

# Kurdish Cultural Freedoms are Possible in Syria—But Not Political Autonomy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Hussain Zaidou is a Syrian writer and journalist writing in Arabic and Kurdish. Besides working as a field correspondent, Zaidou has written articles with a focus on cultural and social research.



## Brief Analysis

From their establishment in 1957 up to the present time, Kurdish political movements in Syria have focused on demanding national rights for the Kurds, couching cultural rights within a package of political demands. With the outbreak of the Syrian revolt in 2011, the emergence of armed conflict, and the resulting security and administrative vacuum in majority-Kurdish areas, Kurdish political movements raised the ceiling of their political demands to include administration of their regions, full recognition of their cultural rights, and Kurdish-language education in majority Kurdish areas.

However, in light of the circumstances faced by Syria's Kurds as Syrian Kurdish leadership enters into negotiations, making political demands could be risky. A better, more strategic approach would be to prioritize aspirations for cultural inclusion over political demands in Northern and Eastern Syria. To see why this is the case, consider the current international focus on Northern Syria, manifested most recently in Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting in Turkey, and the limited attention given to the Kurdish position.

According to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, "culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group." Furthermore, according to the declaration, "in addition to art and literature," culture denotes "lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs." By this definition, the right of Kurds to practice their culture has been suppressed at various points in history, with Kurdish cultural events banned alongside political ones in Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

Over the years, different displays of Kurdish culture, ranging from singing nationalist songs, to printing books or writing place-names in Kurdish, were quelled unless held with the government's knowledge and expressed consent. Unapproved expressions of Kurdish culture have been quickly suppressed, in some cases by imprisonment.

This pattern was replicated after the brief autonomy enjoyed by Kurdish groups in Syria had yielded to new realities. For example, when Turkish-backed groups took control of Afrin, their presence in the majority-Kurdish city resulted in restrictions being placed on the political and cultural freedoms of Kurdish residents. This instance demonstrates how, when the Kurdish leadership ties political freedoms to cultural rights, the latter are at risk if the former are

revoked.

Taking advantage of the security and administrative vacuum in Syria, Kurdish forces have chosen to assert the existence of a Syrian Kurdistan or West Kurdistan. This hasty attempt at nation building — which was accompanied by slogans in Kurdish, as well as a display of nationalist flags and images of prominent Kurdish cultural figures — failed to account for the fact that Kurdish political demands are entirely subjected to states' wills and the international balance of power, and contributed to the perception that Kurdish culture is inextricably linked to the Kurds' political aspirations.

Consequently, Kurdish leaders must learn how to separate Kurdish culture from the idea of Kurdish political autonomy. This is especially true now, as negotiations have begun between the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)—the entity claiming to represent the communities east of the Euphrates, or northeast Syria, including Kurds — and the Syrian government in Damascus.

Kurdish negotiators must recognize that Damascus will prioritize bilateral ties with neighboring states like Turkey, and that any advancements made on the political front can be quickly reversed. Thus, Kurdish political movements ought to respect the gravity of the situation, and draw up a list of realistic cultural demands agreed upon by the Syrian government, which would be less likely to become bargaining chips later in any future regional disputes.

Kurdish cultural demands in Syria are designed to protect values, traditions, and beliefs, as well as the rights to produce art and literature and to be educated in one's mother tongue. If these demands are granted, Kurds in Syria will be able to preserve their values and traditions, strengthen their national identity, and expand their culture.

Given that the Kurds in Syria are allied with U.S.- supported forces, which are concentrated in majority-Kurdish regions, it is possible that the international coalition—and the United States in particular—could help the Kurds secure their cultural rights within the next Syrian constitution. In this manner, the coalition forces could support their Kurdish allies without jeopardizing their relationship with Turkey.

At the heart of Kurdish national identity lies a distinct Kurdish culture that is more important than any single political goal. As such, messy regional realities call on Kurdish negotiators to always keep in mind those who they represent in the negotiations and refrain from the harmful practice of tying cultural demands to political ones. ❖

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