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## Reports

# The Role of Iraqi Kurdistan in the Syrian-Kurd Pursuit of Autonomy

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## Introduction

The green, white, and red flag with a centered sun has been flying high in the Kurdish areas of Syria since President Bashar al-Assad withdrew government forces. There is, in fact, a tacit agreement between Assad and the Syrian Kurds; the latter are free to act, as long as they do not attack Damascus! Since they liberated their cities, the Syrian Kurds have had their first taste of autonomy and have prevented both government and Free Syrian Army troops from entering the territory. They are guided by the example of strong and autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, which has been emerging since 1991, and they are preparing to ensure their own rights in a post-Assad Syria. This opportunity, however, is tempered by anxiety. With the diplomatic brokering led by Iraqi Kurd President Massoud Barzani, the two main Syrian Kurdish groups (formerly bitter rivals), namely, the Kurdistan National Council (KNC) and the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), have unified to form the Supreme Kurdish Council, much like the rivaling Iraqi Kurd groups, the KDP and the PUK, did after gaining autonomy. The calls for a pan-Kurdish 'Greater Kurdistan' – a joining of the Syrian and Iraqi movements into a single entity – however, are low.

This report will present the Iraqi Kurd interests in the Syrian Kurd struggle and will argue that while the pan-Kurdish idea of a Greater Kurdistan is still only a nationalist dream<sup>ii</sup>, the Iraqi Kurd leadership, specifically President Barzani, is playing the kingmaker role and ensuring that an autonomous Syrian Kurdistan remains Erbil-friendly.

## A Memory of Trauma

Neglect and its consequences become clear as one walks through the barren Kurdish areas of Syria. Decades of Arab nationalist rule was underlined by paranoia of Kurdish aspirations. This led to banning the teaching of the Kurdish language, seizing Kurdish publications, and forbidding Kurdish art and music. Arab society, culture, and language were forced upon the Kurds and threatened their cultural identity.<sup>iii</sup>

The notorious August 1962 census of the Syrian Kurdish al-Hasakeh province effectively stripped 150 000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship overnight – and they were deemed 'ajanib' (foreigners).<sup>iv</sup> Then, the reign of Hafiz al-Assad, who was a staunch Arabist, continued the Arab paranoia and oppression by forcibly displacing the Kurds. Beginning in the 1970s, for example, Damascus began changing place names from Kurdish to Arabic.<sup>v</sup>

An 'Arab Belt', a military zone along the Syrian borders with Turkey (822 km) and Iraq (600 km) was then established in much of the Kurdish-dominated al-Jazeera region. Arabs were enticed with agricultural subsidies and loans to settle along this belt.<sup>vi</sup> This distanced and divided the Kurds from their counterparts in Turkey and Iraq. As a result, pan-Kurdish nationalism was and is weak.

### List of Abbreviations

KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KNC	Kurdish National Council (Syria)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)

### Political Parties in the KNC<sup>vii</sup>

Party	Leader
The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti)	Abdul Hakim Bashar
Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti)	Nasruddien Ibrahim
The Kurdish Democratic National Party in Syria	Tahir Sfook
The Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria	Aziz Dawe

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Suspicion of his own Kurds did not stop Hafiz al-Assad from supporting neighbouring Kurdish groups in Turkey and Iraq, when convenient. Fleeing Turkey in 1979, Abdullah Ocalan and his Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) established offices and camps in Syria. This lasted until a deal was reached between Ankara and Damascus in 1998. The strong presence of a Turkish Kurdish opposition movement resonated with Syrian Kurds, many of whom shared direct links with Turkish Kurds (including the use of the Kirmanji dialect, intermarriages between those living in bordering villages, and a robust trading system). As a result, Ocalan became the strongest symbol for the Syrian Kurds and sparked the eventual creation of the PYD party in 2003.

The Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (Yakiti)	Shaikh Ali
The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria	Hamid Darwesh
The Kurdish Yakiti Party in Syria	Ismail Hamo
The Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria	Mustafa Oso
The Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria	Mustafa Jumaa
The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party	Shaikh Jamal
The Kurdish Leftist Party in Syria	Mohammed Mousa
Yakiti Kurdistanî	Abdelbasit Hamo
Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria	Abdulrahman Aluji
The Kurdish Reform Party	Faissal Yusuf
The Kurdish Democratic Wifaq Party	Nash'at Muhammad

Syrian Kurds watched as their Iraqi counterparts, following the establishment of a no-fly zone in 1991 and the US-led invasion in 2003, employed brinkmanship to create a system of Iraqi federalism with unprecedented Kurdish autonomy.<sup>viii</sup> Qamishli felt the resulting vibrations in March 2004 when Syrian Kurds rioted during a football match, and Assad's responding security forces led to the deaths of 30 Kurds and injuries to many others. It was not until the 'Arab Spring', however, when the Syrian Kurds really found an opportunity with a weakened Bashar al-Assad and an unstable Syrian state, to make gains. They would look to the only known success of Kurdish autonomy, Iraqi Kurdistan.

## Establishing a Syrian Kurdistan

The widely-held and historically-backed idea that pan-Kurdish nationalism is weak, particularly between Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, was seemingly questioned with Barzani's decision to support the Syrian brethren's struggle. Again, however, pragmatism outweighs any strong pan-nationalist sentiment. This dynamic, actually rooted in the Erbil-Ankara relationship, is based on the dangers of irredentism and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) vow (to Turkey) not to overstep that line with regards to neighbouring Kurds.

Over the past few years, Turkey has grown to trust Erbil and the two sides have built a strong and long-term partnership based on economic (the anticipated oil pipeline) and political (the weakening of an Iranian-backed Maliki) interests. For the Iraqi Kurd leadership, the Syrian-Kurd policy is twofold: to contain unfriendly Kurdish groups (PKK and its apologists) and to increase pressure vis-à-vis Baghdad by supporting the overthrow of a Maliki-backed Assad. There is also the fear of destabilization that a mass of refugees evokes, as more than 15 000 Syrian Kurds have already fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>ix</sup>

## A Containment Policy

The Iraqi Kurd leadership, with Ankara's blessing, trained fleeing Syrian Kurds, who would then go back to Syria and work to bring down the Assad regime<sup>x</sup> - a clear challenge to Baghdad's non-interference policy. In a telephone interview, head of the Syrian National Council, Abdul Basit Sieda, referred to Massoud Barzani as the 'Marjaeya', or the 'authority' that Syrian Kurds look to.<sup>xi</sup> Sieda, the leader of the entire Syrian opposition, has remained in Erbil since July, under Barzani's care. A similar

outcome was not achieved when Barzani invited Sieda's Syrian Arab predecessor, Burhan Ghaloun, to Erbil.

This stems from a series of events that has highlighted Barzani's influence and interests for Syrian Kurdistan. It was under his supervision that the KNC, an amalgamation of 15 Syrian Kurdish groups, was founded in October 2011. Most notably absent from this was the PYD, due mainly to its close ties to the PKK. Then, Barzani organized a meeting in January 2012 in Erbil for the Syrian Kurdish opposition, together with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, but again did not include the PYD. One source from the PYD went so far as to tell the author that Barzani had ordered the Syrian Kurd delegates (who each received \$10 000 for attending) to attack PYD checkpoints, using weapons supplied from Turkey, and to use propaganda against them.<sup>xii</sup> For the Iraqi Kurds, the PYD had to renounce its ties to the PKK before it could be included under the KRG umbrella of care. While the accusations went back and forth, what became clear was that the on-the-ground power and legitimacy of the PYD meant it could not be ignored. Thus, on 11 July, Barzani brokered a unity deal between the KNC and the PYD establishing unification under a new Supreme Kurdish Council. This was codified with the Erbil Agreement of July 2012.

### **Erbil and Ankara see Mutual Benefits**

Iraqi Kurdistan is again in the position of having to balance between a strong relationship with Ankara and pan-Kurdish nationalism. Beneath the surface, however, the mutual benefits of this strategy are clear. Both Ankara and Erbil want to have an active role in the future of the Syrian Kurds. For the former, the PKK cannot regain bases in Syria to destabilize Turkey. While the Syrian Kurds may not appreciate Turkey's interference (in supporting the Sunni-dominated Free Syrian Army), an alliance with Erbil will allow Ankara to play an indirect role in ensuring the PKK does not thrive again in Syria. For the latter, Barzani's KDP is not only interested in Turkey as an ally vis-à-vis Baghdad, but it too has historically opposed the PKK, which even resulted in KDP *peshmerga* forces fighting alongside Turkey against the PKK in the 1990s.<sup>xiii</sup> Moreover, a PKK attack within Iraqi Kurd territory threatens Erbil's sovereignty and bring volatility to a region that investors are being convinced is stable.<sup>xiv</sup> Hemin Hawrami, head of foreign relations for the KDP, claims that the "recent visit by Turkish Foreign Minister to Erbil [had] positive and fruitful dialogue with President Barzani and later with the Kurdish National Council", which "are signs of strong and mutual efforts by Turkey and Kurdistan Region for Regional Stability".<sup>xv</sup>

### **Barzani, the 'Marjaeya'**

In the 2012 Erbil Agreement, the PYD has condemned PKK tactics of violence, ensuring that the PKK does not strengthen influence in Syria. For Barzani there is a further desire to be the 'authority' for the Kurds in general – challenging Ocalan for that spot. While Barzani leads five million Iraqi Kurds, Ocalan leads 20 million Turkish Kurds. Hence, a Syrian Kurdistan (with two million inhabitants) closer to Iraqi Kurdistan and under the authority of Barzani can both keep a watchful eye on potential PKK activity and increase Barzani's legitimacy across borders. This will also evoke nationalism and speak to the masses of Iraqi Kurds, many of whom have become disgruntled on domestic issues. "The majority of the Kurdish people in Syria see him as a national symbol," states Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar, the leader of the KNC, "he worked to unite the Kurdish parties through the Erbil Agreement."<sup>xvi</sup>

The problem, then, is how to enforce the Erbil Agreement and contain the PYD's historic links to the PKK. "Iraqi Kurdistan and federalism", according to Dr. Semo, the PYD foreign affairs representative, "hasn't been a successful model", going on to cite issues with Baghdad and over-dependence on Turkey.<sup>xvii</sup> While this gap between Erbil and the PYD still exists, at the moment, the latter continues to stand behind the unification agreement and denounces the PKK.<sup>xviii</sup> Although the Erbil Agreement lacks concrete decisions on leadership and organization, the external threat of Assad has united the

KNC and PYD. Sieda, the leader of the Syrian National Council, is positive that “Barzani can have a good role and must pressure all sides [Kurdish] to do more” for unification.<sup>xxix</sup> Barzani reassures that he will not interfere directly and that he will respect what the people say.<sup>xxx</sup>

## Power vis-à-vis Baghdad

The Syrian conflict has fueled another dividing point between Erbil and Baghdad. An Iran-backed Maliki is opposed to any post-Assad regional dynamic under which a Sunni-led Damascus will threaten Shi’a power in Baghdad. The Kurds, who have turned toward Turkey, are wary of Maliki’s threatening consolidation of central power and are interested in regime change in Syria – the opposite of what Baghdad wants. This led to a standoff between *peshmerga* forces and Iraqi Security Forces in late July along the border with Syria.<sup>xxxi</sup> Baghdad sees Erbil as threatening its sovereignty by issuing independent oil contracts (Exxon, Total, Chevron, Gazprom, etc.), facilitating the escape of fugitive Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, using *peshmerga* forces to gain influence in disputed territories, and most recently, allowing the Turkish foreign minister to visit Kirkuk without informing Baghdad first. Iraq’s Council of Ministers decreed on 3 September that foreign officials cannot enter Iraqi cities (including the Kurdistan Region) without Baghdad’s consent.<sup>xxxii</sup> Erbil sees Maliki as strengthening authoritarian rule and not respecting the constitution or the terms of the 2010 Erbil Agreement, including implementation of Article 140 of the Constitution.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Turkey is now considered as an important patron against a threatening Baghdad.

## What the Syrian Kurd Opposition Envision

After watching Iraqi Kurds gain unprecedented autonomy next door, Syrian Kurd demands remain relatively modest, for now. These two cases, however, differ. Unlike in Iraq, the Syrian Kurds have not developed the institutional mechanisms and lack a history of organized struggle. They have no ‘Mustafa Barzani’ or ‘Ocalan’ figure. They also represent a smaller portion of the population (nine percent) and systematic segregation has ethnically fragmented them. As a consequence, autonomy is a new prospect. Nonetheless, the demand is for decentralization, without going as far as federalism. Syrian Kurds want a united but decentralized Damascus (to prevent strong Arab nationalist leaders from repeating history) which would grant Allawites, Druze, and other minorities similar rights. To them, simply being able to teach Kurdish or publish Kurdish in media outlets is a triumph.

As the movement continues, however, there is no doubt that demands will increase, particularly if a new Sunni (and possibly Islamist) regime in Damascus does not respect or grant enough rights for Syrian Kurds. The fuel for this is distrust of any Arab regime, caused by a history of trauma. The Supreme Kurdish Council opposes, for example, any new state to be called a ‘Syrian Arab Republic’, opting instead for a ‘United Syrian Republic’. Signs of a shaky Arab-Kurd future are already clear. This can be seen from the tense atmosphere that ultimately led to the KNC walking out of the Cairo conference on 2 July because the Arab Syrian opposition refused to incorporate the term ‘Kurdish Nation’.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Dr. Hakim, echoing Sieda’s point, argues that decentralization “is the best formula to achieve stability in Syria and if this option is rejected...we should expect the worst-case scenario in Syria even after the fall of the regime.”<sup>xxxv</sup> If the new Syria does not accept the Kurds, warns Dr. Semo, “the Kurds will have no choice but to go along with Turkish and Iraqi Kurds.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## Conclusion

Although the Syrian Kurd success is riddled with concern, for the moment this doomsday scenario is not a necessary outcome. In fact, the leadership remains optimistic at the prospect of decentralization under a United Syria. Sieda reassures that “they [the opposition] are insisting on respecting the rights of minorities in Syria and they are

loudly saying that the future of Syria should be civilized, based on the foundation of citizenship.<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, as this report has outlined, a bitter history rooted in Arab nationalist regimes unites the Syrian Kurdish opposition parties, which have found an external patron in Erbil. And Erbil, in turn is interested in promoting a stable and friendly Syrian Kurdistan.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup>This was also an opportunity for Assad to retaliate against Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition, by allowing the potential reestablishment of PKK bases in Syria. P. Escobar (2012) 'Could a State for Greater Kurdistan be on the Horizon', Al Jazeera English, 02 September,

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/2012828102534412824.html>> (accessed 02 September 2012), p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> This is partly due to the role that kinship plays in Kurdish society. Also, each of the 4 Kurdistans have had completely different national projects moving their trajectories further apart. With regards to Syrian Kurdistan, decades of Arab nationalist assimilation and segregation weakened the group's unity. For a review, see M. Van Bruinessen (1998), *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books).

<sup>iii</sup> K. Yildiz (2005) *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (London: Pluto Press), p. 31.

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*, p. 34.

<sup>v</sup> For example, Kobani became 'Ain al-Arab'.

<sup>vi</sup> Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, p. 35.

<sup>vii</sup> For a review of the Syrian Kurd political parties, see O. Hossino and I. Tanir (2012) 'The Decisive Minority: The Role of Syria's Kurds in the Anti-Assad Revolution', *Henry Jackson Society Report*.

<sup>viii</sup> Habits of statehood afforded to the KRG include the right to have a security force (*peshmerga*), the ban of Iraqi troops from entering their Kurdish Region, and a Kurdistan Regional Government free to exercise foreign policy and oil contracts on new oil fields.

<sup>ix</sup> Author interview with Hemin Hawrami (1 September 2012)

<sup>x</sup> J. Araf (2012) 'Iraqi Kurds Trains their Syrian Brethren', Al Jazeera 23 July <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/07/201272393251722498.html>> (accessed 1 September 2012), p. 1.

<sup>xi</sup> Author interview with Abdul Basit Sieda (24 August 2012)

<sup>xii</sup> Author interview with anonymous source (Summer 2012). This was corroborated and widely spread in the Syrian Kurd media.

<sup>xiii</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Although it should be noted that Barzani has seemingly had difficulty maintaining PKK activities within his own borders, the PKK can still be used by Erbil as a bargaining chip on the negotiation table with a much-stronger Turkey. In essence, the Iraqi Kurd leadership wants to have control of this destabilizing tool.

<sup>xv</sup> Author interview with Hemin Hawrami (1 September 2012)

<sup>xvi</sup> Author interview with Abdul Hakim Bashar (30 August 2012)

<sup>xvii</sup> Author interview with Alan Semo (23 August 2012)

<sup>xviii</sup> A. Marcus (2012) 'Kurds in the New Middle East', *The National Interest*, 22 August, <<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/kurds-the-new-middle-east-7377>> (accessed 22 August 2012), p. 2.

<sup>xix</sup> Author interview with Abdul Basit Sieda (24 August 2012)

<sup>xx</sup> J. Araf (2012) 'Q&A: Iraqi Kurdish Leader Massoud Barzani', Al Jazeera English, 30 July,

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/07/201272991311907942.html>> (accessed 30 July 2012), p. 1.

<sup>xxi</sup> P. Markey (2012) 'Analysis: Syria border standoff a new front in Iraqi Kurdish Rift', Reuters, 8 August, <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/08/08/us-syria-crisis-iraq-kurdistan-idINBRE8770IX20120808>> (accessed 22 August 2012), p. 1.

<sup>xxii</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government (2012), 'موقف رئاسة إقليم كردستان من توصيات اللجنة المشكلة', KRG Press Release, 4 September

<<http://krg.org/articles/detail.asp?lngnr=14&smap=01010100&nr=81&nr=45159>> (accessed 4 September 2012), p. 1.

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution calls for a three-stage process: first, the return of displaced Kurds to Kirkuk, second, the removal of Saddam's imported Arabs, and third, a referendum to determine Kirkuk's final status by 31st December 2007. The 2010 Erbil Agreement that formed Iraq's current government involved promises to abide by Article 140. This is not to be confused with the July 2012 Erbil Agreement that united the KNC and the PYD.

<sup>xxiv</sup> A. Abdulmajid (2012) 'Kurdish Parties Walk out of Syrian Opposition Conference in Caire', Rudaw, 5 July, <<http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4922.htm>> (accessed 20 August 2012), p. 1.

<sup>xxv</sup> Author interview with Abdul Hakim Bashar (30 August 2012)

<sup>xxvi</sup> Author interview with Alan Semo (23 August 2012)

<sup>xxvii</sup> Author interview with Abdul Basit Sieda (24 August 2012)

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