



Seasoned Skeptics

Why Syrian Kurds Have Resisted Political Islam

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Image: A young woman fighter with the People's Defense Units.
Credit: Kurdishstruggle via Flickr

The historic failure of Islamist movements to establish a foothold among Syria's Kurdish minority can be traced from the French Mandate (1923–46) through the creation of the Syrian state (1946) and into the twenty-first century. Today, the Kurdish population of Syria stands at about three million, and the region lacks an Islamist-oriented party advocating Kurdish rights, even though most Syrian Kurds are Sunni Muslim. This marks a notable contrast to the experience of Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, where such parties do exist.

In Syria's long-running war, the struggle against the Islamic State (IS) constituted an opportunity for the Kurds not only to showcase their fighting

effectiveness but also to establish a governing system that promotes a tolerant form of Islam, thereby facilitating coexistence among the different religious groups living in Syria's Kurdish region, locally known as Rojava. Moreover, since 2014, the United States has supported Syrian Kurdish forces in the anti-IS fight, essentially enabling their quest to develop a semiautonomous entity that embraces secular values in a region otherwise characterized by religious sectarianism, extremism, and fanaticism.

In light of this background, this study examines the historical context of the Kurdish movement in Syria, explains the main orders of Islam adhered to by Syrian Kurds, and ultimately argues for sustaining a close U.S. partnership with forces representing the Syrian Kurdish community. In a nascent semiautonomous region, the Rojava experiment can serve as a model of religious tolerance for the rest of the Middle East, even as the project has not been without flaws. Yet its continued success is largely contingent upon sustainable support from Washington.

The Syrian Kurdish experience with their rulers over time help explain why they have generally developed a hostile sentiment toward political Islam. Conversely, unlike so-called secular Middle East governments, such as Syria's Assad regime, Syrian Kurdish leaders themselves have created a system of governance that does not manipulate Islam for political gain.

Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration for North and East Syria
IS	Islamic State
KDP-S	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SCP	Syrian Communist Party
YPG	People's Defense Units

The Failed Allure of Political Islam

To understand the imperviousness of modern Kurdish society in Syria to political Islam—and radical political Islam particularly—one must examine how historical factors have shaped the broader Kurdish experience.¹ To begin with, the Kurds are the only major ethnic group in the Middle East that has not built political empires based on Islamic identity. By contrast, the dominant ethnic groups—Arabs, Persians, and Turks—have done so since the inception of Islam. For their part, Kurds have ruled at times over local principalities with limited political, geographic, and economic influence, among them the Bohtan principality in Turkey and the Bahdinan and Baban principalities in Iraq.

The absence of an Islamist imperial model has had a lasting effect on the Kurdish collective imagination. Kurdish historical narrative thus eschews any appearance of tales, myths, or conquests that can be viewed as a direct byproduct of Islamist domination.² Even Salah al-Din, the twelfth-century Kurdish Muslim warrior-leader renowned for, among other feats, sacking Jerusalem in 1187, is linked by some nationalist Kurds not to Islamist narrative or symbolism but instead to Kurdish nationalism. This is the case despite attempts by successive Syrian governments to coopt Salah al-Din's legacy for Arabs. And it emanates from his fundamental role as a political, not a religious, leader.³

Across the Middle East, Kurds' experiences with their rulers have likely fueled an aversion to Islamism. The Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, has used political Islam to suppress the Kurds living within its borders, stifle their political aspirations, and threaten their very existence.⁴ In the recent past, the Islamic State has targeted Kurds in Iraq and Syria, using different narratives to ostracize them in the eyes of the broader Muslim community.⁵ With the exception of a small number of Kurdish Islamists, Salafists, and jihadists, Syria's Kurds in particular have shown a general antipathy to religious political doctrines.⁶

Sufi Orders

In the historical development of what has ultimately become a moderate form of Islam among the Syrian Kurdish community, Sufi orders (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*) have been central, with Kurds embracing several orders over the centuries, and two in particular: the Naqshbandiyah and the Qadiriyyah.⁷ At different stages, these two orders have played important social and political roles across Kurdish-inhabited areas in Syria and beyond, largely by representing a pattern of social organization independent of tribes and the state. Sufism, through the literature it had produced, has significantly contributed to the development of Kurdish identity, ultimately leading to the emergence of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

The Naqshbandiyah

The Naqshbandiyah is a major Sunni order of Sufism that originated in the late 1300s in Bukhara, a city in present-day Uzbekistan, and spread among Muslim Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey in the early 1800s.⁸ Its rise is associated particularly with Dhiya al-Din Khalid al-Shahrazuri (1779–1827), or Mawlana Khalid Shahrazuri as he was widely known, a Kurdish cleric and poet from Qaradagh, a village near Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan. The initial objective adopted by Shahrazuri was to build a youth-driven reformist religious movement among his Kurdish community.⁹

After establishing a large base of Sufi followers in his hometown and the surrounding areas of Iraqi Kurdistan, Shahrazuri set out an ambitious plan to expand his movement. To this end, he traveled to Damascus in 1822 and capitalized on his reputation among Damascenes by opening new religious centers that taught the precepts of the Naqshbandiyah.¹⁰ Deep-rooted conservative Damascene families supported the new order by allowing Shahrazuri to create a large social network that widened his reach beyond the metropolis, and

he gained recognition in many Kurdish circles, ultimately spawning the Khalidiyyah branch of the Naqshbandiyah. For many Sunni Muslim Kurds, Kurdish identity at the time became associated with Shahrazuri's branch of the Naqshbandiyah order. After Shahrazuri's death in 1827, several other Kurdish clerics rose to prominence by leading the Naqshbandiyah in Damascus, allowing several Kurdish families such as the Kuftaros and Boutis to gain religious influence in Damascus and beyond.

Among the Kurds in northern Syria specifically, the Naqshbandiyah established itself as an apolitical religious movement that avoided political Islam from the get-go. It was formally introduced to the local Kurdish population in 1912 by Sheikh Ahmed Khaznawi, who had studied the order in Turkey. The Naqshbandiyah attracted many *murids* (followers) after two of Ahmed's sons—Aladdin (1919–69) and Masoum (1915–58)—inherited the sheikhdom from their father. The peak of the order's popularity, however, occurred during the reign of his other son, Sheikh Ezzedine Khaznawi (1925–92).¹¹

After Ezzedine died, his son Muhammad took the helm, a succession that brought divisions within the family. Muhammad's uncle Abdul Ghani rejected Muhammad's leadership, seeing himself instead as the legitimate heir to the sheikhdom. This friction split the allegiance of the order's *murids* between uncle and nephew.

The Qadiriyyah

The Qadiriyyah order in Syria's Kurdish region is not as entrenched as the Naqshbandiyah. It reached the town of Amuda, in Hasaka province, through Sheikh Ahmed al-Qadiri around 1925. Following Sheikh Ahmed's death in 1954, his son Ubeydullah Ahmed al-Qadiri (b. 1932) took over the sheikhdom and has been at its helm ever since.¹² Because it did not have any association with religious Kurdish figures, the Qadiriyyah order did not attract local Kurds in the same way the Naqshbandiyah did. Thus, most of its followers were ethnic Arabs from the provinces of Aleppo, Raqqah, and Deir al-Zour.¹³

Similar to the Naqshbandiyah order, the Qadiriyyah ensured that its followers steered clear of politics. At the same time, its leaders maintained close ties with the regime of Hafiz al-Assad and later that of his son, Bashar, both of whom used Ubeydullah and his status to divert the attention of his followers from the political activism conducted by the secular Kurdish movement.¹⁴ This relationship gave sufficient reason for many Kurds to view the Qadiriyyah order as less appealing and—more important—less trustworthy.

Qadiri influence diminished further in the early 2000s after the order began leaning toward Shia Islam, thanks to Iran's growing influence in Syria, including in Kurdish-majority areas such as Hasaka.¹⁵ The trend started with the construction of a major Shia congregation hall, or *husseiniyah*, in Amuda in 2008.¹⁶ Ordinary Kurds grew suspicious of the activities of Qadiri sheikhs, particularly their overt “Shiafication” efforts. The start of the Syrian war in 2011 prevented leaders of the order from formally opening the *husseiniyah*. Shortly after the conflict erupted, Sheikh Ubeydullah left for Turkey, where he still resides and preaches, albeit with little influence in Syria.

This history, however, intimates the local authority held by Sufi orders in Syrian communities. Sheikhs required close allegiance from followers, much as the general guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, the emir of al-Qaeda, or the caliph of the Islamic State would from their followers. In other words, the absolute obedience of Sufi *murids* to their sheikhs foreclosed the possibility of following other leaders, including Islamists.¹⁷

The Xoybun Factor

The origins of secularism in Syria's Kurdish political movement date to 1927, when a group of Kurdish intellectuals, mostly exiles from neighboring Turkey, formed the Xoybun (which means “independence” in Kurdish; pronounced “Khoyboun” in English). The new organization was founded expressly to provide

political and financial support for a Kurdish uprising in Turkey. From the outset, the Xoybun embraced an absolute secular model for its burgeoning activism. Indeed, then-French-controlled Syria offered a safe space for the group to promote secular-based nationalism and self-determination.¹⁸

As the Xoybun expanded, Syrian Kurds began viewing it as a major resource for promoting Kurdish culture.¹⁹ Many renowned Kurdish writers, poets, and thought leaders, such as Cegerxwin (whose formal name was Sheikhmous Hasan) and Qedrican (formal name Abdulkadir Can), participated in its activities. After nearly two decades of political and cultural activism, the Xoybun was formally dissolved in 1946. The dissolution was largely attributed to the improvement of Kurdish-Soviet relations and a declining interest among Kurdish community leaders in purely nationalist ideas. That same year, Syria gained independence from France, and the Syrian Communist Party was simultaneously gaining popularity among the Kurds, offering a new political space for former Xoybun members.

Influence of the Syrian Communist Party

At its inception in 1924 and later during its heyday, the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) attracted many working-class Kurds. Given its leadership by a Damascus Kurd, Khalid Bakdash—from 1937 until his death in 1995—the party had extra appeal for Kurds nationwide, and by the 1940s and 1950s it dominated the Kurdish political scene. Its view of the Kurdish issue, however, differed sharply from that of the Xoybun. The SCP found no utility in distinguishing the Kurds ethnically, instead proclaiming them as simply another Syrian group to be consolidated into an empowered working class.²⁰

The spread of communism across the region occurred at a time when Kurdish elites in Syria were searching for a movement that would embrace their demands and fill the void left by the dissolution of

the Xoybun. The SCP viewed itself as being above ethno-national politics, despite its Soviet ties. For the Kurds, the SCP's central focus on social equality was enough for the party to serve as a vehicle to achieve their national aspirations.

As the communists expanded their influence among the Syrian Kurdish community, so did several powerful Kurdish figures such as Rashid Hamo and Shawkat Naasan, who had an important role in establishing a local organization for the SCP in Afrin, a majority Kurdish city in northwest Syria. Despite their affiliation with the SCP, both Hamo and Shawkat continued to promote a low-key campaign in the region to keep Kurdish rights on the SCP's agenda—much to the dismay of the party's leadership. As a consequence, Hamo faced an internal trial by the SCP, which accused him of spreading nationalistic ideas and then expelled him. Several other influential figures, including the poet Cegerxwin (in 1957), resigned from the SCP over what they called its disregard for preserving the Kurdish language and culture. Such resignations and the SCP's general apathy toward the Kurds as a distinct ethnic minority led to a gradual decline in the party's popularity among the ethnic group.²¹

The Syrian Kurdish affinity for the SCP lasted only two decades, but this period had a more enduring effect, with Kurdish elites perceiving various benefits. Among them was to unify Kurds from different parts of Syria—similar to, or perhaps more than, what Xoybun had previously achieved. Moreover, the SCP's ideological legacy would be visible in future Kurdish leftist parties.

Secularism in Political Rhetoric

The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S), the country's first strictly Kurdish party, was founded in 1957 by intellectuals who were either former communists or bearers of the Xoybun legacy. Despite

the influence of the more conservative Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq, the KDP-S has always emphasized the separation of religion and politics through a centrist political ideology. The party therefore demonstrated the flexibility to take in people from different backgrounds. For instance, one of its founding members, Sheikh Muhammad Issa, was an influential religious figure. He did not, however, impose his religious views on the KDP-S and its political rhetoric. In fact, he strongly advocated preserving the secular nature of the party, based on his view that a religious orientation would turn away Kurds already suspicious of Islamist movements in Syria and the broader region.²²

Over the years, KDP-S breakaways maintained the secular tenets of the original party. Today, the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of more than a dozen parties, is widely considered heir to the KDP-S. Founded in October 2011—several months after the start of the anti-government Syrian uprising—the KNC calls for the establishment of a civic state in Syria wherein no religion or religious group shall be dominant. In December 2016, the KNC released a proposal that showcased its vision for the Kurdish region and for the country as a whole, with Article 10 stating that “the principle of separation of religion and state [will be] applied in the region.”²³

The political identity of a future Syrian state has often been a point of contention between the KNC and other groups within the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (*Etilaf*). The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the de facto ruling party in northeast Syria, emerged from the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and is closely affiliated with the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The PYD, founded in 2003, is the only Kurdish political party in Syria that has no direct legacy from the original KDP-S, and its members formerly acted under the PKK banner. Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK, was based in Syria from early 1979 until his expulsion in 1999. During those years, the PKK mobilized the Kurdish population in Syria, using a Marxist-Leninist discourse and calling for the establishment of a secular and independent Kurdish state.²⁴

The PYD's outright leftist ideology clearly rejects the involvement of religion in politics. In its updated political manifesto, the PYD directly advocates "struggle against the *takfiri* thought."²⁵ Since taking over the Kurdish region in Syria in 2012, the PYD has established two key organizations that engage with religion, particularly Islam. They will be explored further in this paper, as will Ocalan's comments from Turkey, where he is imprisoned.

Anti-Kurdish Policies from Damascus

Over the decades, anti-Kurdish policies adopted by successive governments in Syria have caused significant tensions between ethnic Kurds and Arabs. For instance, nearly 120,000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their Syrian citizenship in 1962 by the government of then president Nazim al-Qudsi in a campaign known as the "exceptional census."²⁶ The government justified the action by claiming the Kurds had emigrated from Turkey illegally, but the Kurdish community suspected the move was simply meant to weaken them at all levels. As a result, today roughly 200,000 Kurds inside Syria lack Syrian citizenship.

A little more than a decade later, when the Baathists already controlled the country, a plan was devised for demographic engineering in the Kurdish region. That 1974 project, aimed at creating an "Arab Belt," as it was known among the Kurds, involved confiscating lands from Kurdish landowners and granting them to ethnic Arabs who were mainly brought from Aleppo and Raqqqa provinces. The process, once completed, yielded forty-one Arab settlements in the Kurdish heartland and dispossessed local Kurds of nearly 233,000 hectares of agricultural lands. Even as the government claimed the Arabs needed to be relocated because flooding from the Euphrates had destroyed their homes, the Belt stoked Kurdish-Arab tensions.²⁷ Such policies have perhaps, over the years, contributed to Kurdish mistrust toward Arabs—and, by extension, toward political Islam.

The Khaznawi Phenomenon

In March 2004, a Kurdish uprising against the Syrian government, during which scores of Kurdish civilians were killed, hundreds wounded, and thousands arrested by Syrian security forces, prompted Sheikh Mashuq Khaznawi, a prominent figure in his family and among the Kurds of northern Syria, to speak out. He immediately used his status to criticize the Damascus regime for its unjust policies against the Kurds. His blunt opposition to the regime led to his abduction and ultimate death in May 2005.

Sheikh Mashuq had gained renown in a relatively short period, beginning in about 2004. Despite his religious background, family status, and expansive network with Islamic clerics, he opted not to use Islam as a reference informing his political rhetoric. Sheikh Mashuq's refusal to embrace political Islam derived from one simple belief: that political Islam was an invention that had nothing to do with Islam. He believed that Islam as a religion had not prescribed an integrated political system for Muslims to follow—apart from general principles such as justice, equality, and brotherhood—and, therefore, that Muslims cannot manipulate their religion for political gains.²⁸ Nor did he believe an Islamist movement was necessary to mobilize the Kurdish masses.²⁹

Khaznawi's openness and explicit advocacy style struck many as unprecedented for a religious cleric. His rhetoric, therefore, drew the attention of many people, including young Kurds, not used to seeing their rights defended by a religious Muslim figure. He once famously told a crowd in Qamishli, "If one day you feel that Islam is depriving you from your rights, then know that I am with you and I do not accept this Islam."³⁰ Notably, Khaznawi's closest Kurdish political allies were from leftist parties. Syrian Kurds of all stripes continue to honor his legacy, with many commemorating his death every year on June 1.

Muslim Brotherhood Outreach

Efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood to recruit members and sympathizers among the Syrian Kurdish community date back to the mid-1950s, with campaigns focusing especially on Kurdish youth. Recruiters were, for the most part, teachers and other public servants who had been assigned by the government to work in Kurdish areas and were carrying out their Islamist mission clandestinely.³¹ Although the Brotherhood did succeed in attracting dozens of Kurdish youth already inclined to enlist, it failed to become a popular political force in Kurdish Syria as it did in major non-Kurdish cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama.

This failure, in addition to the Kurds' general dismissal of the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamist ideology, owed largely to contradictions within the group's discourse. Despite the Brotherhood's attempts to project itself as an all-embracing movement, its Syrian branch could not detach its Islamist agendas from Arab nationalism. Thus, at a time when Kurds were becoming more organized politically, the Brotherhood struggled to devise a Kurdish-focused political narrative that appealed to this specific audience without sacrificing the group's own fundamental principles.

As for the Kurdish youth who did join the Brotherhood, they were largely disavowed and regarded as outcasts by mainstream Kurdish society while lacking fertile ground to spread the group's political ideology.³² In his 2009 memoir, Adnan Saad al-Din, who served as general guide (*murshid*) for the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood from 1975 to 1981, explained as follows:

When I visited the eastern region as part of a plan...to visit the Syrian provinces in 1977 with a number of members of the Executive Office [of the Muslim Brotherhood], we heard from residents of Jazira in Qamishli and elsewhere that the general guide Sheikh [Mustafa] al-Sibai

[founder of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood] had visited them once during a quarter-century. But because of the sheikh's many and big responsibilities, he did not give Jazira the attention it deserved. The Kurds constitute a wide spectrum in the province, and they are a cornerstone in building the Islamic movement and in advocating for Islam, but they have been left to be robbed by external ideas of a bigoted and chauvinistic nationalism, and by communist and leftist principles that instilled perverted propaganda among the Kurds to distort Islam's bright image.³³

The 2011 Uprising

Despite previous failed attempts to win the hearts and minds of Syrian Kurds, the Muslim Brotherhood did not give up. In the early stages of the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood tried again to establish a new channel with influential Kurds.

Sheikh Murshid Khaznawi, a well-known figure from the earlier-discussed Khaznawi family, recalled several communications between him and the Brotherhood's then general guide, Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, who proposed the establishment of a Brotherhood-linked Kurdish grouping called National Action Unity. At that point, the Brotherhood's objective was not mainly to win the Kurds over ideologically but rather to form a stronger Brotherhood-led opposition alliance against the Assad regime.

Those talks, however, faltered because the Brotherhood's new proposal did not offer anything new or different to empower Kurds in Syria, according to Sheikh Murshid.³⁴ The Brotherhood declared the new political body anyway, yet again failed to find any footing whatsoever among the Kurdish community.

Several armed opposition groups affiliated with the Brotherhood also created all-Kurdish factions

under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army. But they too failed to appeal to mainstream Kurdish society.³⁵ Moreover, many Brotherhood-associated fighting forces used strongly anti-Kurdish rhetoric and vehemently opposed moves such as the Kurdish autonomy bid in Syria.

Congress of the Islamic Democratic Society

In June 2014, the PYD introduced a social contract, which has served as a de facto constitution for areas under the authority of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The contract preamble states that “the areas of the Democratic Autonomous Administration do not accept the concept of a nationalist, militaristic, and religious state.” Furthermore, in Article 32, it stipulates that “all citizens have the right to the freedom of religion and belief, and it is not permissible to politicize religion and use it as a tool for incitement and discrimination.”³⁶

Such language derives from the teachings of PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan, who has been in Turkish custody since 1999. Yet while the PKK is at its core a Marxist-Leninist organization, it does not oppose Islam, according to Ocalan’s writings. The rejection of Islam, Ocalan contends, has been a major factor in the failure of most Middle East leftist movements seeking to mobilize the masses.³⁷

Ocalan therefore sought to devise a new narrative for moderate Islam as an alternative to the official Islam defined by the region’s governments and Islamist movements. To that end, he called for Democratic Islamic Congresses to be held by all PKK offshoots and affiliates across the Middle East and beyond. In addition to one convened by the PYD in Syria, two others were conducted in May 2014, in Diyarbakir, Turkey, and Hagen, Germany.³⁸ As for the PKK, one must note that it is a militant group designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Turkey, and other world actors.

Shortly after declaring its Autonomous Administration in 2014, the PYD established a union for Muslim *ulama* (legal scholars), the seed for a larger Islamic congress later sponsored by the group. Despite its distinct leftist ideology, the PYD wanted to demonstrate its seriousness in governing Syria’s Kurdish region effectively by accepting people from all walks of life. Furthermore, establishing an institutional body for Islam would ensure clerics remained under its watch. The PYD’s rationale for establishing such an institution was guided by Ocalan’s ideas about freeing religion from central government control—however much the PYD was here asserting its own control—and PYD rule over a decentralized semiautonomous region in northeast Syria supported this effort.

In 2019, the PYD announced the formation of the Congress of the Islamic Democratic Society as a further step in promoting its ideas on Islam. Largely modeled after Ocalan’s original notion of a “Democratic Islamic Congress,”³⁹ this congress stirred immediate controversy among religious scholars and PYD opponents, not least over the very concept of a “democratic Islam.” Critics further accused the group of exploiting religion for political gains.⁴⁰ Proponents, meanwhile, answered that the congress’s main objective was to make Islam approachable and to fend off any potential spread of radical Islam in the Kurdish region. Muhammad Kharzani, co-chair of the congress, explained:

Preventing radical Islamist groups from having a foothold in our region is one of the main purposes behind building and nurturing such initiatives. If the Syrian conflict has taught us anything, it would be that ordinary people’s tendencies could change. Therefore, we should preempt any malevolent actions by the dark forces that continue to be on the [horizon] for our people.⁴¹

With the SDF and its affiliates now governing nearly a third of Syria’s territory, including large swaths of non-Kurdish areas, the group could well be concerned about the potential reemergence of extremist thought, especially because most of these

areas are former IS strongholds. To the SDF, the existence of religious entities such as the Congress of the Islamic Democratic Society could be one way to forestall the return of Islamist movements.

During the congress's annual convention, held in Qamishli in June 2021, Fawza Youssef—a member of the PYD's co-presidency commission—opened her remarks by framing the body's mission: "The main reason for the conflicts experienced in the Middle East and the Islamic world is the lack of a sound vision for religion and Islam; although it was previously a center of civilization, with the emergence of extremism and fanatic thought it turned into a barren desert in which only thorns grow."⁴²

The PYD-led Autonomous Administration for North and East Syria, or AANES, has largely shown tolerance toward non-Kurdish religious and ethnic groups under its rule in northeast Syria. Leaders have demonstrated an understanding of the importance of an inclusive discourse that embraces even conservative elements in places such as Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, which are becoming ever more intertwined with the Kurdish heartland in Syria—as articulated in the SDF/PYD's "brotherhood of nations" approach.

On the other hand, the PYD, its affiliates, and security forces have been less tolerant toward their fellow Kurds, primarily members of KNC parties. In recent months—despite ongoing PYD-KNC talks—several offices belonging to the KNC have been attacked by PYD affiliates.⁴³ While the PYD's administration is directly modeled on the teachings about self-rule of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, the KNC—which is supported by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the ruling party in Iraqi Kurdistan, and has friendly ties with Ankara—advocates the establishment of a federated Kurdish region that it calls "Syrian Kurdistan." As for the recent attacks, Elham Ahmed, executive president of the Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the SDF, acknowledged them but claimed that "such sabotaging acts are not linked to the PYD. Certain behaviors occur and the security forces are following up with this issue. We support this follow-up to stop these actions and deeds."⁴⁴

The Rise of the Islamic State

The Islamic State's rapid military advances across Syria, beginning in 2014, were largely enabled by security vacuums. IS militants took over parts of four provinces—Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir al-Zour, and Hasaka—despite resistance from rebel forces that then controlled parts of those provinces. Yet in the Kurdish-controlled areas farther north and northeast, the People's Defense Units (YPG)—the military wing of the PYD—had already established a presence. Although IS did take over parts of southern Hasaka province, no notable political or security vacuum formed in Kurdish-inhabited regions, where forces ultimately prevented the extremist group from expanding in the Kurdish heartland.

The fierce resistance shown by Kurdish fighters in defending the northern town of Kobane against a major Islamic State campaign in 2014 perhaps signaled to the jihadist group that it could not seize Kurdish cities the way it did others in Syria. And, of course, U.S. air support played a major role. Yet IS still used its propaganda machine to target the Kurdish community in Syria in an attempt to recruit followers. It even released several propaganda videos with subtitles in the Kurmanji Kurdish dialect to attract youth. Those efforts, however, were unproductive. Although no reliable statistics are available on the number of Syrian Kurds who joined IS, the mobilization was not large-scale. An IS source in 2014 told France 24 Arabic that "there are a number of Kurds fighting within the ranks of the Islamic State, but the majority of them are not Syrian."⁴⁵

In predominantly Kurdish cities and towns in northeast Syria, occasional reports surfaced about individuals who joined IS or other extremist groups, with the instances rare enough not to worry Kurdish leaders. The recruitment of Iranian, Iraqi, and Turkish Kurds appears to have been more robust, accounting for the lion's share of the Kurdish presence among extremist groups.⁴⁶

The 2014 battle for Kobane and the Islamic State's merciless campaign to capture the city, as well as subsequent atrocities carried out by the jihadist group against Yazidi Kurds and other minorities, presented Syrian Kurds with another deterrent to joining IS and a motivation to remain resolute in opposing IS and its extremist ideology.

For Kurdish leaders, when it comes to promoting and implementing secular beliefs in non-Kurdish tribal areas such as Raqqqa and Deir al-Zour, a main challenge is the presence of strong Islamist currents among the local Arab population and the "Shiafication" trend, driven by growing Iranian interference and influence in such regions.⁴⁷ Additionally, the tribal dynamics are intricate, especially as lesser-known tribes, clans, and figures are now trying to reassert themselves. Therefore, the PYD, along with the YPG/SDF military contingent, needs to cultivate allies in the region. Weariness of Shiafication and, more broadly, political Islam among the largely Sunni tribes would seem to offer an opening. But to succeed here, the PYD must study the tribal scene very closely and conduct its outreach with sensitivity.

Future Prospects for Islamism Among the Kurds

The historic aversion among Syrian Kurds to political Islamism, radicalism, and jihad is unlikely to change in the near future. In the areas of northern Syria where it rules, the Kurdish administration will thus likely persist in pursuing Kurdish rights through secular platforms. In reaction to the atrocities committed by the Islamic State and other Islamist groups, hundreds of Kurds have gone a step further by leaving Islam altogether and converting to Christianity. In Kobane, for example, new Christian converts opened an evangelical church in 2018.⁴⁸ And with Turkish-backed Islamist militias continuing to commit abuses against Kurdish civilians in

places like Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad, hostility among Syrian Kurds toward political Islam can only be expected to grow.⁴⁹

While maintaining a unique opportunity for self-government, independent of the Assad regime and other forces (mainly Iran and Russia) seeking power in the war-torn country, Syrian Kurdish groups will likely continue to use their political status to call for secular governance, not only in their autonomous region but also in the rest of the country. But to do so, their alliance with the United States must endure. In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and growing attacks by Turkey in August and September 2021 against Kurdish communities in northeast Syria, Kurdish actors are raising concerns over their future relationship with the United States. The earlier U.S. partial withdrawal from Syria in late 2019, during the Trump administration, underlies these anxieties.⁵⁰ Fear of abandonment is growing amid rising regional challenges. On August 20, the SDF's general command released a statement urging the U.S. government to clarify its position and commit to its responsibilities toward the alliance by finding a political solution to the crisis with Turkey and the broader Syrian war, including the threats from Islamic State sleeper cells.⁵¹

Washington should maintain its cooperative and protective relationship with the Kurds, which was reaffirmed with the 2015 creation of the SDF. To be certain, a necessary step in solving Syria's crisis and ensuring stability in the region is capitalizing on the secular values of its Kurdish community and strengthening ties with local liberal forces seeking to challenge the Assad regime's five decades of dictatorship, which has fomented radical Islam, sectarianism, and terrorism. Kurdish groups in Syria have lost thousands of fighters since 2014 and have proved their effectiveness in fighting IS terrorist for more than seven years. At the same time, they have created a system of governance that calls for separation between religion and politics and rejects Islamist extremism.

Nor should Washington let its adversaries—Russia and Iran—expand their influence on the ground.

Concerns over great power competition and rising threats from international players such as China cannot be allowed to relegate crucial Middle East issues such as this one. Protecting and supporting the successful Rojava model will help ensure long-term regional stability, as well as U.S. interests.

Policy Options

To promote continued progress in Kurdish-held areas of Syria, U.S. policymakers should consider taking the following concrete steps:

- Contribute to efforts in Rojava to fund and develop local programs that promote religious tolerance and pluralism; strengthen school curricula to meet the needs of families, including addressing the unique concerns of religious and ethnic minorities; and, through rhetoric as well as action on the ground, advance religious freedom and related rights.
- Strengthen the U.S. military presence in northeast Syria and plan to stay for the long term, similar to how the United States has maintained a presence in Germany, South Korea, and Japan to deter adversaries in those regions—however difficult this task might be from a domestic U.S. political standpoint.
- Engage the local population, which is quite receptive to the U.S. presence, and continue to build up outreach efforts through increased involvement in humanitarian programs, intelligence sharing, and infrastructure development.
- Promote increased local dialogue between the different communities within this region to improve and further democratize local governance structures.
- Continue pushing the KNC and PYD to reach agreement toward the eventual formation of a shared political reference, or governing body, as soon as possible. Both sides agree that only U.S. involvement can preserve the trajectory of the negotiations.⁵²
- Create a security infrastructure in cooperation with America's local allies that allows for early identification of potential threats and facilitates preemptive measures.
- Contain aggression from the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia.
- Ensure that Turkey adheres to ceasefire agreements in northeast Syria.
- Strengthen economic conditions and protect local oil fields, disallowing any exploitation of such infrastructure by the Islamic State, or by Assad and his allies in Russia, China, or Iran.
- Continue efforts to repatriate and resettle thousands of IS fighters currently held in the area's prisons and detention camps, such as al-Hawl, while improving living and security conditions within these camps to prevent them from becoming hotbeds for radicalization. ❖

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