38</sup>

Conflicting statements persist as to the FSA-PYD engagement, and the extent to which cooperation exists between the groups remains unclear under the rapidly changing wartime circumstances. Recently, the FSA's formidable Tawheed

33. Abdulmajid, Adib'Kurdish Leader Detained by PYD and Accused of Turkish Plot', Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4898.html>, 29th June, 2012.

34. 'Syria concept with 'Hewler as central command' creates controversy', Firat News Agency, <http://www.firatnews.com/index.php?rupel=nuce&nucelID=64636>, 25th June, 2012.

35. Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, 'Syrian Kurds Try to Maintain Unity', Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4964.html>, 17th July, 2012.

36. 'Zivilbevölkerung von Efrin vereitelt Einmarsch der FSA in die Provinz', DieKurden.de, <http://www.diekurden.de/news/zivilbevölkerung-von-efrin-vereitelt-einmarsch-der-fsa-in-die-provinz-4510305/>, 12th July, 2012.

37. 'YPG Entfernt Kontrollpunkte Der Freien Syrischen Armee', <http://www.diekurden.de/news/yypg-entfernt-kontrollpunkte-der-freien-syrischen-armee-5411582/>, 1st August, 2012.

38. 'Kurdish forces kill six Syrian soldiers in Aleppo', Ak News, <http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/3/318894/>, 27th July, 2012.

Brigade in Aleppo threatened the PYD,<sup>39</sup> after its militias tried to keep both the Syrian regime's *shabiha* militias as well as FSA units out of the Kurdish Aleppo district of Sheikh Maqsoud.

Even the Tawheed Brigade appears conflicted over Kurdish engagement. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August, one rebel unit kidnapped a man for selling vegetables to Kurds because the FSA "did not like the Kurds."<sup>40</sup> Sheikh Tawfik Abu Suleiman, the rural commander the Tawheed Brigade, intervened and coordinated the detained man's release. Then, on 7<sup>th</sup> August, the PYD's militia allowed an FSA-unit to attack Syrian regime forces in Ashrafiyeh, prompting rumors that the PYD was aiding the FSA to smuggle weapons to Aleppo<sup>41</sup>. According to Sheikh Tawfik, who spoke to one of the authors: "They will not help us fight Assad, but there is a cold peace."<sup>42</sup>

In the Hasakah province, relations

between the FSA and the PYD remain poor. On 12<sup>th</sup> August, the FSA announced the formation of a military council in Hasakah in a statement on YouTube. That same day, the Martyrs Battalion of Al-Zahra in Qamishli was formed and, on 18<sup>th</sup> August, the intelligence headquarters in Qamishli was bombed. On 9<sup>th</sup> September, the FSA's Unified Qamishli Brigade then announced its formation. Recent small-scale fights in Efrin, on 27<sup>th</sup> September, between the Salah Edin Eyubbi battalion and the PYD, left 3 dead.<sup>43</sup>

A statement from the PYD's Media Office underscores the group's belief that the FSA is acting as an advance-guard of Turkish interests in Syria:

It is no doubt that the suspicious events which have happened in Kurdish areas recently and the formation of a military council, the Free Syrian Army threats against the Kurds and vowing to interfere in those areas is a sign of Turkish intelligence activities. Those activities came after the Turkish-American agreement with some factions of [the] Syrian opposition to establish their presence and organizations in the Kurdish areas.

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39. Solomon, Erika, 'Syria rebels struggle to advance in new Aleppo offensive', Reuters, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-syria-crisis-clashesbre88r0mj-20120928,0,5755737.story>, 28th September, 2012.

40. Interview: Tawheed commander Abdul Qadir Salih, Al Jazeera, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZnnOz4yo0s&feature=youtu.be>, 8th August, 2012.

41. 'Kurdish Militias Help Out Syrian Rebels in Aleppo', <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/5082.html>, 13th August, 2012.

42. Sherlock, Ruth, 'Syria: United rebels gain ground as slow war comes to Aleppo', The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9382582/Syria-United-rebels-gain-ground-as-slow-war-comes-to-Aleppo.html>, 6th July, 2012.

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43. 'YPG calls for cleaning up armed gangs', <http://www.firatnews.com/index.php?rupel=nuce&nucelID=68915>, 27th September, 2012.

# 3. Political Actors

## 3.1 KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT (KRG)

The KRG has played an instrumental role in shaping the politics of Syrian-Kurds. The KNC was founded in October 2011<sup>44</sup> under the supervision of President Massoud Barzani, as a counterbalance against the PYD and the PKK in Syria. Turkey supported the efforts of Barzani in trying to limit the influence of the PYD. Before the KNC's formation, the PYD had attempted to form the People's Council of West-Kurdistan (PCWK) with other Kurdish parties, but this failed due to different political interests.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Barzani's *peşmerga* militants trained hundreds of Syrian-Kurds to form a paramilitary backup contingent for the KNC in Syria. Barzani then brokered the Erbil Agreement between the KNC and the PYD in order to prevent civil war.<sup>46</sup> As discussed at length earlier, there are complaints that the agreement gives the PYD too much power and time to extend its authority in historically-strong KNC areas.

When Syrian-Kurds trained by Barzani attempted to enter Syria, they were stopped by the PYD, which called for the People's Defense Units to operate as the only existing martial force for the Kurds. This would appear to violate the agreement emphasizing the sharing of security responsibilities. Salih Muslim, of

the PYD, admitted that the Defense Units had stopped defected Kurdish soldiers (from the Syrian army) from entering the area until "these Kurdish soldiers [were] ready to join their ranks."<sup>47</sup> Unlike the PYD, the majority of the KNC is against arming the revolution, and it has not been able to form its own militia, despite rumors that the Azadi party is tied to the Salah-ad Din Eyubi Brigade.<sup>48</sup>

## 3.2 TURKEY

The Ankara administration, like the government of many other countries, was caught off guard when the regional revolutions began. Nineteen months into the Syrian conflict, the quick overthrow of the Assad regime that Ankara had wanted to see – similar to that of Tunisia or Egypt – did not take place. Turkey was caught off guard. Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman, Selcuk Unal, in an email exchange with one of the authors said:

Turkey was closely following the internal developments evolving to newly emerging political movements in all the Arab countries. We were feeling and expecting certain changes. This is especially true for Syria. We have told them many times that it would be inevitable for them to be affected by the wave of Arab Spring [if they didn't reform].

The Syrian-Kurdish question continues to complicate Turkey's calculations, particularly in light of its own domestic confrontation with the PKK. Violence between the Turkish military and the PKK has risen to record heights, as attested

44. Mansour, Renad, 'Iraqi Kurdistan & the Syrian-Kurd Pursuit of Autonomy', edn12, [http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/09/201291910402907471.htm#\\_](http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/09/201291910402907471.htm#_), 24th September, 2012.

45. Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, 'Syrian Kurds Try to Maintain Unity', Rudaw, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4964.html>, 17th July, 2012.

46. 'Minutes of the Meeting', Kurdwatch.org, [http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch\\_D027\\_en\\_ar.pdf](http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_D027_en_ar.pdf), DATE?

47. Author interview with PYD-leader Salih Muslim, 12th September, 2012.

48. Author interview with Sirwan Kajjo, 21st August, 2012.

by a recent report from the International Crisis Group. Though whether or not this escalation owes wholly, partially, or at all to the Syrian crisis, and creeping Kurdish autonomy in Syria's northeast, is a subject of intense speculation and controversy. The only recorded incident between the PYD forces and Turkey occurred on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, when a few PYD militants tried to infiltrate through the Turkish border town Kiziltepe, Mardin. The Turkish security forces and PYD militants clashed, resulting in the deaths of 2 PYD militants.<sup>49</sup>

Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, openly acknowledged Turkey's own "Kurdish Problem" in 2005 for the first time. Turkey's Kurds, particularly those living in the southeast part of the country, had been oppressed throughout most of the 20th century by authoritarian measures that curbed their cultural, social, economic, and political rights. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, European Union, Turkey, and number of other countries, began attacking Turkish security forces and civilians during the mid-1980s, continuing to this day.

In 2008 and 2009, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) vowed to solve the Kurdish problem with a set of reforms, which came to be known collectively as the "Kurdish Opening". Their purpose was to make Kurds equal citizens of the Republic of Turkey. The hoped-for reforms included, but were not limited to: allowing Kurdish names back into the public sphere; providing for Kurdish education and broadcasting rights; issuing amnesty for PKK militants in future; and amending the Turkish Constitution to reflect these fundamental civic changes.<sup>50</sup>

After an initial optimism and a few gestures by the Turkish government, the "Kurdish Opening" quickly closed. While Turkish prosecutors and police forces began going after KCK members and PKK militants more aggressively, terrorist attacks by the PKK steadily increased and the summer of 2012 became the bloodiest one since the early 1990s. Turkey's Kurds – estimated to be 15 million, or 20 percent of the entire population – are a far more substantial group than the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, or Iran. In the eyes of AKP's leadership, the Turkish military, and the vast segments of Turkish society, the creation of another Kurdish autonomous region following the establishment of the KRG in northern Iraq – this one in Syria on Turkey's southern doorstep – could serve as a lifeline for the PKK, which Hafez al-Assad hosted in the 1980s and 1990s and which, as we have seen, is closely allied to Syria's PYD.

Throughout the regional uprisings, the Syrian Kurdish question did not become prominent in Turkish media until mid-July, when Kurdish fighters took control of towns near the Turkish border around northern Syria, following the withdrawal of Assad's forces that were needed to reinforce the Damascus and Aleppo city centers.

Following the PYD's sudden seizure of Syrian towns, Erdogan issued an unequivocal threat in a national address on 26<sup>th</sup> July: "We will never tolerate initiatives that would threaten Turkey's security." Turkey, he said, in a follow-up interview on Turkish news channel Kanal24, would "intervene" in Syria should the PKK set up camp there and control towns with terrorist tactics. The swift mobilization of Turkish troops, tanks, anti-aircraft, and missiles along the Turkish-Syrian border (directly across from Kurdish towns in Syria) only heightened tensions (the mobilization was in response to the Syrian Air Force's downing of a Turkish reconnaissance

49. Mardin Valiligi, [http://www.mardin.gov.tr/web/mardinvaliligi/haberdetay.asp?id=2837&kategori=BASIN\\_ACIKLAMALARI, DATE?](http://www.mardin.gov.tr/web/mardinvaliligi/haberdetay.asp?id=2837&kategori=BASIN_ACIKLAMALARI, DATE?)

50. Kirisci, Kemal, "The Kurdish Opening in Turkey: Origins and Future?", <https://www.carnegieendowment.org/2009/12/01/kurdish-opening-in-turkey-origins-and-future/2ndb, DATE?>

plane). So, for that matter, did the PYD's capture of several villages on their side of the Syrian border: seizures, which, coincided with increased attacks of the PKK inside Turkey. On 23<sup>rd</sup> August, nine people were killed after a car filled with explosives was blown up by a remote device in front of a police station in the southern city of Gaziantep, just across from Aleppo province. Erdogan convened a security summit and issued a stern warning to both the PKK and PYD: Turkey would not allow a new terrorist network to emerge, noting that Ankara's rhetoric was in line with that of Syria's opposition groups.<sup>51</sup>

Turkey has mainly relied on two actors to deal with the Syrian-Kurdish problem: the SNC and the Kurdish President, Barzani. On 1<sup>st</sup> August, Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, raised the issue of the Syrian government's loss of control over Kurdish territory with Barzani. He then met with the KNC and the SNC in a move that led to anger within the PYD, which claimed that Turkey was attempting to circumnavigate the Erbil Agreement. Because of this, the KNC and PYD both took a stance against Turkish intervention in Syria by issuing separate statements.<sup>52</sup> Davutoğlu was forced into a rhetorical compromise, noting that while Turkey does not oppose a Kurdish autonomous region next to its borders, it will only accept such a development contingent on approval by the Syrian people in the post-Assad period: an easy position to take given the Arab majority and Turkey's current political stewardship of both Islamist and secular opposition

groups.<sup>53</sup> Selcuk Unal stated that Turkey's acceptance of the autonomous entity in Syria is not limited to the Kurds, but any other minorities as long as it is approved by the Syrian people.<sup>54</sup>

Some analysts have argued that Turkey wants to use Barzani and the KDP against the PYD,<sup>55</sup> although, up until now, this seems to have backfired. Barzani is dependent on Turkey as an ally in his brinkmanship with the Iraqi government over oil resources: Ankara is currently building oil pipelines with the assistance of Iraqi Kurds that undercuts Baghdad altogether.

### 3.3 THE UNITED STATES

The US position towards the Kurds in Syria is quite clear. Although it wants the opposition to be inclusive of minorities, Washington is against the presence of the PKK and Kurdish separatism, following the policies of its NATO ally, Turkey. The PYD has tried to reach out to the United States, which has rejected such engagement. It also rejects Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

In May 2011, the KNC visited the United States following meetings with (then SNC Chairman) Burhan Ghalioun and Davutoğlu. During a visit to Istanbul, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said that Washington shared Turkey's concerns and would not allow Syria to be a safe haven for the PKK, "whether now or after the departure of the Assad-regime". Despite this, she also emphasized that a new Syrian government would need to protect the rights of all minorities.<sup>56</sup>

51. 'Fiery Erdogan Slams Assad, Iran', Al-Safir, <http://www.assafir.com/Windows/PrintSection.aspx?EditionId=2226&MulhakId=4173&ftype=menu&ref=rm>, 8th August, 2012.

52. Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir, 'Assessing the Threat to Turkey from Syrian-Based Kurdish Militants', Jamestown Foundation, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=39749&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=588](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39749&tx_ttnews[backPid]=588), 9th August, 2012.

53. 'Davutoğlu says Turkey not against Kurdish autonomy in post-Assad Syria', Today's Zaman, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-289023-davutoglu-says-turkey-not-against-kurdish-autonomy-in-post-assad-syria.html>, 9th August, 2012.

54. Email exchange with Selcuk Unal, the spokesman of the Turkish Foreign Ministry, 6th October, 2012.

55. Coles, Isabel, 'Syrian Kurd party says Turkey should not fear its rise', Reuters, <http://news.yahoo.com/syrian-kurd-party-says-turkey-not-fear-rise-120549891.html>, 7th August, 2012.

56. 'US warns Kurdish autonomy in Syria could be slippery slope', Today's Zaman, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-288108-us-warns-kurdish-autonomy-in-syria-could-be-slippery-slope.html>, 30th July, 2012.

The US Ambassador to Turkey, Francis J. Ricciardone, has claimed that the US is strongly in favor of “the integrity of Syria” and against PKK activities in not only Turkey, but also Iraq and Syria.

US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip Gordon, also emphasized this point during a visit to Istanbul in July 2012: “We don’t see for the future of Syria an autonomous Kurdish area or territory. We want to see a Syria that remains united.”<sup>57</sup> In his

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57. ‘US warns Kurdish autonomy in Syria could be slippery slope’, Today’s Zaman, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-288108-us-warns-kurdish-autonomy-in-syria-could-be-slippery-slope.html>, 30th July, 2012.

UN General Assembly speech, President Obama noted that a future Syria should be united and inclusive, adding: “Syrians [should] have a say in how they are governed - Sunnis and Alawites; Kurds and Christians.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, it is of no surprise, that when on 2<sup>nd</sup> August the PYD’s Foreign Affairs Office called for Western support for Syria’s Kurds for the “peaceful establishment of a self-ruled Kurdish region” as a safe haven, their comment was largely ignored.

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58. ‘Full speech: President Obama’s UNGA address’, Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/09/201292514540693845.html>, September, 2012.

# 4. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The KNC's Erbil Agreement with the PYD is a direct result of the inability of the Syrian National Council – most especially the Muslim Brotherhood that plays the strongest role within it – and other Arab opposition groups, to come to an agreement on Syria's Kurds. It appears that the majority of Syria's armed and unarmed opposition, as well as the Turkish government, decided to leave the question of Syria's Kurds for the post-Assad period. Although the FSA regards the PYD as being close to the Assad regime, the two have reached a "cold peace" and, notwithstanding the occasional clashes, do not fight with each other.

Ankara has been threatening to hit PYD positions in Syria, though its reluctance is understandable, since intervening in order to extend its long-running war on the PKK would effectively open up another Kurdish front in Syria, and lead to unforeseeable consequences for both countries. Turkey has not handled the PKK problems within its own borders yet. The Turkish administration also lacks the international and domestic support to create a buffer zone for humanitarian purposes inside Syria. Ultimately, it appears that the PYD has been able to assert its dominance over Kurdish areas of Syria, especially in Aleppo province.

Because the Kurdish parties in Syria cannot afford to have Turkey as an enemy, Salih Muslim (of the PYD) has offered to make and maintain peace with Turkey.

The PYD realizes that the post-Assad period is uncertain at best, so there is a great incentive to avoid the wrath of the Turkish military and deny any links with the PKK, as Muslim currently does. Nevertheless, PYD's interests are *sui generis* and distinct from the broader uprising against the Assad regime. According to a recent *Financial Times* report, at a party youth rally in Hasakah, a speaker relayed a message from imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to the Syrian Kurds (which, the speaker says, was given to a lawyer on a recent visit to Ocalan's prison): "You must not be with Assad, you must not be with the opposition, you must be the third power in Syria", Ocalan is quoted as saying. "You must prepare 15,000 soldiers to protect the Kurdish areas. If you don't take this strategy you will be crushed...Every young Kurd must prepare themselves to join up and protect their motherland."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, the KNC and PYD cannot afford to antagonize each other in light of their reliance and feeble agreement to avoid internal civil war. In a post-Assad Syria however, the PYD must learn to share power with more moderate Kurdish parties and establish a peaceful balance among the various existing actors.

To prevent Kurdish infighting, a civil war between Kurds and Arabs in Syria,

59. 'Syria's Kurds prepare for life after Assad financial times', <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/707b7fa8-0bf2-11e2-8e06-00144feabdc0.html>, 2nd October, 2012.

and fights between the PKK and Turkey, the West should also take greater responsibility on this crucial minority question. The United States has opened up talks with more moderate Kurds from the KNC, as has Turkey, but the two countries must do more to assist in incorporating the Kurdish opposition within the Syrian National Council, the Free Syrian Army, and the leading Syrian rebel groups, and in decreasing the risks of a PKK base eventually being set up in northern Syria. Such a development would only destabilize the region further by inviting Turkish military attacks. There is already a significant problem of internally displaced refugees in the Kurdish regions, and fighting will only proliferate this. The US, EU, and Turkey must pressure the PYD and Kurdish parties in Syria to reach an equal balance, to end PYD domination of Kurdish areas, and to accept and integrate Barzani's Syrian Kurdish soldiers.

The PYD should also be pressed to implement the power-sharing Erbil Agreement with the KNC, remove PKK logos and symbols, and to accept the creation of joint security mechanisms, services, and other institutions, which are necessary to keeping northern Syria safe. In a post-Assad future, the PYD must end its monopoly on the security control of Kurdish areas in exchange for civil-rights guarantees and international recognition. Turkish ties to the SNC, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and Massoud Barzani could create an opening wherein the more moderate Kurds of the KNC are integrated into the Syrian opposition through a common articulation of political and civil rights. This would strengthen the hand of moderate Kurds on the ground and further isolate the PYD and reduce its grassroots support on the ground.

Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, has suggested that elections should be held in a post-Assad Syria, and a "parliament should be formed that

includes Kurds, Turkmens and Arabs. You can come together and say we will grant autonomy [to the Kurds]. This is up to you. We would not oppose that."<sup>60</sup> At the same time though, the Ankara administration has made it clear that Turkey will not allow the PKK to use Syria as a base for terrorist attacks.

One can envision a scenario in which the PYD is allowed to continue its activities in the post-Assad period if it rejects violence. The PYD also knows it cannot ascertain legitimacy without the KNC, and will therefore be pressured to make concessions. Salih Muslim admitted – during interviews for this report – that currently the PYD leadership has little or no access to the Western diplomatic channels, which the KNC enjoys. Muslim also made his wishes clear to establish a continuous dialogue with the West, including-and-especially the United States.

PYD's Foreign Representative, Dr. Alan Semo, said that the PYD is willing to support the FSA if they do not enter Kurdish areas, and if non-armed opposition can be hosted in Kurdish areas, assuming, that is, the West creates a safe haven in northern Syria in order to remove Assad from power and support the Syrian Kurds as it did with the Iraqi Kurds in 1991 and 2003. Likewise, the Kurdish parties are aiming at a form of self-governance within Syria but insofar as they claim not to espouse separatist tendencies, the West should take them at their word and start negotiating with the Supreme Kurdish Council in earnest. After all, that is the purpose of its foreign affairs council.

Finally, Turkey must work to facilitate talks and resolve the position of Syria's Kurds, otherwise it risks incurring serious

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60. 'Davutoğlu says Turkey not against Kurdish autonomy in post-Assad Syria', Today's Zaman, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-289023-davutoglu-says-turkey-not-against-kurdish-autonomy-in-post-assad-syria.html>, 9th August, 2012.



domestic, political, and security risks. Prior to this external reconciliation, however, Turkey must re-launch its Kurdish Opening and end its heavy-handed counterterrorism protocols against the PKK, with which it should resume talks. Many of the Syrian Kurds – who were interviewed for this report – agreed that Ankara’s softened approach to its own Kurdish question would prove a good-will gesture towards resolving the Kurdish question at a regional level. The recent indications by Prime Minister Erdogan, that Turkey is open for talks

with the imprisoned PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan again, can be seen as a positive sign within this framework.

Today, good relations between Turkey and the KRG are a sign of the success of a soft-power policy approach that was implemented successfully with Iraqi Kurds. That Barzani proved to be an indispensable ally of Ankara is an outcome few could have expected just a couple of years ago. This model of reconciliation should be applied to Syria’s Kurdish minority as well.







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