



*Demonstrators in Qamishli protest Turkey's October 2019 invasion of northern Syria. Photo: Reuters*



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## PROSPECTS FOR SYRIAN KURDISH UNITY

### Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics

In June 2020, representatives of two major Syrian Kurdish political blocs came together in Hasaka to announce a new understanding to govern the country's northeast.<sup>1</sup> The U.S.-supported announcement effectively ended nearly six years of estrangement between the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has de facto ruled a nascent, semiautonomous Kurdish region, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which has been its de facto opposition.

Mediating the first phase of these talks was the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which seeks to be as neutral as circumstances will allow—not only for this process but for whatever comes next for the region. The U.S.-backed SDF was persuaded by American officials to serve in this mediating role and has been trying to present itself as an apolitical entity, despite its clear affiliation with the PYD.<sup>2</sup>



Turkey's October 2019 incursion in northeast Syria, which followed the partial U.S. withdrawal earlier the same month, prompted the SDF to suggest forming a unified governing body. If the Turkish invasion offered any lesson, it was that the PYD alone cannot run the show in northeast Syria. On the one hand, a swift change was needed to produce a more representative governing system in the area, as viewed by SDF mediators. On the other, Washington believed it could use its leverage as a splint after the U.S. troop withdrawal and subsequent Turkish invasion. The U.S. objective is to establish in SDF-held areas a representative administration that could prevent further Turkish military interventions while also reducing Russian and Syrian-regime influences.

#### Acronyms for Major Kurdish Players

<b>KNC</b>	Kurdish National Council (Syria)
<b>KRG</b>	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
<b>PYD</b>	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
<b>SDF</b>	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>YPG</b>	People's Defense Units (PYD military wing, Syria)

The dominant PYD and its military wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG)<sup>3</sup>—Syrian affiliates of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—have long had stark political-ideological differences with the KNC, which has close ties with the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan. Such differences, stemming mainly from the very rivalry among the groups' regional Kurdish benefactors, have been exacerbated in the past few years. The recent PYD-KNC meeting, though triggered by internal threats from the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his allies, and by external ones posed by Turkey and its Syrian proxies, nonetheless hints at a new era of compromise and dialogue between the two rivals.

## HISTORY OF KURDISH POLITICS IN SYRIA

Kurdish politics in Syria has never been local. Since the establishment of the country's first Kurdish political party in 1957 and even before, Syrian Kurds have been influenced and inspired by political movements in other Kurdish regions, most notably in Iraq and Turkey. Starting in 2011, Syria's conflict and subsequent events leading to a semiautonomous Kurdish-led region have not only continued that trend but enhanced the notion among Syrian Kurds that reliance on other non-Syrian Kurdish actors is inevitable for political survival. Before the Syrian uprising, this dependence provided protection from the Assad regime—Bashar and his father, Hafiz, before him. After the war, however, it meant furthering Kurdish political gains during the Syrian conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, any outcome of the ongoing Syrian Kurdish unity talks depends largely on how much the regional patrons of both sides are willing to contribute, for either good or ill. Given the immense influence of the PKK and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on Syrian Kurdish politics, its understanding of the importance of a united Kurdish front in Syria is key to the success of any PYD-KNC talks.

### Developments During the Syrian Uprising

The 2011 protest movement against the Syrian regime surprised almost everyone in the country, although Kurds were perhaps more prepared than other groups to organize themselves, considering their previous confrontation with the government in March 2004. In this episode, which came to be known as the Qamishli uprising, a soccer riot pitted local fans in the predominantly Kurdish city against supporters of a team from Deir al-Zour. The confrontation escalated into clashes in which Syrian-government security services opened fire on Kurdish protestors, killing dozens of them.<sup>5</sup>

In the early days of the 2011 uprising, Kurdish youth were quick to organize, forming local committees to coordinate efforts with antigovernment activists elsewhere in Syria. For example, the Union of Kurdish Youth Coordination Committees took the lead in the antigovernment protest movement across Kurdish cities and towns, reaching out to youth groups in major Syrian cities such as Damascus and Homs to unify their political demands.<sup>6</sup>

The traditional Kurdish political movement, mainly represented by parties affiliated with the KRG and PKK, was not as quick to react to the unfolding situation in Syria. By October 2011, however, Kurdish political parties had declared the formation of the KNC, after a few months of intensive high-level deliberation. The very birth of the KNC represented a starting point for widening rifts between its constituent parties and the PYD; indeed, the PYD refused to join the new bloc, citing disagreements with smaller parties over its appropriate level of representation. The core problem, which later became apparent, was that the PYD had already set its sights on controlling the region, wholly separate from other Kurdish groups.

In December 2011, the PYD formed its own bloc, naming it the People's Council of Western Kurdistan. The council also included some smaller parties as well as women and youth groups within the PKK's ideological orbit. Earlier that year, the PYD had established the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), largely considered a designer of policies for the PYD and its allies.<sup>7</sup>

Under public pressure and striving to establish robust control in Kurdish-controlled Syrian areas to combat the rising chaos elsewhere in the country, the PYD and KNC held formal meetings in July 2012 in Erbil, capital of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The meetings, sponsored by then KRG president Masoud Barzani, led to agreement on the following points:

- To adopt the Erbil Communique, the document resulting from the 2012 meeting, and build on it to activate the provisions included therein and to set up the necessary mechanisms for its implementation<sup>8</sup>
- To form a joint higher body (the Kurdish Supreme Committee whose task would be to draw up general policy and lead the Kurdish movement in this crucial phase, and to adopt the principle of parity in the structure of all committees and consensus in the decisionmaking process
- To form three (administrative, military, and political) specialized committees to follow up on the field work
- To stop media campaigns between the two sides in all forms.
- To prohibit violence and reject all practices that lead to tensions in the Kurdish areas
- To adopt the bylaw attached to the Erbil Communique, which includes working mechanisms
- To form the above-mentioned committees within two weeks from the date of signing the agreement
- [The notion that] this agreement is an integrated text, and it is not permissible to breach any of its terms that have been approved by the two parties

As soon as the two delegations returned to Syria from Erbil after signing the agreement, problems resurfaced: the KNC accused the PYD of monopolizing the real power, and the PYD charged the KNC with incompetence and inability to keep up its end of the bargain.

In July 2012, when the Syrian regime withdrew its troops from the Kurdish regions to focus on fighting the opposition elsewhere in the country, the YPG

swiftly took over most towns in northern Syria. The regime, however, maintained a small presence in the two strategic cities of Hasaka and Qamishli, including at the latter's international airport. Whether it was a planned handover between the YPG and the Assad regime or an inevitable withdrawal remains debatable to this day.<sup>9</sup>

The following months witnessed increased tensions between the PYD and the KNC. Despite joint—albeit minimal—efforts to implement the Erbil agreement through setting up checkpoints at city entrances across the region, the YPG and the small armed groups affiliated with the KNC simply could not work together. This lack of cooperation reflected the deep differences that had existed between the two sides since the early days of Syria's uprising. Although they were clearly mismatched in terms of size and combat skills, the YPG was still building its military prowess and lacked the means to sideline the much smaller and less well-organized armed units affiliated with KNC parties. The YPG needed more time and resources to consolidate its grip on the region, and thus allowed the KNC affiliates to retain their limited power while it lasted.<sup>10</sup>

Strong ties between the YPG and PKK bolstered the former's gradual ascent to power in Kurdish Syria. Experienced, organized, and disciplined, the PKK fighters who were transferred to Syria played a major role in strengthening the YPG's regional influence. The PKK was also instrumental, at least initially, in providing weaponry to its Syrian affiliate. But with the PYD taking control of certain revenue-generating resources, such as oil and grain, the YPG quickly built itself into a force that no longer needed materiel support from the PKK. Imposing military conscription on the local Kurdish population also helped the YPG beef up its ranks with young fighters, a means preferable to its former reliance on non-Syrian PKK fighters largely from Turkey and Iran.

Growing tensions between the PYD and the KNC required another intervention by Barzani, who insisted

on involving an Erbil-friendly faction in the administration of Syrian Kurdistan. Thus, the PYD and KNC met in Erbil for a second time, in December 2013. Details of the new agreement were no different from those of its predecessor. The new agreement merely emphasized preserving the Kurdish Supreme Committee as the sole governing body of the Kurdish region in Syria. The new accord, known later as the Erbil II Agreement, was doomed to fail. The two sides refused to cooperate on practical issues, and the Supreme Committee remained dysfunctional, causing more indignation among the Kurdish populace.

One point agreed on during the Erbil meeting has largely held. As part of the 2012 agreement, the PYD pledged not to use its area to launch attacks on Turkey. Barzani insisted on this provision, which both parties to the deal accepted, as his goal was to show his Turkish allies just how much leverage he has in Syria. Ensuring that the YPG would not send weapons or other support to PKK fighters inside Turkey was indicative of Barzani's efforts to seal the deal.

For the most part, the PYD and its military wing have kept their word. Border areas controlled by Kurdish fighters on the Syrian side have largely been protected. And Turkey, which was already fortifying its Syrian frontier, has erected cement walls along much of the border it shares with the YPG.

The YPG takeover of the region overlapped with the beginning of an immigration wave among the Syrian Kurdish community. Unlike many parts of Syria, the Syrian Kurdistan Region did not experience much fighting in the early days of the Syrian war, so the decision by many to leave for Iraqi Kurdistan or Turkey owed largely to reasons other than escaping violence. Some sensed that the YPG's nearly peaceful control of the region was only a prelude to a lengthy conflict, so they made the preemptive decision to leave. Others simply no longer saw the prospect of a better future for themselves and their children under PYD-YPG rule, and thus moved to the more

prosperous and stable Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>11</sup> More noticeably, many young Kurds left the region to avoid YPG's military conscription.

However, subsequent battles between the YPG and the opposition fighters of the Free Syrian Army in places such as Ras al-Ain in 2013, as well as the Islamic State's attempt to occupy the town of Kobane in 2014, forced thousands of civilians to make the flight to either Iraqi Kurdistan or Turkey. More recent events such as the Turkish invasion of Afrin in 2018 and of Ras al-Ain in 2019 turned many more Syrian Kurds into refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 243,000 Syrians—the vast majority of whom are Kurds—live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (as of August 2020).<sup>12</sup>

## THE DUHOK AGREEMENT AS A BASIS

Acute disagreements between the KNC and PYD escalated as the latter unilaterally declared the Democratic Autonomous Administration in January 2014, effectively discarding the Erbil II Agreement. The following months saw even greater tension between the two sides before they met again in Duhok, in Iraqi Kurdistan, at Barzani's urging. After a week of intensive meetings, some of which Barzani attended, a new deal—known as the Duhok Agreement—was announced in October 2014.

Although much of what the new agreement specified was already contained in the two previous deals, one major point was introduced for the first time. The Duhok Agreement stipulated the establishment of a political reference "*marjaiya*"<sup>13</sup> made up of thirty-two individuals: twelve from each side and the remaining eight from other groups that were not part of the deal. According to the agreement, this thirty-two-member body would be responsible for designing generic strategies, presenting a unifying stance, and setting up a real partnership among the

different commissions within the Democratic Autonomous Administration.

The new unity talks emphasize the Duhok Agreement as a foundation for the negotiating process between the PYD and the KNC. One of its main elements, which has long been a point of contention, is the return of eight thousand KRG-based Syrian Kurdish fighters, known collectively as Rojava Peshmerga.

The Rojava Peshmerga force was founded in March 2012 by Barzani's KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan, with the intent of deploying the fighters to Syria to protect the Kurdish community. The force largely comprises Syrian Kurdish military officers and soldiers who defected from the Syrian army after the outbreak of the uprising. Many other Syrian Kurds residing in Iraqi Kurdistan have joined the force over the years. This Peshmerga group has participated in major battles against the Islamic State (IS) in the Nineveh Plains and other parts of northern Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

Although the PYD and the SDF refuse to have two military powers in the northeast, the latter has expressed willingness to include the Rojava Peshmerga within its ranks where it remains in command. The KNC, however, demands a restructuring of the SDF in which the military power is equally shared between the two sides. "We won't sign any agreement without a military partnership," said Sulaiman Oso, a leading member of the KNC negotiating team. "Rojava Peshmerga would return as an independent military force under a joint military command with the SDF," he stressed.<sup>15</sup>

A senior SDF commander, however, said the soldiers' return would be possible only if they agreed to be under the SDF command. "They could certainly come back, after all they are Syrian Kurds," he said, adding that "the Rojava Peshmerga could keep their structure as many non-Kurdish military groups such as Jaish al-Thuwar have done so under the banner of SDF."<sup>16</sup> Settling this issue would largely determine the outcome of the PYD-KNC unity talks.

Another contentious issue following the June 2020 talks involves the military conscription imposed by the Autonomous Administration on men ages eighteen to thirty since November 2014. The compulsory military service law has gone through several iterations in recent years. Currently, it requires those drafted to complete twelve months of service as part of the self-defense units.<sup>17</sup> These units at times have participated in battles against IS in eastern Syria.

The KNC wants to abolish military conscription, arguing that such a law has forced thousands of young Syrian Kurds to emigrate from the region.<sup>18</sup> The PYD, however, insists that compulsory military service has been essential in protecting the region from IS and other forces. During a round of talks in September 2020, the PYD reportedly conveyed to the KNC that eliminating military conscription is out of the question.<sup>19</sup> It remains to be seen whether the two sides can reach a compromise on this issue.

## DIVERGENT VIEWS ON GOVERNANCE

Despite various attempts to work together, the PYD and the KNC have always had different views when it comes to adopting a governance model for Syria's northeast. Such differences are a main factor in their fragmentation.

Since the establishment of the Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria, the PYD and its affiliates have been clear about their way of governing. Their local administration is directly modeled after PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's teachings on self-rule. During the early years of his imprisonment, which began in 1999 and continues today, Ocalan was heavily influenced by the writings of Murray Bookchin, a leftist theorist and philosopher. Bookchin (1921–2006) spent his career advocating an anti-capitalistic vision of an ecological and egalitarian society, arguing that capitalism “was a blight on society from the moment it began to rise.”<sup>20</sup> His proposed

alternative was to build an economy based on human needs and to establish grassroots assemblies aimed at empowering people at the local level.<sup>21</sup> Bookchin's doctrine, sometimes referred to as “democratic confederalism” or the “democratic nation,” has become a banner for the PYD, the YPG, and ultimately the SDF.<sup>22</sup>

In 2003, the PKK and its offshoots in Syria and Iran softened some of their nationalistic slogans, such as “liberating and unifying the Greater Kurdistan,” and began incorporating Bookchin's ideas into an already left-leaning ideology.<sup>23</sup> The PYD takeover of the Syrian Kurdish regions in 2012 employed some of those ideas for the first time. The social contract introduced by the newly established Autonomous Administration as a local constitution generously embraced terms borrowed from Ocalan and Bookchin and immediately put them into practice. It was an ideological experiment, the results of which were anxiously anticipated by its supporters.<sup>24</sup>

This grassroots, gender-based form of governance was not entirely well received by the local Kurdish population, who, despite its secular tendencies, still found such ideas foreign after years of suffering and marginalization under authoritarian Baath rule. The reality was that the PYD had cherry-picked ideas from Bookchin's writings in a way that fit its specific ideological narrative. For example, the PYD refused to fully accept political parties that disagreed with it. The KNC, with a significant popular base, was not included in any governing body. Activists were regularly arrested for expressing their political views. Conversely, the governing system has introduced new economic concepts to local Kurds. For instance, the commune model has played an important role in providing essential services in neighborhoods. The PYD has also established new cooperatives in certain sectors, such as food supply and electricity, despite challenges presented by the ongoing conflict in Syria. The effectiveness of such attempts at new governance has been tested in the past few years; as such, the population's receptivity has varied with the dynamics of Syria's war economy.

Given the fluidity of the overall political and security situation in the Kurdish region specifically and in Syria more generally, the PYD has not been able to fully implement the changes it had initially envisioned for the areas under its control. The current status of northeast Syria, therefore, indicates a hybrid system of local government.

The KNC, however, has espoused a different vision for governance in the Kurdish region. Since its inception in 2011, the political bloc has gone through several ideological convolutions. The fact that KNC is a coalition of multiple parties with slightly different ideologies is a challenge. For instance, the two dominant parties within the KNC, the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (KDP-S) and the Yekiti, have distinct ideological backgrounds. The KDP-S is the oldest ally of Barzani in Syria. It represents conservative political values, particularly in areas with geographic and social ties to Iraqi Kurdistan. The Yekiti, however, represents a once-powerful Syrian Kurdish left—outside of the PYD structure. Other, much smaller parties in the KNC, largely the by-products of splits and breakaways—a chronic affliction in the Kurdish political movement in Syria—are abiding subordinates of either the KDP-S or the Yekiti. Despite its multifaceted nature, the KNC has had one constant: a strong rejection of the PYD’s “democratic nation” project for governance.

In December 2016, the KNC released its vision for Syrian Kurdistan. The 115-article manifesto was widely regarded as the group’s proposal for a constitution for the Kurdish region. The proposal in many ways intersected with the PYD’s social contract, especially on issues such as federalism, minority rights, political pluralism, and the overall vision for the future Syrian state.<sup>25</sup>

Another contributing factor in the widening KNC-PYD rift is the groups’ respective alliances with the mainstream Arab opposition blocs. In June 2011, the PYD helped establish the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), which is generally

considered Syria’s internal, regime-friendly opposition. More than two years later, in November 2013, the KNC became part of the Turkey-based National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or Etilaf; Arabic for coalition), which strongly opposes the PYD and its system.<sup>26</sup>

In January 2016, the PYD suspended its NCB membership to focus on working with the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC).<sup>27</sup> It has moved on to forge new nationwide alliances with other non-Kurdish groups, while the KNC has opted to maintain its relationships with other groups within the Etilaf. This stance has caused further fissures within the KNC, in particular among hardliners who remain reluctant about the ongoing unity talks.

Another important point is that the PYD could not rely only on its core supporters to run the governing body it had established for the region. Although most sensitive positions were limited to longtime cadres of the party, the PYD also sought help from experts who did not necessarily subscribe to the group’s political ideology. Many politically independent professionals in the region joined the new local administration for two reasons. The first was belief: some genuinely felt that the new experiment, with proper support, would eventually lead to a more substantial system of government. The second was purely economic: as the war continued, many people with college degrees were left jobless. The Autonomous Administration offered a glimmer of hope to those who decided not to leave the country. Even some KNC supporters took administrative positions within the Autonomous Administration, mostly for the above-mentioned reasons.

When the PYD and its allies announced the Autonomous Administration in 2014, they established twenty-two commissions that acted as de facto ministries (see appendix). The Education Commission, for example, has thus far been the largest civilian employer in the Autonomous Administration. As of August 2020, it had nearly 20,000 employees,

including teachers, principals, and other education workers in the cities of Qamishli and Hasaka alone.<sup>28</sup> Adopting a curriculum in Kurdish, Syriac, and Arabic, the administration gradually introduced a new education system for elementary to high school students. The commission also sponsored several higher education institutions, including three universities, one of which was shut down after the Turkish invasion of Afrin in the northwest in January 2018.<sup>29</sup>

Realistically, the PYD administration, which lacked sufficient political support to run the government on its own, had to rely on other, non-PYD Kurds to administer its various branches. In fact, a few weeks before the intra-Kurdish talks between the KNC and the PYD in June 2020, the latter announced a new alliance with smaller Kurdish parties.<sup>30</sup> These parties were a mix of (1) KNC breakaways that had already been part of the PYD's Autonomous Administration and (2) groups that had been founded only after the establishment of the administration, during the Syrian conflict. The objective behind this new alliance was to give the impression that the PYD was not alone in negotiating any new deal with the KNC.

## THE UNITED STATES

Since the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, the U.S. objective in Syria has been to eliminate the group. As such, the U.S. relationship with the YPG and, by extension, the PYD has centered on that goal. Everything else, including reaching a political resolution in Syria, is secondary. The YPG and later the SDF have been unique partners for the U.S. military. The American inclination to work with the SDF was largely attributable to the Kurdish-led group's willingness and capability to take on IS militants with no preconditions. The U.S. military found this relationship to be effective as it sought to push out IS from major cities in eastern

Syria, including Raqqa, the jihadist group's de facto capital.

Maintaining a stable relationship with the YPG and the SDF was important for the U.S. military to ensure the continuity of the war on the Islamic State. Often, U.S. military officials praised the SDF for its effectiveness in the war on IS. When the U.S. military carried out a mission to kill the group's founder, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October 2019, it made sure to express gratitude to the Syrian Kurdish forces who had supported the raid. Even President Donald Trump himself thanked the Kurds when he announced the killing of Baghdadi.<sup>31</sup>

The PYD tried to translate that U.S. military backing into political support, which the group would use to demonstrate its legitimacy both internally and externally. Such efforts were futile, however, as the United States wanted to maintain this distinction in response to Turkey's growing concerns about Washington's new alliance with the YPG.

In June 2020, however, Ambassador William Roebuck, the deputy envoy to the global coalition to defeat IS and the top State Department official in northeast Syria, was present during the announcement of the PYD-KNC understanding. His attendance was significant, and Roebuck even made a statement in support of the talks. The U.S. embassy in Damascus also issued a statement supporting the talks, including a translation in Kurdish.<sup>32</sup>

But these moves, despite their symbolic importance, should not suggest a shifting U.S. policy toward the Kurds, or in Syria by extension. Since 2016, the United States has been trying to establish an effective governing body in eastern Syria as part of its post-IS stabilization efforts. Initially, the thinking went, U.S. forces would not only help liberate towns and cities across the region and then move on, but also make genuine efforts to bring about political change at the local level. That change, including good governance

and effective services, would ultimately prevent the reemergence of circumstances that had helped foster IS in the early stages of the Syrian conflict.

The clear objective for Washington was to bring together Arab and Kurdish communities in northern and eastern Syria, where Kurdish forces led militarily, while Arabs oversaw local affairs in Arab-majority areas in Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zour provinces. By doing so, the United States would ensure that IS militants had no access to oil revenues that could help them regroup and pose new threats in the region. During his September 2020 visit to northeast Syria, James F. Jeffrey—the U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS—met with leaders in the intra-Kurdish dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey expressed U.S. support for the talks and urged both sides to overcome their differences and reach tangible results.<sup>34</sup>

For the United States, keeping Turkish forces at bay could be another reason for wanting to bring the PYD and the KNC together, in hopes that Ankara would be satisfied with having a Turkey-friendly group—the KNC—involved in running northeast Syria. But it would take more than bringing the two Kurdish sides together for Washington to convince Turkey, which is why Roebuck's and the subsequent statement from the U.S. embassy in Damascus emphasized the inclusion of other communities in broader talks over the future of northeast Syria.

The Turkish invasion of the Kurdish-held towns of Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad in October 2019 accelerated Washington's plan to take practical steps in that direction. And formally supporting the PYD-KNC talks was perhaps a message from the United States that its intention to help establish a more inclusive administration in northeast Syria was serious.

Washington has made it abundantly clear that U.S. troops will remain in parts of eastern Syria to protect the region's oil fields and to prevent IS and the Syrian

regime from accessing them. In its 2021 defense budget, the United States proposes to continue funding the SDF in the joint effort to combat IS in eastern Syria. In fact, the United States intends to continue supporting the SDF in terms of capacity building and combat skills.<sup>35</sup>

Before and after the United States introduced Caesar sanctions against the Assad regime, American officials notified their Kurdish partners that the northeast would be protected from the impact of the sanctions. Those promises apparently were fulfilled by the oil deal that was signed between an American company—Delta Crescent Energy LLC—and the SDF. The deal would help the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)—as the entity was renamed in 2019—explore, refine, and even export oil more effectively. According to a senior Kurdish official, part of the agreement specifies the building of a modern refinery in northeast Syria, at the cost of \$150 million. U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo confirmed that the deal would modernize oil fields in northeast Syria. Having secured approval by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, the American company will operate in areas under SDF control.<sup>36</sup>

The United States believes that supporting an inclusive AANES in northeast Syria will mean nothing in the absence of a strong local economy—one that does not depend entirely on Damascus. Since taking control of the region and throughout the difficult years of the war on IS, Kurds have heavily relied on the regime for most commodities. The only outlet to the outside world has been the Semalka border crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan. Semalka itself, however, is not a formal border point; rather, it was opened in 2013 to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to those inside Syria. Over the years, Semalka has served as a lifeline for the Autonomous Administration and the three million people living under its rule. At times, though, Semalka has been used as a tool for political pressure—both by the PYD on the Syrian side and the

KDP on the Iraqi side. For example, the crossing has been closed several times as tensions have increased between the PYD and the KNC, reflecting Semalka's regional impact on local Kurdish politics in Syria.

Over the years, the PYD has sent crude oil to the Assad regime. The United States, recognizing the need to keep the local economy in northeast Syria going, has turned a blind eye to such activity. Under the new deal, however, not only would Assad be denied access to oil fields, but the PYD would not be selling him any crude.

The AANES heavily relies on oil revenues for its survival. A robust, modern, U.S.-supported oil sector in northeast Syria will lead to greater economic independence for the Autonomous Administration, while offering Syrian Kurds political leverage to increase commercial movement through Semalka. Maintaining Semalka's stability will give the Autonomous Administration further independence from the Assad regime, which does not recognize the border crossing and has occasionally called for its closure.

Including the KNC in the Autonomous Administration would put the KDP and the KRG at ease for future dealings with the Kurdish entity in Syria. In fact, it was for this reason that Barzani fully supported the recent talks. Given the ongoing economic crisis in the KRG, KDP officials now recognize the importance of trade with Syria's Kurdish region.

In short, a stable and reconciled Kurdish-led entity in the northeast would not only serve U.S. stabilization efforts in eastern Syria, but also give a snapshot of positive change for American involvement in the country. If eastern Syria is stabilized, other regions in the south protesting Assad's failed political and economic policies—areas that include Deraa and Suwayda—could establish ties with the Autonomous Administration and leverage U.S. support to gradually marginalize Assad. Idlib, too, could benefit from cooperating with the AANES—that is, if Arabs and Kurds can overcome the political tensions between them.

## TURKEY

The battle for Kobane in 2014 helped spark a new Turkish approach toward the YPG. As Kurdish fighters desperately defended the last few quarters of Kobane against an Islamic State onslaught, Turkish officials were busy making early predictions about the city's fall to the group.<sup>37</sup>

Whether under pressure or not, Turkey still allowed the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga to militarily support the YPG against IS in Kobane. About two hundred Peshmerga fighters, with a convoy of thirty-eight vehicles carrying heavy weaponry and supplies, entered Turkey and headed to the border area with Kobane to fight in the battle against IS.<sup>38</sup> Turkey also accepted YPG help to transfer the Tomb of Suleyman Shah from Syria across the border.<sup>39</sup>

When the Turkish government began peace talks with the PKK in 2013, Ankara reluctantly agreed to the PYD and YPG's running much of northern Syria. After all, the YPG presence in northern Syria, to a certain degree, secured Turkey's southern border. In that period, Salih Muslim (the former leader of the PYD) and other party officials frequently visited Ankara for meetings with Turkish officials.<sup>40</sup> But these meetings ended almost simultaneously with the collapse of Ankara's talks with the PKK in 2015. Many Syrian Kurds would argue that the YPG's increasing power in Syria largely contributed to the breakdown of the Turkey-PKK negotiations.

If Turkey's Syria policy is not entirely centered on being anti-Kurdish, then the Kurdish factor is certainly the policy's main driver. Since the outset of the Syrian war, Turkey has been adamant that the establishment of a Kurdish entity on its southern border is unacceptable. Ankara views the PYD and the YPG as an extension of the PKK.

Although growing U.S. support for the YPG and,

ultimately, the SDF infuriated Turkey, there was not much Ankara could do to convince its NATO ally to end its partnership with the Syrian Kurdish fighters. In a short time, the YPG proved itself as an effective fighting force in the U.S.-led mission to defeat the Islamic State terrorist group. Unlike other mainstream opposition groups, the YPG was disciplined and organized, and did not set any preconditions for its partnership with the United States in the fight against IS. Despite Turkey's objections, Washington made the convenient decision to expand its military cooperation with the YPG.

Then came the KNC card. When the KNC joined the Etilaf, it was inevitable that Turkey would exploit the Kurdish group and pit it against the PYD and its political ambitions. The KNC, politically and financially supported by Barzani—a close ally of Recep Tayyip Erdogan—quickly became a vehicle for Turkey's anti-PYD policy in Syria. Ankara often used the very existence of the KNC to delegitimize the PYD.

The KNC has significant popular support among Kurdish communities in Syria, but it is no match for the PYD in terms of organizational structure, political discipline, and, most importantly, military power. Turkey failed to present the group as an alternative, even at Geneva talks between the Assad regime and the opposition.

Realizing the futility of playing the KNC card against the PYD, and failing to convince the United States to cease its support for the YPG and the SDF, Turkey decided to take matters into its own hands. Nearly five years since the beginning of the Syrian war, Turkey entered the conflict militarily in 2016, albeit not to topple Assad or to fight IS exclusively, but to stop the YPG and SDF from expanding their territory.

Despite continued Turkish pledges to fight IS more effectively, U.S. military officials were not certain whether Ankara's military intervention would be helpful in advancing Washington's steadfast goal of eliminating IS. Their concern simply was that a major

confrontation between the Turkish military and the YPG and SDF would distract Kurdish fighters from the main fight against IS, and thus delay important battles against the terrorist group in eastern Syria.

Although the official objective for Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield was to remove towns such as Jarabulus and al-Bab from IS control, it was clear that the real goal was to prevent Kurdish fighters from forming a contiguous entity along the Turkish border. In January 2018, Turkey's Operation Olive Branch ousted the YPG from the Kurdish city of Afrin, a major PYD stronghold. Less than two years later, in October 2019, Turkey's Operation Peace Spring removed the YPG and SDF from the towns of Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad. The latter offensive marked Ankara's first military involvement in the eastern Euphrates region. Despite strong statements by the KNC against the Turkish invasion, the PYD and its supporters continued to accuse the group of collaborating with the Turks. Such accusations stemmed largely from the fact that certain Turkey-based KNC leaders, such as Abdul Hakim Bashar and Fouad Aliko, justified the Turkish military action, mostly blaming the YPG and SDF for dragging the Kurdish region into an unequal war with Turkey. This pro-Turkey narrative by powerful KNC leaders put the group in an awkward position with the PYD, which wasted no time in accusing the KNC of treason.

Before, during, and after the invasions, Turkey was quick to use its Syrian political proxies, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, to attack the PYD and its political entity in northeast Syria. The Istanbul-based Etilaf, a staunch supporter of Turkey's military operations in Afrin and Ras al-Ain, has repeatedly described the PYD and its armed forces as terrorist groups that must be eliminated. With the KNC still part of the Etilaf, the latter has often argued that the KNC is the legitimate representative of the Kurds in Syria, a view that was shared by Turkish officials until the June 2020 announcement of the PYD-KNC talks.<sup>41</sup> Turkey's initial response to the talks was a comment from foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu,

who said that any organizations that work with the PKK will be considered legitimate targets, including the KNC.<sup>42</sup>

Within the Etilaf, the KNC's future will likely be at the forefront of negotiations with the PYD. Whether the KNC remains part of the national opposition depends on how both it and the PYD agree on their representation at any future nationwide peace talks. And the very participation of the PYD in UN-sponsored Syria peace negotiations, of course, depends on whether Turkey can be convinced to include the group. This might be a task for U.S. diplomats to assume at some point.

## THE SYRIAN REGIME

When Assad's troops withdrew from the Kurdish region in 2012 at the peak of the Syrian uprising, the initial understanding was that the regime would keep a minimal presence in major cities, such as Qamishli and Hasaka. Such pockets of control, which later came to be known as "security squares," hosted government buildings and intelligence headquarters. The rest of Qamishli and Hasaka, as well as the rest of the region, fell fully under YPG control; over time, the YPG made certain that the authority of the Assad regime remained confined to the security squares and to the international airport in Qamishli.

The uneasy *détente* in place since 2012 seemed to largely hold until October 2019, although violent episodes did sometimes occur between Assad and YPG forces, mainly over oil and customs revenue and control of certain areas.

But despite the growing U.S. military support for the YPG, the PYD has always kept an open channel, either directly or indirectly, with Damascus. Certain powerful individuals within the Autonomous Administration have consistently advocated for a

friendlier rapport with the regime. This position stems from the belief that Kurds would ultimately return to Damascus to negotiate over the future of their region; thus, a less tenuous relationship with the regime could be advantageous for any future talks. Others within the PYD-SDF structure who are opposed to this idea have been emboldened only by U.S. support. Those individuals have leveraged the U.S. presence to further distance the PYD from Assad.

Largely quiet over the U.S.-Kurdish partnership against the Islamic State, Assad occasionally slammed the YPG and the SDF for partnering with the Americans. But until early 2017, he was in no position to make real threats against the Kurds, given he was deeply entrenched in various battles against the rebels throughout Syria.

As the Syrian regime gradually recaptured much of the territory once held by the rebels, its anti-Kurdish rhetoric increased almost simultaneously. Statements by Assad and his top officials made it clear that the Kurdish region—and other eastern areas controlled by Kurdish-led forces—would not be excluded from the regime's ultimate objective to reclaim its authority.

Those wishes were only fortified after U.S. forces withdrew from parts of northeast Syria and Turkey invaded the region. Desperate for help to stop the Turks from further advancing into Kurdish territory, the SDF officially invited in Russian and Assad-regime forces, whose presence the Kurds thought would compel Turkey to limit its operations to Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad.

To its supporters, the regime showcased its return to parts of northeast Syria for the first time since 2012 as a major victory. The Kurds, however, took it as a slap in the face for their reliance on the Americans. But in reality, nothing major has changed on the ground; in fact, the Assad-regime troops who were deployed to areas such as Kobane and Ain Issa in the north have been fed and sheltered by the SDF.

Assad recognizes that his army, which is depleted from nine years of war, is incapable of taking full control of the region—even if that were politically possible. The regime simply does not possess the resources necessary to reestablish its authority over the Kurdish region. Recognizing that deficiency, Assad has admitted that there are new political, military, social, and economic realities in northeast Syria—and that changing them will take his regime a long time.<sup>43</sup>

In February 2020, Russia announced an initiative to mediate talks between the SDC—the political wing of the SDF—and the Assad regime. The move was significant, given that the PYD and other SDF-affiliated political parties had been considering direct negotiations with Assad after the Turkish invasion in October 2019.

A major point of contention between the Syrian regime and the SDC, both before and during the preliminary talks, was the governing system that should be adopted for the Kurdish region. The SDC not only insisted on preserving the new local autonomy, which had been announced in 2014 by Kurdish groups affiliated with the PYD, but went even further to say that its model of governance should be applied throughout Syria. But the Syrian regime, which rejects the Kurdish self-rule project, instead sees its current local administration law (ratified in 2011) as the only acceptable form of governance in the country.

The Kurds understandably fear that giving in to such demands by the Assad regime could end the Kurdish dream of self-rule. Thus, the PYD and its allies, not wanting to abandon the opportunity at hand, recognize that certain aspects of the current governance system may stand to be negotiated with Damascus. The negotiations, held in Damascus, ended without results. Despite Russia's intensive efforts, evidenced by preliminary meetings at its military base in Hmeimim and by public support of the negotiations, it apparently could not sway the two sides to come up with a tangible agreement.

It is difficult not to assume that, given his history, Assad could find any excuse to dilute the prospect of meaningful dialogue with the Syrian Kurds. And although he could be pushed by the Russians to hold more talks with the Kurds, Assad could always maneuver—as he has before—to buy time until his regime is better positioned politically and militarily. He would thus have the upper hand in any future negotiations with the Kurds.

As long as the SDF continues its partnership with the Americans, the Syrian regime and Russia will find it difficult to participate in real talks with the Kurds. At this point, then, any political negotiations between Assad and the Syrian Kurds will be destined to fail.

## THE RUSSIA FACTOR

The Russian government consistently references Moscow's historical ties with the Kurdish people, often lauding their effectiveness in the fight on terrorism. With regard to the Syrian context, Russia understands the importance of maintaining ties with the Kurds. Recognizing the weaknesses of Assad's forces, Russia continues to believe that the Kurdish-led SDF could be a future ally that may contribute to the territorial integrity of Syria.

In January 2017, Russia sponsored a conference in Sochi for elements of the regime and the opposition. Russia's insistence on calling the meeting a "congress for Syrian peoples," despite objections from nationalists on both sides, was a tacit message for the Kurds that Russia understands their plight better than any other actor inside or outside Syria. Calling the Kurds a "people" was Moscow's way of conveying the essence of the Kurdish question in Syria—that of a people living on its ancestral land. Such recognition seemed advanced compared with views held by others party to the Syrian conflict, who merely view the Kurds

as an ethnic minority whose issues could be resolved through citizenship.

One of the outputs of that ill-fated conference in Sochi was a Russian-drafted constitutional proposal for Syria. In it, Moscow advocated for Kurdish cultural autonomy—something rejected by the regime before the opposition. The Kurds, however, including those who had boycotted the conference (such as the PYD and the KNC), positively viewed the Russian proposal and its reference to a degree of Kurdish autonomy.<sup>44</sup>

The partial U.S. troop withdrawal from northeast Syria in October 2019 and the subsequent Turkish invasion offered Russia a new window of opportunity to build its influence in the Kurdish region, specifically through deploying forces to areas previously off-limits for Russian troops. In addition to Russian troops' patrolling sections of the Syria-Turkey border—as part of the October 2019 agreement between Moscow and Ankara—their presence has increased in Qamishli and Hasaka, particularly in the former's airport, which had long been under the control of Assad's forces.

On several occasions in recent months, U.S. troops have blocked Russian military convoys from crossing into areas falling within the U.S. zone of influence. For example, in early June 2020, a Russian military convoy attempted to reach a village near the town of al-Malikiyah in the northeastern tip of Syria. The convoy was reportedly communicating to residents its desire to build a Russian base in the village, but American troops later prevented the Russians from returning. Although the Russian attempt failed, it showed that Moscow had a vested interest in deploying troops to an area known for its abundant oil fields. Given the new oil deal between the United States and the SDF, Washington should ensure that Russian forces cannot access these fields in the future—a scenario that could potentially disrupt oil production.

Although Russia's policy in Syria may not be rooted entirely in anti-Americanism, the sentiment plays a

major role in its current actions in the Syrian northeast. The U.S. presence in the region is an impediment to Moscow's long-term plans for the war-torn country, including its approach to the Kurds. Therefore, Russia will continue to pressure the Americans in Syria's northeast by all possible means.

After initial deployment of troops following the U.S. withdrawal in October 2019, Russian officials were quick to tell the Kurds to stop relying on U.S. support. Indeed, Russia used the withdrawal to show that a U.S.-Kurdish partnership in Syria “won't bring [the Kurds] any good,” as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put it.<sup>45</sup>

Russia's approach in Syria, vis-à-vis the presence of U.S. forces in the Kurdish-majority region, might be cast as a second Cold War strategy that fits Moscow's hegemonic goals in Syria and the broader Middle East. But what continues to frustrate Moscow is the PYD and SDF's refusal to yield to Russia's appeals—at times, obscure threats—for the groups to distance themselves from the Americans. This comes even after SDF officials admitted that the U.S. force withdrawal damaged the trust between the two partners. SDF general commander Mazloum Kobani Abdi said in 2019 that the Kurds had had a bitter experience with Russia when it paved the way for Turkish troops to invade the northwestern Kurdish town of Afrin in 2018.<sup>46</sup>

In July 2020, Russia—along with China—vetoed a UN Security Council resolution under which three Syrian border crossings with Iraq and Turkey would have allowed continual transport of aid to Syria's Kurdish regions and rebel-controlled areas.<sup>47</sup> For the Kurds, the move was yet another Russian attempt to break the Kurds' close relationship with Washington. Indeed, it was a message that Moscow still had the means to suffocate the Kurds economically if they maintained their alliance with the United States. Almost simultaneously with its veto, Moscow renewed its push for negotiations between the Kurds and the

Assad government, merely in response to U.S. sponsorship of the Kurdish unity talks.

Russia recognizes that it needs the Kurds in the long run. Kurdish parties in general are well-organized, as are their military forces in particular. Working with the Kurds now and in the post-conflict phase would make it easier for Moscow to expand its influence throughout Syria. The fact that the SDF currently controls about one-third of Syria's territory makes it even more appealing for Russia to maintain effective ties with Syrian Kurds. However, the longer the Kurds remain allied with the Americans, the more difficult it is for Russia's ultimate scheme to be realized on the ground. With or without Assad, Russia understands the importance of having new allies inside Syria. And the SDF, with its coherent, disciplined military structure, presents a unique opportunity for Russia: Moscow has the chance to start building relationships in northeastern Syria—similar to those it has been forging in southern Syria through trusted alliances with former rebel groups—without the need for approval from Damascus.

In yet another attempt to bring the Syrian Kurds closer together, Russia sponsored in September 2020 the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the SDF's political wing, the SDC, and the People's Will Party, a Moscow-backed communist faction. The head of the latter party, Qadri Jamil, was a minister in Assad's cabinet during the Syrian war and is now considered part of the "internal opposition." In the document, both sides agreed on five broad points, including a "democratic solution to the Kurdish question in Syria according to international conventions and agreements." The memorandum also included a point about the Autonomous Administration and "the need to benefit from its experience as a form of decentralization" for a future Syria. Yet another important part of the agreement was that "Syrian Democratic Forces effectively contributed to the war on terror and enhanced coexistence, and that it be incorporated into a Syrian military that doesn't interfere in politics."<sup>48</sup>

## THE BUMPY ROAD AHEAD

In early August 2020, the second round of KNC-PYD talks was reported to have begun in Hasaka. In September, several more meetings took place. According to a KNC official, the United States is pushing the two sides to reach agreement in an effort to form the political reference *marjaiya* as soon as possible.<sup>49</sup> Although the outcome of these unity talks remains unclear, one thing is certain: both sides assert that only U.S. involvement can preserve the trajectory of the negotiations. So long as Washington remains committed to politically sponsoring this important initiative, the hope of an acceptable degree of reconciliation will stay alive.

As for the SDF's role in pushing the intra-Kurdish talks forward, Abdi in particular will have a greater onus to counter continued opposition from within the PKK structure—namely, the PKK cadre embedded within the SDF and YPG ranks, whose members have opposed talks with the KNC since they began in June 2020. Abdi was key in bringing the two central parties to the negotiating table under challenging circumstances; thus, his success or failure to continue the talks will determine the limits of his power as the emerging unifying leader that Syrian Kurds historically have lacked.

Iraqi Kurdish officials perhaps want Abdi to succeed in his efforts because that would ultimately reduce the PKK cadre's influence in Syrian Kurdistan. Barzani has reportedly insisted that his KNC allies hold firm on their essential demands during talks with the PYD, particularly with regard to the military and political aspects of a future power-sharing agreement.<sup>50</sup>

Despite some optimism for the talks' success, it is important to note that entities from both sides—particularly the PYD, which wants to preserve the status quo—oppose this opening. In August 2020, a PYD-affiliated youth group known as the

Revolutionary Youth defaced an office building belonging to the KDP-S of the KNC. The SDF was quick to denounce the vandalism, vowing to hold the perpetrators accountable.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the SDF admitted that such acts harm the ongoing PYD-KNC talks.

Iraqi Kurds will need to be more supportive of establishing a formidable political front for their brethren in Syria. In addition to economic incentives, a united and autonomous Kurdish entity in Syria would represent strategic depth for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The PKK, though, also needs to realize that Syrian Kurds have a unique chance at self-rule. For Kurds, this is a “once in a century opportunity,” as a senior SDF official described it.<sup>52</sup> But the PKK’s direct involvement in local Kurdish affairs in Syria only complicates matters further for the SDF. Distancing the PKK from the SDF and YPG would not stop Turkish threats against northeast Syria entirely, but it could indeed strip Ankara of pretexts used for invading Syria’s Kurdish-held areas.

Another important step for the next phases of the PYD-KNC negotiations would be including such Kurdish and non-Kurdish bodies as the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party, the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (al-Wahda), the Assyrian Democratic Organization, and Arab tribes and civil society groups. Both sides recognize that any future agreement over local governance must achieve consensus among all ethnic and religious groups in northeast Syria.

The next practical step would then be to rebuild local governance structures in a way that reflects the political, religious, and ethnic diversity of northeast Syria. Local elections, held twice by the PYD since 2014, must be fair and free. Despite serious

challenges facing the region, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria still has a real chance to empower itself and protect its very existence.

The Islamic State has largely been defeated militarily, and the group no longer holds territory in Syria. Recent attacks claimed by IS militants in Deir al-Zour and elsewhere in eastern Syria, however, suggest that the group still poses a serious threat not only to the SDF, but also to the very Autonomous Administration that seeks to prove its effectiveness, particularly in Arab-majority areas. Such Islamic State threats have challenged the SDF and its civilian bodies to achieve long-term stability in the region. Therefore, the AANES and the SDF, with the help of their international partners, must immediately devise a real recovery plan for those areas liberated from IS; such a plan should provide for a quality system of governance and also economic opportunity. Ensuring that Arab residents of Deir al-Zour and elsewhere in eastern Syria are content with their economic conditions would certainly prevent other actors such as IS—and even the Syrian regime, Russian forces, and Iran-backed militias along the western Euphrates—from attempting to exploit local grievances on the river’s eastern bank.

Preserving the autonomy experiment in the Syrian northeast, however, relies on two main variables: (1) how the political situation unfolds elsewhere in the country; and (2) the role of the international community. Even though the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria has shown just how fragile the situation for Syrian Kurds can be, they will retain several political and military cards for pursuing political deals with Assad or other actors in Syria. Led by the United States, the West can empower the AANES, helping make it a successful economic and political model for Kurdish regions as well as others throughout the country. ❖

APPENDIX

**DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION  
COMMISSIONS, FORMED IN 2014**

Agriculture Commission

Communication Commission

Culture Commission

Defense and Self-Protection Commission

Economy and Commerce Commission

Education Commission

Energy, Industry, and Animal Resources Commission

Environment, Tourism, and Antiquities Commission

Finance Commission

Foreign Relations Commission

Health Commission

Human Rights Commission

Interior Commission

Justice Commission

Labor and Social Affairs Commission

Local Administration and Municipality Commission

Martyr Affairs Commission

Religious Affairs Commission

Supplying Commission

Transportation Commission

Women and Family Affairs Commission

Youth and Sports Commission

**AANES\* COMMISSIONS AND BUREAUS, FORMED IN 2019**

Advisory Bureau

Agriculture and Economy Commission

Bureau of Defense Affairs

Bureau of Foreign Relations

Bureau of Human Affairs

Bureau of Media

Bureau of Oil

Bureau of Planning and Development

Culture Commission

Education Commission

Finance Commission

Health and Environment Commission

Interior Commission

Labor and Social Affairs Commission

Local Administration Commission

Women's Commission

Youth and Sports Commission

*\*Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, its name as of 2019*

KNC PARTIES		
NAME	IDEOLOGY	LEADER
Council of Syria's Yazidis	Yazidi-focused	Sarhan Issa
Kurdish Democratic Equality Party	Conservative	Naamat Daoud
Kurdish Democratic Forces Party	Liberal	Zardashta Mustafa Pasha
Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria	Left	Shalal Gado
Kurdish Democratic National Party	Conservative	Tahir Sfook
Kurdish Democratic Unity Party	Center-left	Hajar Ali
Kurdish Future Movement	Liberal	Fadi Maree
Kurdish Reform Movement	Conservative	Faisal Youssef
Kurdistan Democratic Party–Syria (KDP-S)	Conservative	Saud Malla
Kurdistan Democratic Unity Party	Center-left	Fasla Youssef
Kurdistan Freedom Movement	Liberal	Siamend Hajo
Kurdistan Leftist Party	Left	Mahmoud Malla
Kurdistan Pioneer Party	Liberal	Ismael Sahaf
Yekiti Kurdistan Party–Syria*	Center-left	Sulaiman Oso
Syrian Kurdistan Future Movement	Liberal	Rezan Sheikmous

\*Known prior to 2019 as the Kurdish Union Party

## PYD-LED KURDISH NATIONAL UNITY PARTY, FOUNDED IN MAY 2020

Democratic Struggle Party

Democratic Union Party (PYD)

Free Kurdistan Union Party

Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria

Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Parti)

Kurdish Democratic “Roj” Party in Syria

Kurdish Left Party in Syria

Kurdish National Party in Syria

Kurdish Reform Movement–Syria

Kurdistan Brotherhood Party (PBK)

Kurdistan Communist Party (KKP)

Kurdistan Democratic Change Party

Kurdistan Democratic Party–Syria (PDK-S)

Kurdistan Green Party

Kurdistan Liberal Union Party (PYLK)

Kurdistan National Assembly

Kurdistan Republican Party–Syria

Kurdistan Revival Movement–Syria

Kurdistan Workers’ Union Party

Star Congress

Syrian Kurdish Democratic Accord Party

Syrian Kurdistan Future Movement

Syrian Kurds’ Democratic Peace Party (PADKS)

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49. See Rudaw television's interview (in Kurdish) with Sulaiman Oso on September 15, 2020, at <https://www.rudaw.net/kurmanji/kurdistan/150920209?fbclid=IwAR3qzkrSFgBEjHbk4465E0uDsqrDRytVsYc5dbbHfi-t-U2nM6pzONh9EJw>.
50. Another KNC official, who declined to be named, told the author about Barzani's internal message to KNC leaders, September 5, 2020.
51. "SDF Vows to Hold Attackers on KDP-S Office Accountable" (in Arabic), Rudaw, August 15, 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/150820208>.
52. Author interview with SDF official who declined to be named, July 23, 2020.



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## THE AUTHOR



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