Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

The Narrowing Field of Syria's Opposition

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In March 2011, Syrians took to the streets to demand the fall of their country's dictator, Bashar al-Assad. With calls for dignity, freedom, and democracy, secular protestors organized Local Coordination Committees to plan demonstrations, especially on Fridays, pressing for a more representative and pluralistic Syria. The Assad regime responded with live gunfire and an escalation of arrests. As soldiers from the Syrian army defected to neighboring countries and members of an initially peaceful opposition picked up weapons to fight back, the emerging opposition formed Revolutionary Councils to coordinate between civil bodies in various "liberated" areas of Syria and armed groups fighting the Assad regime.

These early Assad opponents were geographically based and primarily secular in their orientation and goals. But as UN-backed diplomacy in spring 2012 failed to yield a political solution to the crisis and U.S. president Barack Obama rejected a plan to arm the nascent Syrian militia seeking to take down Assad, the task was left to America's Arab Gulf allies. Quickly, Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades became marginalized, while Islamist groups—particularly Salafi-jihadists whose ideology was closer to Gulf-based Salafism than to any native Syrian belief system—became the most effective fighting forces. They were able to deploy fighters across multiple provinces where local armed groups had remained tied primarily to their communities.

Six years later, despite the country's devastation, groups still exist that espouse the opposition's original goal of bringing about a more democratic and pluralistic Syria in keeping with its diverse demographic makeup. However, these groups are few and increasingly far between, with years of war having driven both the regime and the opposition to extremes, and increasingly to Shiite-Sunni sectarianism. Indeed, a symbiosis between Shiite and Sunni groups has emerged: the Assad regime has come to rely more and more on Hezbollah and Shiite militias to maintain its hold on power, while the Sunni ultraextremist Islamic State has overrun half of Syrian territory.

The remaining opposition groups that emphasize pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual freedoms—rejecting exclusivist, intolerant, and sharia-based agendas—consist primarily of exiled organizations or figures, armed FSA formations who defend their communities but still rely on Salafists or jihadists to take offensive actions, and marginalized opposition groups tolerated by the Assad regime. Further complicating the landscape has been the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its armed People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish group

spawned by the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the United States considers a terrorist organization. Despite this designation, U.S. officials now rely on the PYD as the political arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-majority multiethnic fighting group that Washington hopes can root out the Islamic State in Raqqa and elsewhere in Syria. Another emerging opposition player, the Turkish-supported Euphrates Shield, is likewise muddying the field.

While not addressing grassroots activists, this paper sketches the remaining non-Islamist, pluralistically inclined groups involved in the Syrian conflict, with an eye toward which groups the United States could potentially work with when the war finally ends.

EXTERNAL OPPOSITION

The Syrian opposition-in-exile, represented broadly by the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), has made a point of using language committed to secularism, democracy, and pluralism. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly irrelevant over time owing to infighting, corruption, and the stagnating negotiations. The SNC, formed in November 2012, originally included well-known opposition figures, representatives from various Syrian civic associations, political parties, and Kurdish and Turkmen groups. Nestled next to its two principles of "overthrowing the Syrian regime" and refusing to negotiate, the body lists among its goals "a democratic, pluralistic Syria based on the rule of law and [a] civil State," while also announcing it does not tolerate "acts of revenge and retribution against any group in Syria."[1] While this language would make the coalition an ideal partner for the United States ideologically, the SNC has been significantly undermined by the increasing alienation its inefficiency and corruption have engendered in Syria.

The basis of the current SNC is the Syrian National Council, formed in October 2011 in Istanbul by a group of Syrian oppositionists, many of whom were already in exile because of the Assad regime's refusal to respond to months of protests with anything but violence. At that point, the Syrian National Council stated explicitly that "to overthrow the regime and [facilitate] the establishment of a pluralistic democratic system" was among its tasks.[2] However, more secular-oriented members of the council balked at the presence of a bloc from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, prompting the Brotherhood to release a document committing the group to a democratic, pluralistic future Syria.[3]

The council began to coordinate governance and military efforts later inherited by the SNC, which was formed in response to U.S. urging for a more inclusive opposition umbrella group. In the new arrangement, the council remained the SNC's main bloc. The SNC gained recognition from many foreign countries as a legitimate representative—if not the only representative—of the Syrian people. In March 2013, it established the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), which has made efforts to provide municipal services to opposition-controlled areas through local councils.

However, these efforts were plagued from the outset by corruption and squabbling. By early 2014, the SIG found itself unable to pay employees and therefore largely reliant on Qatari funding, putting it in competition with Saudi-backed SNC blocs. Former SIG employees have complained that Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood exerted undue influence in the SNC as well as the SIG.[4] While some humanitarian efforts continued to be channeled through the SIG and associated civic councils still in Syria, the SNC was increasingly marginalized because of its ineffectiveness.

That ineffectiveness was evident at the various international peace talks held since 2014. The SNC participated in the largely unproductive 2014 Geneva II negotiations, although the decision to attend the talks sparked internal divisions that led to a threat to leave by the Syrian National Council bloc. At an opposition conference in Riyadh in December 2015, nine members of the SNC were chosen to join the thirty-three-member High Negotiation Committee to represent the Syrian opposition in the February 2016 Geneva III talks. To date the broadest-based opposition body, the High Negotiation Committee includes armed groups such as the influential Islamist factions Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam. However, as demonstrated by the exclusion of opposition members from the talks in Astana between the armed groups, Turkey, Iran,

and pro-regime forces, the external opposition has no productive role in negotiations.

While SNC member Riad Hijab was originally selected as the head of the High Negotiation Committee—although not as its chief negotiator—the fact that the committee was formed at all reflects the SNC's lack of clout. Furthermore, the local councils of three of the provinces with the strongest opposition presence—Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib—announced their withdrawal from the SNC in June 2016, citing the coalition's inability "to meet the ambitions of the people of the Syrian revolution."[5]

Moreover, the local councils' move reflected a widespread frustration, if not antagonism, toward the SNC on the ground in Syria. While secular politicians living outside Syria have continued to rearrange themselves into different blocs and coalitions, towns and cities remain besieged, aid goes undelivered, and barrel bombs continue to fall, fundamentally marginalizing these outside players. At the same time, their involvement in negotiations in European cities has not yielded results. As a common rhyming refrain in Syria goes, these secularists are the rebels "in the hotels, not the trenches."

ARMED "MODERATES"

Reliably identifying moderate rebels in Syria—those fighting for a future rule of law based on pluralism and democratic mechanisms—is a nearly impossible task. As the war has turned more sectarian, the lip service paid to secular, pluralist values—which was tainted as the empty discourse of the secular regime—increased in parallel with the growing presence of Islamist groups. As fighting groups have disbanded, reformed, and joined broader coalitions, the ability to ascertain whether fighters in a given brigade envision a future Syrian government resembling anything like Jeffersonian democracy has grown more difficult. Some may find themselves fighting with radical brigades simply because these brigades are most effective. Finally, image-conscious armed groups have tailored their presentation to reflect the ideology of their backers, whether it has meant shaving or growing out their beards. The resulting conformity in appearance has further complicated the task of pinpointing ideologies.

As it stands, the FSA exists as a series of local brigades with notop-down command structure organizing their activity—or ensuring ideological uniformity throughout the country. The traditional signifier for such groups, the three-star Syrian republic flag—adopted as a symbol of the revolution in 2011 and then by the FSA—places a group outside the realm of Salafi-jihadism, but it does not indicate much about that group's political agenda. Indeed, some groups are too small to have even developed such an agenda.

Many of the groups vetted for U.S. support, most notably in the form of TOW missiles, incorporate Islamic themes into their names or logos, indicating that the U.S. process considers what rebel groups *don't* say—incitement through sectarian language or promotion of an exclusivist Islamist program—as much as what they do. Indeed, a few rebel groups are on record as using language supporting democratic and inclusive values, including Division 13 in the north, the Southern Front coalition in the south, and the New Syrian Army (NSA), operating until recently from headquarters near the eastern border with Iraq.[6]

While the SNC nominally claims leadership over FSA forces, it clearly does not exercise such leadership in practice. Rebels operate based on local battlefield exigencies, and the SNC is too disorganized to handle aid delivery, let alone coordinate the hundreds of rebel formations throughout Syria. Further, these groups operate in battlefield environments where larger and better-organized Islamist groups throw their weight around, dominating regional coalitions and operations rooms that have been crucial to rebel gains.

In particular, the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—and its later incarnations, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham—has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to wipe out the FSA brigades it dislikes because they either have Western backing or are competing for influence. Moreover, while FSA-flavor groups have tended to join coalitions that exclude Jabhat al-Nusra and more extremist entities, they share an enemy. As such, they are forced not only to cooperate tacitly on the same frontlines as hard-core Islamist brigades, but also to rely on the intercession of these brigades to prevent Jabhat al-Nusra from chasing them out of their territory.[7]

The situation in southern Syria is less complicated, although not without questions. The February 2014 charter of the FSA's Southern Front, the umbrella coalition for brigades fighting primarily in Deraa province, provides unambiguous language on their ideological commitment:

> We represent many classes but our goal is one: to topple the Assad regime and give Syria a chance at a better future. There is no room for sectarianism and extremism in our society, and they will find no room in Syria's future. The Syrian people deserve the freedom to express their opinions and to work toward a better future.

The Southern Front's constituent brigades also voice more support for inclusive values, albeit not by much. However, some Syria commentators have noted that the use of more-inclusive language simply represents a tactic to clear hurdles to access to Western backing and weapons.[8]

In the east, the FSA has not recovered from the Islamic State's rapid summer 2014 takeover of most of Syria's Deir al-Zour province. However, in November 2015, the NSA announced its formation along with its goal of expelling the Islamic State (IS) from the region. A U.S.- and Jordan-backed project, the group correspondingly prioritized fighting IS locally in Deir al-Zour over combating the Assad regime.[9] But the group experienced little early success. Beyond capturing the al-Tanf border crossing that serves at its base, the group was beaten back by IS in its only major offensive, at Abu Kamal—citing the redirection of U.S. air support to IS targets in Iraq as the cause—and its activity has been otherwise limited to hit-and-run raids. The failure of the NSA to recruit and mount successful operations, despite being situated along a friendly border and unencumbered by the multiplicity of enemies in theaters like northern Syria, highlights the difficulties the United States faces in finding capable partners in even the best of circumstances. At the same time, the controversy surrounding the redirected air support adds credence to widespread rebel complaints about fickle U.S. support. Further, it underscores the claim that even when the United States does find opposition forces willing to operate within U.S. ideological and operational parameters, such as those in Iraq, American support can be unreliable.

DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY

The PYD, a Kurdish leftist political party with a parallel military structure known as the YPG, has received support from Western countries looking for a non-regime-affiliated partner in Syria that clearly articulates commitments to secularism and pluralism. The group, formed in Syria in 2003, grew out of the Turkey-based PKK when the Damascus government ended its unofficial sponsorship of the group, a policy pursued for leverage against Ankara.[10]

The PYD, like the PKK, adheres to the ideology and philosophies espoused by the Kurdish nationalist Abdullah Ocalan, who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999, after being forced to flee Syria. During his time in prison, Ocalan melded various strands of Western political philosophy into a proposed system for grassroots direct democracy for a wider Kurdish-majority region, a system he dubbed "Democratic Confederalism."

In his writing, Ocalan describes the system as "a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings."[11] Although the 2014 social contract governing the three areas under de facto PYD control in northern Syria—Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira—does not make specific reference to Ocalan or his theory, the articles outlining the principles and mechanisms of democratic self-administration there closely mirror Ocalan's.[12] The charter also identifies itself as "a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens" and lays out its goals as "freedom, justice, dignity, and democracy...led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability."[13]

Currently, the PYD/YPG, along with its Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and security branch, the Asayesh, controls the swath of territory covered by the 2014 charter, an area referred to as Rojava, or alternatively Western Kurdistan. Although formally Rojava is governed by a coalition known as the Movement for a Democratic Society

(TEV-DEM), which consists of six parties including the PYD, many analysts claim the PYD is using TEV-DEM to place a democratic veneer on a PYD-dominated system.[14]

Indeed, evidence suggests PYD human rights abuses and practices at odds with the group's democratic principles. Part of the problem is that in the Rojava area, only 60 percent of a total population numbering some two million is Kurdish.[15] In particular, a 2015 Amnesty International report documented the razing and forced displacement by the YPG and Asayesh of non-Kurdish villages in northeastern Syria.[16] A year earlier, a Human Rights Watch report documented "arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, due process violations, unsolved disappearances, and the use of children in PYD security forces."[17]

The Human Rights Watch report also pointed to the targeting of Kurdish political parties that oppose the PYD. These parties operate nominally under the banner of the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), which has consistently criticized the PYD, including the social charter in 2014 and later gestures. After the PYD and affiliated parties announced the formal incorporation of the Federation of Northern Syria–Rojava in March 2016, the KNC members vehemently denounced the move, calling it "unilateral" and "reckless."[18]

The PYD fed charges of heavy-handedness when it arrested the head of the KNC in Hasaka in August 2016.[19] At the same time, the PYD may have dispelled longstanding questions over its allegedly warm relationship with the Syrian regime by expelling remaining regime militias from Hasaka city. Although the regime had never formally recognized Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, it had tolerated the de facto situation there, withdrawing much of its military presence.

Some analysts speculate that the PYD's militant PKK roots prevent the group from abandoning a top-down system of rule and sincerely implementing a project more secular and democratic than any others evidently on display in Syria. As an International Crisis Group report commented, this heritage has "encumbered the party with a rigid culture and vague program that are out of sync with popular expectations."[20] All the same, the United States, having little leverage on the Syrian battlefield, has few if any other alternatives for combating the Islamic State.

SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

The SDF is the official umbrella military force of Rojava and, as such, has been primarily engaged in fighting the Islamic State. The core of the SDF consists of Kurdish YPG and YPJ fighters, with the remaining brigades a mix of Arab and minority armed groups. The proportion of YPG fighters in the SDF seems to support a prevailing hypothesis that the SDF was created to provide the YPG with a cover of inclusiveness by incorporating token FSA and non-Kurdish brigades.

An anti-IS force with proven effectiveness, the SDF has been a steady recipient of U.S. support, benefiting from assistance by U.S. Special Forces and anti-IS coalition air support. Notably, the PYD, as the YPG's military wing, employs the same language on and commitments to secular democracy, but it likewise faces accusations of unsavory tactics, including forced conscription and forced displacement.

While many of the non-YPG brigades in the SDF may be considered secular and democratic by dint of their association with the SDF, nonideological factors such as "bandwagoning" and receiving U.S. funding are other possible motivators. Many of the non-YPG and FSA groups in the SDF actively demonstrate a commitment to pluralism as mixed-ethnicity battalions. Should the SDF become increasingly involved in executing the PYD's heavy-handed orders, or should U.S.-SDF cooperation fragment, the United States could consider these groups for an alternative ground force.

EUPHRATES SHIELD

In August 2016, Turkish tanks and Special Forces entered Syria to support a coalition of FSA brigades in retaking the border city of Jarabulus from the Islamic State. The cross-border action marked the beginning of Operation Euphrates Shield, which was aimed at retaking IS-controlled territory and ultimately progress-

ing south to the city of al-Bab. Turkey's unannounced but immediately clear ulterior motive was to prevent the linkage of the PYD's Afrin and Kobane cantons. In short order, Euphrates Shield retook Dabiq—a symbolic victory given the town's important place in IS eschatology—and its brigades now control the city of al-Bab. Several of these FSA battalions have, in addition to fighting IS, clashed directly with SDF forces.

An estimated two to three thousand rebel fighters are associated with the Turkish operation, including many long-established FSA brigades operating on multiple fronts in northern Syria. Whereas Turkey has historically supported some such groups, others have received TOW missiles from the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition. As with other rebel coalitions in Syria, the brigades of Euphrates Shield do not warrant being painted with one ideological brush.

Some brigades, such as Division 13 and the al-Mutasim Brigade, are familiar FSA groups that have publicly mentioned democracy as part of their political vision.[21] Yet, like nearly all FSA brigades, none of the Euphrates Shield member groups has a clear and comprehensive political program on record. The ambitions of some groups can be convoluted, given the web of alliances and players in Syria. For example, the leader of Liwa Ahfad Salah al-Din, a Kurdish-majority brigade in Euphrates Shield, was reluctant to identify his group as "secular" but emphasized its "civil and democratic nature," while also criticizing the PYD's political program. The fact that this is one Euphrates Shield group also receiving coalition support is telling: public references to democracy are rare.

Nonsectarian FSA groups are also hard to find. For example, one of the groups supported by the SNC is named after an ancient Arab-Persian battle. Others work in alliance with Islamist brigades. Videos have surfaced of the Sultan Murad Division, one of the FSA Turkmen brigades in the coalition, in which the division's fighters torture other pro-YPG FSA fighters and YPG fighters.[22] Even classic FSA "moderates"—those using the flag and the motto "Long live Syria, free and dignified"—require thorough vetting of individual leaders and members, since such individuals do not make statements that would clearly indicate their positions.

The United States is familiar with many of these groups, given their proximity to the Turkish border, where the U.S. train-and-equip program, begun in fall 2014, was run. Accordingly, the United States has continued to support many of these groups in their fight against the Islamic State. However, the alliance is disjointed in terms of both coordination and ideology, with the unifying factor being opposition to the YPG and IS. To the extent possible, the United States, either unilaterally or by marshaling Turkish leverage, could push for vetted forces in Euphrates Shield to lead important campaigns should the SDF prove to be a troublesome partner.

INTERNAL OPPOSITION

Whereas the language of many groups acting on the ground in Syria is either vague on democracy or tinged with sectarianism (e.g., anti-Alawite or anti-Shiite or anti-Sunni), the platforms of Syria's internal opposition entities are explicit in their commitment to democracy. Yet these groups, which include the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), the Building the Syrian State (BSS) movement, and the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, have been dubbed by the regime as the "patriotic opposition"[23] and are generally irrelevant, given their ultimate dependence on regime toleration. They thus hold little legitimacy or leverage in opposition-controlled areas.

The various Damascus-based opposition blocs formed throughout 2011 as protests continued and veteran opposition figures attempted to bring organization to the popular unrest. Whereas some of these opposition groupings would join the Syrian National Council, ultimately based in Istanbul, and later joined the larger SNC, the leaders and members of these parties for the most part remained in Damascus. The Popular Front for Change and Liberation is a legally recognized opposition party, which gained seats in the parliament after opposition parties were legalized in 2012. The NCB and BSS are both technically illegal opposition coalitions comprising smaller parties, and their leaders and members have been occasionally arrested by the regime.

All three parties espouse a future Syrian government based on democratic principles including equality, inclusivity, and a rejection of sectarianism. Although both the NCB and BSS take a more critical view of the Assad regime, their stance does not even approach the vehemence of the external opposition. The NCB, which was formed first, has called for "prosecuting those responsible for violence"[24] and for an interim government, as well as other reforms. The BSS, created out of frustration with the NCB's perceived ineffectiveness, "rejects dialogue while government troops operate against the opposition."[25] Founder Louay Hussein has also said that the regime is "incapable of protecting the country."[26]

The NCB and BSS, like other internal opposition groups, share a rejection of foreign military intervention and the militarization of the opposition. In 2014, both the Popular Front and the NCB signed a memorandum of organization calling for "comprehensive grassroots change, which means the transition from the current authoritarian regime to a democratic pluralistic system within a democratic civil State based on the principle of equal citizenship to all Syrians regardless of their ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities."[27]

As already noted, these groups—among the more influential of the internal opposition—have little leverage over events on the ground. The Popular Front has only 5 of 250 seats in a Baath Party–dominated parliament, while the BSS and NCB attend what have proved to be sideshow conferences arranged by Russia and Egypt aimed at organizing Syria's internal opposition. Their representation on the High Negotiation Committee in Geneva, itself a seemingly doomed process, is limited to a handful of advisory positions. In the meantime, the political calculus for any settlement changes on the ground rapidly, further marginalizing these groups.

CONCLUSION

Overall, many opponents of Syria's autocratic Assad regime espouse pluralism, religious tolerance, and individual freedoms, while opposing Islamist and sharia-based agendas. Despite this, the degree to which such lofty goals meet the reality on the ground is increasingly in question, as the war's bloody trajectory has led nearly all parties to use extreme means to pursue increasingly extreme and noninclusive goals.

In selecting groups to work with in Syria during and after its civil war, the United States will likely need to weigh criteria besides rhetoric to locate a middle ground between autocrats and extremists. Political organization, viability, and control of territory and constituencies will be key, as will the support such groups receive from Syria's neighbors that have carved out spheres of influence inside the country.

Six years into the Syrian war, the United States has little to show for the billions of dollars it has spent propping up opponents of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Yet as a de facto partition looms—and both the Assad regime and opposition face manpower shortages—Washington may yet be able to wield its influence more effectively. In the past, U.S. goals were often viewed through the lens of democracy promotion and regime change. In the future, by comparison, they are likely to be seen as efforts to both combat jihadism and hedge against the return of the durable safe havens in which jihadists train.

NOTES

1. See the Syrian National Coalition charter, "Declaration by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces," http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syrian-revolutionary-and-opposition-forces.html.
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6. In Division 13's case, the leader gave an interview with an opposition website in which he outlined the group's goal of building an "inclusive, civilian state" and a unified, Assad-free Syria. Few other groups, however, have made such clear commitments.
7. Sam Heller, "Are Syria's Rebels at Al Qaeda's Mercy?" Century Foundation, July 26, 2016, https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-rebels-al-qaedas-mercy/.
8. Aron Lund, "Does the 'Southern Front' Exist?" Carnegie Middle East Center, March 21, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55054.
9. Sam Heller, "Syria's Newest Rebel Army Has Its Sights on the Islamic State," *Vice News*, November 30, 2015, https://news.vice.com/article/syrias-newest-rebel-army-has-its-sights-on-the-islamic-state.
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11. Abdullah Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2011), p. 26, http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf.
12. "Charter of the Social Contract in Rojava (Syria)," Kurdish Institute of Brussels, February 7, 2014, http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/charter-of-the-social-contract/.
13. Ibid.
14. Language from international observers (at, e.g., the International Crisis Group, Chatham House) indicates skepticism. To wit: "The official [TEV-DEM] democratic ideology is, however, trumped by the PYD's desire to monopolize power. Many activists see the Rojava project is practically governed by TEV-DEM, and that the PYD permits leadership positions in the Rojava and DAA [Democratic Autonomous Administration] governance structures only to those who are willing to abide by its rules." See Rana Khalaf, *Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2016), p. 11, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-12-08-governing-rojava-khalaf.pdf.
15. Fabrice Balanche, "Rojava's Sustainability and the PKK's Regional Strategy," PolicyWatch 2680 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 24, 2016), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy.
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25. Ibid.

26. Mustafa al-Haj, "Syrian Authorities Arrest Opposition Leader," Al-Monitor, November 13, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/syria-regime-arrest-bss-leader.html#ixzz4IMeDqR7d.

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