

# How will Syria's Kurds maintain their authority?

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Jiwan Soz is a Kurdish journalist based in France and a member of the French Press Syndicate. His articles focus on Turkish affairs and minorities in the Middle East, as well as human rights and media freedom issues.



Brief Analysis

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With a history of oppression by Damascus regimes, Syrian Kurds have achieved an unprecedented level of de facto autonomy in the past seven years. In the long run, however, these gains are at risk for three related reasons: disunity even within the Syrian Kurdish community; problematic ties to Kurdish parties outside Syria; and tense relations with key neighboring countries. Only if all three issues are addressed can the future of Syria's Kurds be secured.

The Kurds in Syria have endured long decades of difficult humanitarian conditions. The state has classified them as second-class citizens, and they have not been able to obtain sensitive, high-level or important positions in the Syrian state. Even normal employment in state agencies has been difficult, bordering on impossible. Despite many Kurdish attempts to achieve broad political changes in Syria during the era of the father-and-son presidents, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, and even before this period, their various efforts have failed. One example of this was their challenge to Syrian authorities when Kurds attempted to celebrate Nowruz, the Kurdish national holiday which serves as the Kurdish new year, in the capital Damascus in 1986. This attempt resulted in confrontations between revelers and Republican Guard forces, leading to the death of a young Kurdish man named Suleyman Adi, whom the Kurds consider a martyr.

In the decades after this incident, the Syrian authorities continued their oppressive behavior toward the Kurds, and the situation remained as it had been. The Kurds were forbidden from promoting their language in the country, and arrests were made against those active in their political parties, which had been banned since the first Kurdish party in Syria emerged in 1957. Likewise, the situation did not change for tens of thousands of Kurds stripped of Syrian citizenship in a plan known as the "Arabic Belt," adopted by the Syrian government in 1962 to clear northeastern Syria of Kurds and settle Arab families there instead.

At the start of the year 2000, Kurds in Syria began to participate in open anti-regime protests and sit-ins in Damascus on international Human Rights Day. They demanded an improvement in their conditions, the restoration of citizenship to those stripped of it, and constitutional recognition of Kurds as the second largest ethnic group in the country.

These protests were followed by the famous popular uprising of 2004, which encompassed the largest Kurdish cities in Syria, such as Qamishli, Kobani, and Afrin, in addition to the main areas where they were located in the capital and in Aleppo at that time. However, dozens were killed and wounded without achieving their aims.

The failure of most Kurdish parties in Syria to achieve their aims did not impact their numbers. However, as there came to be more than twenty parties in Syria as a result of the many defections in their ranks. Despite this large number, they were also unable to effect any changes. However minor, to the policy of the Syrian authorities by dealing with them. Security repression continued, and almost no annual Nowruz celebration passed without deaths and injuries, even in the last years before the eruption of popular protests in Syria in mid-March 2011. The largely positive political relations between the Syrian regime and the Iraqi and Turkish Kurdish parties did not succeed in producing any tangible positive results for the Kurds in Syria, who remained deprived of their most basic civil rights. This situation continued when Iraqi President Jalal Talabani announced the formation of his party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, from Damascus.

The Kurdish situation was the same when the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Ocalan, was residing in Damascus. The relationships between the Syrian regime and these two major parties produced no positive results for their conditions in Syria. Similarly, there were no notable improvement to the conditions of the Kurds in Syria from the Syrian regime's relationship with Masoud Barzani, the now-resigned president of Iraq's Kurdistan region.

According to a media interview with Hoshyar Zebari, who served as Iraq's foreign minister for ten years, Barzani had described the Syrian regime as an "ally and friend," after his return from his secret visit to America in 2002. On reaching Iraqi Kurdistan from America by way of Frankfurt airport, he proposed to the Kurdish delegation accompanying him that they head to Damascus to inform the regime of the coming fall of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime, and to reach an understanding with them. This is what in fact occurred, according to Zebari's statements, in which he also confirmed that Barzani had carried out this trip to Damascus "in the interest of relations with countries which were sympathetic to our cause." He did not mention whether this trip concerned Syria's Kurds or if they would benefit from it.

The three major Kurdish parties with their leaders, Masoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani and Abdullah Ocalan, have not aimed to develop or improve the conditions of Kurds in Syria. Indeed, while each had their own interests, they added a new problem: the linkage between these three parties and the parties in Syria, which no longer had a Kurdish-Syrian character, but for the most part were divided along the lines of the major disputes among the three Kurdish parties. The prime case in point is the historical ideological link between Ocalan's PKK in Turkey and the PYD in Syria, and their current dominance over other Syrian Kurdish parties with links to the Kurds in Iraq. The support that Kurdish parties received in Syria from these three main parties resulted in major political divisions and tended to lead to violent confrontation, as occurred in the mid-1990s when Barzani's party fought for power with Talabani's party in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Today, Syrian-Kurdish parties have been unable to find a formula to share the administration of the regions which they control as a result of the civil war Syria has been witnessing for years.

After decades of Syrian regime repression of the Kurds and the lack of acknowledgment of their presence, they were able to impose de facto control over several territories. In 2016, they announced their intention to establish a federal system in "Rojava," the Kurdish name for their regions in Syria, despite the fact that Turkey considers the establishment of this entity to be a threat to its national security, which Turkey has stated repeatedly through its president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Kurdish federal areas today include wide geographical territories – including areas which are not majority Kurdish which it was able to seize after defeating fighters of the Islamic State group (IS) with support from international coalition forces – and are relatively safe areas compared with others.

To close, the Kurds can consolidate their gains in Syria first through a political opening between their parties, and

second through a call for dialogue and a Kurdish-Kurdish agreement, as occurred with the two major Kurdish parties in Iraq's Kurdistan region in the mid-1990s under the leadership of Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. The current rift and fragmentation among the Kurdish parties do not serve the Kurdish national interests or their aspiration for autonomy. Therefore, Syrian Kurdish parties must be invited to dialogue which results in the formulation of a unified national strategy that contributes to the unity of the Kurdish people in Syria.

In addition, Syria's Kurds require openness to neighboring countries which are in direct contact with the borders of Kurdish cities, particularly in order to benefit from economic exchanges. This means that guaranteeing the Syrian Kurds maintain their gains relates directly to relations among different Kurdish parties -- with one another, and with neighboring states, all in the interests of the Kurdish community. ❖

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