

Kick-off Paper
Syria

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States such as Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Israel, the United States, and Russia, among others; and non-states such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, including even more its two main political parties the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and European Union (EU), among others, are all examples of transnational actors who have been influencing the Syrian Kurds' bid for autonomy, a situation brought on by the Syrian civil war.

States

Turkey. Until recently Turkey has taken an almost schizophrenic attitude toward the Kurds, fearing that their national claims would potentially destroy Turkish territorial integrity. Khoybun's backing from its political base in Syria of the Ararat rebellion in Turkey from 1927-1930 illustrated that this fear of the Kurds was not entirely misplaced. The failed Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in Iran in 1946 under its revered leader Qazi Muhammad still resonates in the development of transnational Kurdish nationalism including among the Kurds in Syria. In September 2013, another pan-Kurdish conference that would include prominent representation from

the Syrian Kurds was postponed, but is now scheduled to take place in Irbil in November 2013.

It is only recently that Turkey has come to see the possibilities of cooperation with the KRG and even began formal negotiations with the PKK in January 2013. These initiatives already have had important effects on the Kurds in Syria by leading Turkey to take a somewhat less hostile attitude toward the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD), by far the most important Syrian Kurdish party today. Indeed, Ankara has played a key role in assisting the opposition in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian National Council (before it was succeeded by the Syrian National Coalition in November 2012) was founded and largely based in Istanbul, while the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) maintains its nominal headquarters in southeastern Turkey.

However, in indiscriminately supporting the FSA, Turkey also has been aiding Jabhat al-Nursaand the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda that are part of the Syrian opposition, but opposed to the Syrian Kurds, who claim they are pursuing a third path that is independent of the Assad regime and the opposition in the Syrian civil war. The PYD already has clashed on numerous occasions with these Turkish-backed al-Qaeda militants in Kurdish populated areas of Syria.

In a surprise visit to Ankara on July 26, 2013, Salih Muslim, the *serokor* leader of the PYD, assured the Turkish authorities that the Syrian Kurds continued to see themselves as part of Syria and posed no threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. However, he did add that the Kurds in Syria needed to establish "a temporary serving administration till the chaos in Syria is over."

Others. To the extent that their intervention into the Syrian civil war also impacts the Kurds in Syria, the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Britain, France, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel, among others, including the European Union (EU), of course, also are involved transnational state actors today.

United States. The United States has long viewed Syria with caution and often hostility as a radical Arab state sponsor of international terrorism and implacable foe of Israel. As of this writing in October 2013, the United States had the following priorities in Syria. 1.) Respond successfully to the regime's probable chemical attack against elements of the opposition on August 21, 2013. 2.) Protect Israel. 3.) Oppose Iran. 4.) Curb al-Qaeda. 5. Maintain Syrian unity.

On the other hand, by opposing Kurdish autonomy in Syria as leading to secessionism and to please its NATO ally Turkey, the United States might find itself weakening a potential secular Kurdish ally that was successfully combating the terrorist al-Qaeda-affiliated enemies of America. This was so even in the case where as of this writing the United States had hesitated to give heavy military equipment to the opposition fearing that it would fall into anti-Western, Jihadist/Salafist hands. However, by remaining aloof the United States in effect ironically favored the Assad regime, which its ally Turkey opposed but its enemy Iran supported.

In July 2013, however, the United States did see fit to denounce the PKK-affiliated PYD for clashes in the town of Amuda in which the PYD had killed several Kurds from other parties. Probably in deference to its Turkish ally, the United States has also opposed the PYD's plans to establish some kind of Kurdish administration in the areas of Syria they now dominate.

However, the PYD claims it has been in hopeful contact with the United States over the issue. Indeed, Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, has appealed to both the United States and Europe to support the Kurds against their common al-Qaeda affiliated enemy in the Syrian civil war. "I

want the American public and the entire world to know that we are trying to stop these jihadist groups, and we want them to stand with us. These people attack innocent civilians and kill children, women and old people simply because they are Kurds.”

The PKK. The PYD’s very existence illustrates the importance of examining transnational actors as it owes its very existence to the PKK, which created it in 2003. And of course the PKK was formally created in Turkey in November 1978, headquartered in Syria from 1979-1998, and then moved to the Qandil Mountains on the northeastern Iraqi border with Iran where it still finds sanctuary while also being active throughout a large Kurdish diaspora, particularly in Europe.

Even though the Kurds in Syria avoided armed struggle until the current civil war began, for almost two decades the Assad regime sheltered and permitted the PKK to grow in Syria. The dialogue of the deaf between Turkey and Syria over this issue finally came to an end in October 1998 when Turkey threatened to go to war unless Syria expelled the PKK. After almost two decades of existence in Syria, however, a potential base remained among the sympathetic population. In October 2003, the PKK in effect reincarnated its Syria branch under the new name Democratic Union

Party (PYD), leaving out the term Kurdistan or even Kurdish, nomenclature that might have been chosen to appease the Syrian authorities.

Although the PYD denies any organic links to the PKK, the connection is illustrated institutionally by the PYD being one of the constituent members of the *KomoCivaken Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union, an umbrella organization created by the PKK around 2005 that supposedly unites the PKK with a host of other Kurdish organizations including those in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Europe.

Further illustrating the PKK/Syrian connection, one study found that as of 2007, 20 percent of the PKK's troops stationed in the QandilMountians were of Syrian origin, while at the same time FehmanHuseyin (Dr. BahozErdal, his nom de guerre in reference to being a dentist) is a Syrian Kurd who formerly commanded the *HezenParastina Gel* (HPG) or Peoples Defense Force, the PKK's military arm. Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, also said that his party had discussed the first draft of a proposed interim government for the Syrian Kurds with the PKK as well as the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

The Iraqi Kurds.First as political parties (the KDP and PUK), but also since its creation in 1992 and constitutional recognition in 2003 as the

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Iraqi Kurds have played a crucial role as transnational actors interacting with and influencing the Syrian Kurds. As Mishaal Tammo, the subsequently assassinated leader of the Kurdish Future Movement (Party) in Syria, once explained: “The Iraqi war liberated us from a culture of fear. . . . People saw a Kurd [Jalal Talabani] become the president of Iraq and began demanding their cultural and political rights in Syria.”

When Jalal Talabani became president of Iraq on April 6, 2005, Kurds living in Damascus played the pan-Kurdish national anthem *EyReqib*, in celebration. Thus, *EyReqib*'s popularity among the Kurds in Syria illustrates how they feel part of the transnational Kurdish nation. Shortly after Talabani became president of Iraq, the now empowered Massoud Barzani, as newly chosen president of the KRG, called upon Syria to grant the Kurds in Syria their democratic rights. Barzani's actions were a definite break from his past subservience to Syria on this matter.