

Why Syria's Kurds are Struggling Politically

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Brief Analysis

According to one Kurdish proverb, “the Kurd loses at the negotiating table in hours what he has gained on the battlefield over years.”

Indeed, although in recent years Syrian Kurdish organizations have demonstrated their military effectiveness in the war against the Islamic State, they have so far been unable to translate their successes in the battlefield into political victories.

One major obstacle preventing Syrian Kurds from gaining political power is their difficulty in forming a united front, both internationally and domestically. Within Syria, a bitter hostility persists between two national Kurdish political parties: the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (ENKS). The PYD has previously arrested ENKS leaders, burned ENKS offices, and prevented ENKS members from holding meetings and conferences. Combined with the vicious media battle between the two groups, relations between the parties' bases have eroded significantly in the past few years.

At the regional level, the PYD's ties to the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have meant that the PYD has failed to overcome its differences with the government in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish Regional Government has connections to the ENKS and views the PKK as a rival organization. As a result, the PYD has missed multiple opportunities to capitalize on its shared borders with Iraqi Kurdistan, which have been closed more than once due to these strained relations.

Furthermore, Syrian Kurdish groups have put themselves at a disadvantage by failing to alleviate tensions with Turkey, which continues to pressure the United States to limit its aid to Syrian Kurdish areas. Turkey's main concern is the PYD's links to the PKK, which the Turkish government views as a domestic terrorist organization. Likewise, the conflict between the PKK and Turkey has affected the PYD's relationship with Turkey's Syrian-based allies. These tensions have negatively impacted the PYD's ability to administer self-rule in Syria and pose a lasting issue given the PYD-controlled area's shared borders with Turkey.

In the broader international arena, the Kurds have not been successful in building solid multilateral relationships nor in obtaining recognition for their autonomy in Syria. An independent Kurdish delegation has not been allowed to represent Syrian Kurds in international conferences concerning Syria, and, to make matters worse, the Kurds themselves have failed to form a political body capable of promoting their interests at such conferences.

Despite the above, Kurdish organizations in Syria can take measures to overcome the obstacles they currently face in order to develop increased political standing. To do so, they must first try to curtail the influence regional Kurdish forces—such as Iraqi Kurdistan and the PKK—have over the internal Syrian Kurdish political decision-making process. By separating the latter from the former, Syria’s Kurdish parties will be able to more fully represent their interests to the international community as separate from broader regional conflicts.

Consequently, Syrian Kurds must endeavor to coalesce their organizations—especially the PYD and the ENKS—into a united political body. Although establishing such a united political front through a direct merger may not be feasible, it would be possible to form a coalition from the discrete Kurdish political forces in Kurdish-controlled Rojava and east of the Euphrates. This union may be feasible because of the parties’ shared common vision for the future of these regions of Syria. If such a coalition develops, the ENKS could play a positive role in building relations with Turkey and enabling the entry of essential commercial goods through Turkish gateways, which would also benefit Syria as a whole.

As in many cases, the United States, whose interests are tied to maintaining stability and preventing the return of ISIS in the area east of the Euphrates, can also offer a helping hand. Washington could assist the Kurds by acting as a mediator between parties as it did in 1998 with the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan. In that instance, the [Washington Agreement \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-agreement-signals-new-u.s.-commitment\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-agreement-signals-new-u.s.-commitment) strengthened (<https://www.rferl.org/a/1090385.html>) the internal unity of Iraq’s Kurdish parties and allowed the disparate groups to refocus on their common goals. Today, Washington can similarly help ameliorate the relationship between Syrian Kurds and Turkey by ensuring that the area east of the Euphrates will not be handed over to the PKK.

Thus, by working towards greater unity, Syrian Kurds will have better chances of succeeding at the negotiation table. And, in order to promote its own interests, the United States would be wise to offer its support in facilitating this union. ❖

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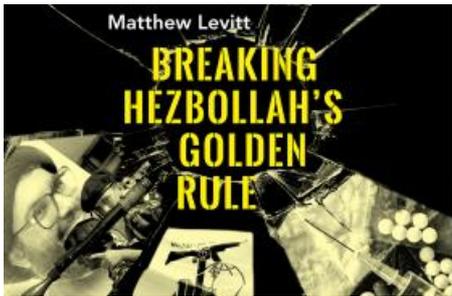
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