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Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition?

The development of Kurdish
parties, 1956–2011



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The purpose of this essay is to analyze the current landscape of Kurdish political parties in Syria, including their protagonists, their political goals, their concrete political actions, and their significance for society. Given the current situation, a political analysis of the Kurdish parties, which form a significant part of the Syrian opposition, is of considerable importance. Since the middle of March 2011, mass dissident demonstrations have challenged the Ba'th regime. However, the outcome of the Syrian revolution thus far remains unforeseeable. If President Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'th regime fall, the Kurdish parties will try to implement their political visions of a »new Syria.« What do these visions actually look like? Do they extend beyond Kurd-specific demands? Who is leading the Kurdish parties, and which supporters do they have at their disposal? What role have the Kurdish parties thus far played in the revolution and within the Syrian opposition as a whole?

The first section is concerned with the beginnings of the Kurdish parties in Syria; in other words with the history of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê), KDPS for short, from its formation in 1957 until its split into three wings in 1970. The difficulties and internal conflicts apparent in this early phase of the party are interesting insofar as they remain relevant to the present day.

The second section of the essay addresses the current landscape of the Kurdish parties: fourteen parties, of which eleven have arisen out of the KDPS. The programmatic direction as well as the social and political

relevance of the parties will be discussed. Among other things, our analysis will make clear that the Syrian-Kurdish movement distinguishes itself from the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iraq in several significant ways. In contrast, the differences in content between the individual parties are generally marginal and only responsible for a fraction of the conflicts and divisions within the party spectrum.

From formation to division: The history of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS) from 1957 to 1970

Until the second half of the 1950s, there was no Kurdish party in Syria with a Kurdish-nationalist agenda that focused specifically on Syria. The nationalist Khoybun Committee (1927–1944), which was founded in Beirut and whose most important actors lived in Syria, focused primarily on the fight against Turkey. This was also the case for the organization that followed Khoybun, the Kurdish League (1945–1946), as well as for the brothers Jaladat and Kamiran Badrkhan, who were initially active in Khoybun and later acted independently. Thus, for example, after the Second World War, the Kurds gave up the opportunity to demand specific rights for Syria's Kurds from the Allies.¹ The situation of Syria's Kurds and their position with regards to the government in Damascus was only of central concern to the Christian-Kurdish autonomy movement (1932–1939), which was led by Hajo Agha among others.²

Although both during the French mandate and into the 1950s, individual Kurdish figures from the traditional tribal elite were elected to the Syrian parliament—among them were Jamil and Akram Ibrahim Pasha, Hasan and Akram Hajo, and Hasan's son Sulayman Hajo—there were no attempts to build a Kurdish-nationalist party around them. Insofar as politicized Kurds were engaged in party politics, they were involved above all in the Syrian Communist Party.

It was not until 1956 that 'Uthman Sabri, a former Khoybun activist and a member of the Society of Pacific Syrians (Civata Aştîxwazên Sûrî), a Communist party group,³ the law student 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish and

¹ Tejel 2009: 86.

² Savelsberg Ms.

³ Cigerxwîn 1995: 285.

Hamzah Niweran, who came from Ra's al-'Ayn (Serê Kaniyê), began to think about forming a Kurdish party under the name »Partiya Kurdên Demokratên Sûrî (P.K.D.S.)« (Syrian Democratic Kurd's Party). With the support of Nuruddin Zaza and Jalal Talabani, who at this point was living as a student in Syria, they composed a party program »Rêzname« (»charter«).⁴

The founding meeting of the party took place on June 14, 1957—following conversations with the Aleppo Group, which included Rashid Hammu, from 'Afrin, Muhammad 'Ali Khoja, Khalil Muhammad, and Shawkat Hanan Na'san, all of whom had split from the Communist Party in 1956, because the party was not willing to include rights for the Kurds on its agenda.⁵ The meeting was held in Muhammad 'Ali Khoja's apartment in Aleppo.⁶ It was agreed that the party would be called the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS).⁷ A central committee was formed, consisting of 'Uthman Sabri, 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, Hamzah Niweran, as well as the members of the Aleppo Group. At the end of 1957, Shaykh Muhammad 'Isa Mulla Mahmud from Darbasiyah joined the party and was accepted as the eighth member of the Central Committee. In early 1958, Nuruddin Zaza, who had recently returned from Switzerland after finishing his dissertation, followed in becoming Central Committee member and was named chairman.⁸ In 1958, the Society of the United Kurdish Democratic Youth in Syria (Civata Yekîtiya Xortên Demokratên Kurd li Sûriyê), which was based in al-Qamishli, also joined the KDPS. The Society had been established in the early 1950s⁹ and one of its goals was the liberation and unification of the Kurds and Kurdistan (Paragraph 5 of the charter).¹⁰ Along with Kurdish-nationalist positions, the charter also reflects leftist principles and ideas. Thus it addresses women's issues, and terms like »reactionary« and »imperialism« are included in the text.¹¹ Among the founding members were the elementary school teacher Muhammad Mulla Ahmad and the high school students Sami Mulla Ahmad Nami, Darwish Mulla Sulayman, and 'Abdul'aziz 'Ali 'Abdi.¹² The Freedom Party (Partiya Azadî) also followed in 1958. This party had been founded that same year by a group of Kurds from the Jazirah, who had previously left the

⁴ Written interview with 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, June 2009.

⁵ Ahmed 2004: 26.

⁶ Omer 2004: 22; Namî 2000: 87.

⁷ Written interview with 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, June 2009.

⁸ Namî 2000: 88. According to 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, 'Uthman Sabri was previously the chairman; written interview, June 2009.

⁹ According to Sami Mulla Ahmad Nami, the society was formed in 1953/54, while Muhammad Mulla Ahmad claims that he and his friend 'Abdul'aziz 'Ali 'Abdi had initiated it in 1952; see Namî 2000: 75 and Ahmed 2004: 20–21.

¹⁰ Namî 2000: 76.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Namî 2000: 75.

Communist Party. Its most well-known members were the poet Mulla Shaykhmus, called Jigarkhwin, Mulla Shaykhmus Qaraqati, Mulla Shaykhmus Shaykhi, and Muhammad Mulla Fakhri.¹³ Among other reasons, they had left the Communist Party because the party had refused to issue declarations in the Kurdish language and was not ready to get involved in Kurdish rights.¹⁴ The program of the Freedom Party is not known, but it can be assumed that Communist goals took precedence and nationalist goals were of secondary importance.¹⁵ Jigarkhwin was accepted into the Central Committee of the KDPS, which was composed of ten people at this point.

The KDPS party program was already passed on June 14, 1957, as ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish remembers it, and the program was fundamentally an Arabic translation of the *Rêzname*.¹⁶ The party program is no longer available, but copies of the original version of the *Rêzname* still exist. Thus the following will analyze the latter in order to get an idea of the KDPS’s goals.¹⁷

The *Rêzname* contains a total of eleven paragraphs. The beginning includes neither a historical, nor a political, nor a social classification or analysis of the situation of the Kurds in Syria. By not including a preamble, the program also misses an opportunity to establish the party’s legitimacy.

Paragraph 1 of the program states that the party was founded in order to »protect the Kurds from mistakes, oppression, and from disappearing.«

Paragraph 2 takes a position on the form of government sought: »Because the Syrian Democratic Kurd’s Party is a peace-loving and progressive party, it champions a people’s democracy in its homeland Syria.«

Paragraph 3 states that, in the name of the Kurds in Syria, the party is fighting the »imperialist exploitation« of the country. Thus in both Paragraphs 2 and 3, the influence of communist ideas is obvious.

Paragraph 4 again turns to the Kurdish question and defines the goal of the party: »As soon as the shadow of imperialistic exploitation over our country, Syria, disappears [...] the P.K.D.S. will demand »special status« for the 400,000 Kurds in the Jazirah, in ‘Ayn al-‘Arab, and in Çiyayê Kurmênc [‘Afrin region], in order to ensure

13 Namî 2000: 89; Cigerxwîn 1995: 326–327, and Ahmed 2004: 25.

14 Ahmed 2004: 25.

15 According to Jigarkhwin, the Freedom Party before it disintegrated and joined the KDPS, served as a platform to critique the Syrian communists. Some party members had wanted to form a Kurdish Communist Party, but he prevailed with the argument that in one and the same country there could only be one Communist Party; Cigerxwîn 1995: 327.

16 Darwish 2000: 18.

17 A copy of the *Rêzname* can be found in Darwish 2000: 43–45.

their political, social, and cultural rights within the Syrian state.« Here it becomes clear that the goal of the party was not independence, but a solution to the Kurdish question within the framework of the Syrian state.

In Paragraphs 5 and 6, the main subject is again the »fight against imperialism.« Thus Paragraph 5 states: »The P.K.D.S. welcomes the Kurdish fight in Turkey, in Iran, and in Iraq, as well as [the fight] of all oppressed peoples for the liberation of their states from the imperialists. The P.K.D.S. will lend them a hand so that they secure their freedom.«

Paragraph 6 explains that »in its own state and in Northern Kurdistan,« the Turkish government has built military bases for the imperialists, who have turned the region into a combat zone in a future world war. As such, a war would have dire consequences for the Kurds and for the Arab states, the party sees itself compelled to alert the Kurds in Turkey to this »truth« and to work together with their Arab brothers to oppose the imperialist military bases.

Paragraphs 7 and 8 define whom the party relies on for its work in society—»all patriotic, democratic, honorable, peace-loving Kurds«—and whom they consider supporters—all peaceful, socialist people's governments.

Paragraph 9 emphasizes the desire for peace and the rejection of any sort of military agreement. A world war would be »a huge catastrophe for the [whole] world, [but] especially for the small and oppressed ethnic groups.«

Finally, Paragraphs 10 and 11 are concerned with concrete measures to improve the situation of the Kurds. Thus Paragraph 10 states that the protracted oppression of the Kurds has led to »harmful thoughts,« which must be combated by educating the Kurds. Paragraph 11 defines the measures which can be taken prior to achieving the »main goal« of a »special status« for the Kurds (see Paragraph 4). In the realm of culture, the paragraph mentions the founding of cultural committees in the Kurdish regions, the publication of books, magazines, and newspapers in the Kurdish language, the translation of foreign language books and articles into Kurdish, as well as convincing the government to open additional schools in the Kurdish regions. On the societal level, farmers are to be further edu-

cated, and the government should be convinced to ensure poor farmers state loans and to establish hospitals and orphanages. The paragraph also mentions donations by the wealthy as a possible source of financing for this. Moreover, donations should be collected for poor pupils, who are unable to continue their studies because of their financial situation.

According to ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, the party program was changed in early 1959; at that point, the goal of the party was defined as an »independent and united Kurdistan.« In addition, the name of the party was changed to the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê). These amendments were undertaken as a result of changes to the program of the KDP-Iraq.¹⁸ Darwish further explains that in 1963, both changes were reversed.¹⁹ In contrast, Sami Mulla Ahmad Nami writes that the party was already called »Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê« (Kurdistan Democratic Party) upon its formation and its most important goal was the liberation and unification of Kurdistan.²⁰ Muhammad Mulla Ahmad in turn explains that these changes to the party program had already taken place in 1958. After a session between party leaders and Kurdish notables, they agreed on various political goals that included striving for an »independent and united Kurdistan.« Admittedly, this agreement did not last long.²¹ Whatever the case, it becomes clear that in the early phase of the party, its goals, and associated with that, its name, were the subject of heated discussion.

So much then, for the program and the ideological debates—between 1957 and 1965, the KDPS was, in fact, primarily occupied with building party structures. Regional groups formed in the Kurdish regions, as well as in Aleppo and Damascus. The concrete number of supporters is largely unclear. The events surrounding the parliamentary elections on December 5, 1961 after a military coup ended Egyptian-Syrian unity, suggest a high popularity. At the time of the French mandate there was a tradition that the lists of candidates for election in the al-Qamishli/‘Amudah region named a Kurd, an Arabized, urban Kurd, an Arab, and a Syrian-Orthodox candidate. The list prepared by the KDPS,

18 According to Jemo 1990: 23–24, who references ‘Uthman Sabri, this name change did not take place until early 1960 under the influence of Jalal Talabani. Sinclair & Kajjo 2011 state, without specifying particular sources, that Talabani »forced« this name change.

19 Darwish 2000: 73.

20 Namî 2000: 87.

21 Ahmed 2004: 32–33.

whose top candidate was Nuruddin Zaza, broke with this tradition and nominated two rural Kurds and a Christian from al-Qamishli along with Zaza. At that point in time the military intelligence service subsequently demanded that Nuruddin Zaza, who had been briefly arrested for unauthorized campaigning, withdraw his candidacy. He refused and when it became clear during the elections that the KDPS list would win, numerous supporters and potential voters were arrested, and a portion of the votes for Nuruddin Zaza's list were exchanged for votes for the government list. The parliament-appointed investigative commission, which was supposed to investigate these incidents, could not begin its work due to another military coup.²²

While the KDPS gained popularity, the Communist Party lost supporters: In 1954 they had received 3,000 votes in the parliamentary elections in the Jazirah; in 1962 the number was only 300.²³ The extent to which this was causally related to the fact that more and more Kurds were rallying around the KDPS, or whether it was rather related to the persecution of communists under Nasser during the time of the union of Egypt and Syria (1958–1961) must remain an open question.²⁴ In any case, the Communist Party described the KDPS as a bourgeois handmaid of the West that worked against the interests of the people.²⁵

Along with building a party structure, the KDPS also worked to publish two magazines, *Dengê Kurd* in Kurdish and *Dimuqrat* in Arabic, both concerned with political and cultural topics connected to the Kurdish question.

Only a short time later, the work of the KDPS was hindered by state repression: Two members of the Central Committee, Shawkat Hanan Na'san and Hamzah Niweran, were arrested in early 1959 on the accusation that they were members of the Communist Party. In mid-1959, Jigarkhwin, Khalil Muhammad, and Muhammad 'Ali Khoja left Syria for Iraq for reasons of safety. In mid-August 1960, there were mass arrests. According to Ahmad, along with the Central Committee members 'Uthman Sabri, Nuruddin Zaza, and Rashid Hammu, more than 120 other members of the KDPS were arrested; Zaza speaks of more than 5,000 arrests within a few days.²⁶ At this point, leadership of

22 Zaza 1993: 174–176; 181–184.

23 Haco Ms.

24 One of Nasser's demands for the unification was the dissolution of all Syrian parties. The Communist Party refused, at which point the United Arab Republic's security forces arrested hundreds of communists, and the Communist Party had to go underground.

25 Ahmed 2004: 40.

26 Ahmed 2004: 62; Zaza 1993: 141.

the party was in the hands of the two members of the Central Committee who remained in Syria and had not been arrested, ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish and Shaykh Muhammad ‘Isa.²⁷

Differences in assessments of their political role soon emerged among the KDPS members who had been arrested. Nuruddin Zaza was of the opinion that all those detained should explain that the KDPS was a cultural association, not a political party, and that their program did not demand a united and independent Kurdistan. He himself took this position in his hearing before the court. Moreover, he was of the opinion that membership in the party was suspended with the arrests, and that the detained members of the Central Committee were no longer part of leadership. ‘Uthman Sabri categorically rejected this point of view. He insisted on naming the party’s actual goals and continued to view himself as a leader. As a result, there were serious disputes between Zaza’s and Sabri’s supporters.²⁸

At the end of February 1961, the Military Court in Damascus announced the sentences of the KDPS members: Nuruddin Zaza was sentenced to one year imprisonment; ‘Uthman Sabri and Rashid Hammu were each sentenced to one and a half years. Shawkat Hanan Na’san received the longest prison sentence—two years—for having recruited a member of the military to join the KDPS. The regional heads of the KDPS each received a nine-month sentence, and ordinary members were each sentenced to three months.²⁹

After all party members had been released from prison in early 1962, the first party conference since the formation of the KDPS in 1957 took place in February of that year in Damascus. A new Central Committee was elected and was composed of ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Isa, Kamal ‘Abdi, Khalid Mishayakh, Muhammad Mulla Ahmad, Muhammad ‘Ali Khoja, and Bilal Husayn. The committee excluded Nuruddin Zaza from the KDPS based on his conduct in prison.³⁰ ‘Uthman Sabri, whose membership had lapsed, once more became a full-fledged member of the party and was named party secretary.³¹ At the second party conference in November 1963 in al-Qamishli, ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish, who was then accused of

27 Ahmed 2004: 73.

28 Ahmed 2004: 47–53.

29 Nami 2000: 120. According to Zaza (1993: 169), the verdict was not handed down until March 5, 1961.

30 According to Muhammad Mulla Ahmad, none of Zaza’s supporters were present at the conference; Ahmed 2004 :74.

31 Ahmed 2004: 73–74.

belonging to Nuruddin Zaza's camp, was relieved of all party functions in absentia. Although he was a member of the Central Committee, he had not been invited to the conference. His party membership was frozen and he was warned that if he continued his »activities directed against the interests of the people,« more severe sanctions would be taken against him.³² Finally, a new committee was chosen, consisting of 'Uthman Sabri, Rashid Hammu, Kamal 'Abdi, Khalid Mishayakh, Muhammad Mulla Ahmad, 'Abdullah Mulla 'Ali, and 'Aziz Dawud.³³ By the end of 1963 at the latest, but actually following the detention of Nuruddin Zaza and 'Uthman Sabri in 1960, the KDPS had splintered: On one side was the faction around 'Uthman Sabri, and on the other, the faction around 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish and—until he was expelled from the party—Nuruddin Zaza.

The (first) official split of the KDPS, however, did not occur until 1965. At that time, two parties emerged from the KDPS: The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Left Wing) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (çep)] under 'Uthman Sabri (after 1969 under Salah Badruddin) and the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Right Wing) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (rast)] under 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish. According to Salah Badruddin the following three points were disputed at the decisive 1965 party conference: (1) Are Syria's Kurds a people or a minority; do they have the right to self-determination or (only) to cultural rights? Is the party part of the revolutionary movement or is it an association? (2) Is the party part of the democratic movement in Syria and what position does it take on political and social questions in Syria? Should the party side with those in power or be part of the country's political opposition? (3) How does the party position itself with respect to the Kurdish movement in Iraq: Regarding the question of leadership, should it side with Mulla Mustafa Barzani or should it support Jalal Talabani?³⁴ As another reason for the split, Tejel cites the ideological differences in opinion between notables, religious leaders, and landowners on the one hand, and former members of the Communist party, for the most part students, teachers, and workers, on the other.³⁵ The KDPS had brought these various groups together

32 In 1964, the Central Committee decided that 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish would not only be reaccepted into the party, but also into the Central Committee; Ahmed 2004: 104.

33 Ahmed 2004: 99–100.

34 Bedredîn 2003: 36–37.

35 Tejel 2009: 87.

without actually bridging the gap between them. In fact the differences between the notables and party leadership—‘Uthman Sabri in particular—had already become apparent in 1958: According to Ahmad, during a meeting between these two groups, the notables had criticized the fact that although most members of the party came from the Jazirah, the Central Committee was dominated by people from Aleppo.³⁶ They agreed to hold a party congress, elect a new Central Committee, and to make Hasan Hajo the chairman. However, ‘Uthman Sabri, who had not taken part in the session, spoke out against this agreement—with the result that no party congress took place.³⁷ In elections, the fact that a majority of the members were from the Jazirah, could have, actually, led to an entirely new composition of the Central Committee—in favor of the traditional elite leaders.

At a session in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1970, under pressure from the KDP-Iraq, there was a short-term reunion of the two wings under Salah Badruddin in the form of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Provisional Command) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (qiyadah mu’aqqat)]. Represented in the »Provisional Command« were four members of the right wing and four members of the left wing of the KDPS, along with five independent persons. Neither ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish nor Salah Badruddin was included. The »Provisional Command« agreed to name Daham Miro the leader.

The union failed that same year, 1970. In 1971, Darwish left Iraq for Syria where he revived »his« KDPS beyond the sphere of influence of Mulla Mustafa Barzani. In 1971, Salah Badruddin also left Iraq—for Germany, in order to continue the work of the left wing of the KDPS there. Irrespective of this, Daham Miro remained leader of the KDPS (Provisional Command). In 1972, at the so-called first party congress of the KDPS, which took place in Bamarni (Iraqi Kurdistan), he was elected party secretary.³⁸ Fifteen years after the formation of the party, this was, in fact, the first time that the KDPS had held a regular party congress.

Looking back it becomes clear that the »original KDPS« hardly existed as a united, functioning party: Formed in the summer of 1957, the party program was

36 Ahmed 2004: 33.

37 Ahmed 2004: 32–33.

38 See also »Xebatkerê kurd Dehamê Mîro wefat kir« [The Kurdish activist Daham Miro has died], <<http://www.rojevakurd.com/civak/5766-Xebatker-kurd-Deham-Mro-wefat-kir.html>>.

continually discussed until the first split in 1965, in particular, the fundamental question of whether or not the goal of the party should be an independent Kurdistan and whether the KDPS was a part of the opposition or on the side of the government. Additional differences arose regarding the »proper« stance toward conflicts within the KDP-Iraq. Sometimes fundamental political differences—former Communists versus notables—were the reason for the disputes about content, other times differences on the issue of content led to personal resentments. Parallel to this, the first members of the Central Committee had already been arrested in 1959, and others then left Syria. The mass arrests in 1960 resulted in the party structures that had been established by that point to split into factions. In addition, it is notable that even the beginnings of the KDPS were characterized by a lack of democratic legitimation. The following section will show, among other things, the extent to which these early conflicts continue to shape the Syrian-Kurdish parties to the present day.

The Syrian-Kurdish party spectrum in October 2011

As of October 2011, a total of fourteen Kurdish parties exist in Syria. The parties with the numbers 1 to 11 in the following list all emerged from the 1957 KDPS: some from its right wing (1–3), some from its left wing (4–7), and some from the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Provisional Command) (8–11). These are direct successor parties to the KDPS, splinter groups of the party and mergers of these splinter groups—this is one reason why there are significant overlaps between party names; some names appear repeatedly. The exact history of splits and mergers can be seen in the accompanying graphic.

1. The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)—hereinafter: Progressive Party. ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish has been the secretary since 1965.
2. The Kurdish Democratic Patriotic Party in Syria (Partiya Welatparêz a Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê)—hereinafter: Patriotic Party. Tahir Sa’dun Sifuk has been the secretary since 1998.

3. The Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria (Partiya Wekhevî ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê)—hereinafter: Equality Party. ‘Aziz Dawud has been the secretary since its formation in 1992.
4. The Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Partiya Azadî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)—hereinafter: Azadî. Khayruddin Murad has been the secretary since its formation in 2005.³⁹
5. The Kurdish Left Party in Syria (Partiya Çep a Kurdî li Sûriyê)—hereinafter: Left Party. Muhammad Musa Muhammad has been the secretary since its formation in 1998.
6. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria [Partiya Yekîti ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Yekîti)]—hereinafter: Democratic Yekîti. Since the death of the former chairman, Isma‘il ‘Umar (‘Amo), in 2010, no new chairman has been named. Muhiyuddin Shaykh Ali has been the party secretary since 1993.
7. The Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîti) [Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê (Yekîti)]—hereinafter: Yekîti. Isma‘il Hami has been the secretary since 2010.
8. The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)]—hereinafter: ‘Abdulkhakim Bashar’s el-Partî. Bashar has been the party secretary since 2007.
9. The Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî Sûrî)—hereinafter: Syrian-Kurdish Party. Jamal Muhammad Baqi has been the secretary since 1997.
10. The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)]—hereinafter: Nasruddin Ibrahim’s el-Partî. Ibrahim has been the party secretary since it was formed in 1997.
11. Kurdish Democratic Party—Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî – Sûrî)—hereinafter: ‘Abdurrahman Aluji’s party. He has led the party since it was formed in 2004.
12. The Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (Şepêla Pêşrojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)—hereinafter: Future Movement. Mish‘al at-Tammu was the speaker from its formation in 2005 until his assassination on October 7, 2011.
13. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)—hereinafter: PYD. Salih Muslim Muhammad has been the chairman since 2010.

39 At the end of October 2011, the Azadî split. Since then, there are two parties with the same name, one under the leadership of Mustafa Jum‘a, the other still under leadership of Khayruddin Murad. In the following text, Azadî refers to the party before the split.

14. Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Reconciliation (Rêkeftin) (Rêkeftina Demokrat a Kurdî ya Sûrî)—hereinafter: Rêkeftin. Fawzi ‘Aziz Ibrahim (Fawzi Shingali) is the secretary of the party, which split from the PYD in 2004.

A look at the general goals of the parties makes it clear that there are hardly any programmatic differences between them. This is not only true for the successor parties to the KDPS, but is also largely true for the only newly formed party, the Future Movement (12), as well as for the PKK organization, the PYD⁴⁰ and its splinter group, the Rêkeftin (13, 14).

Programmatic Orientation

To begin with, the goals of the Syrian-Kurdish parties are noteworthy for the demands they do not make: None of the parties demand an independent Syrian-Kurdish state or the inclusion of the Syrian-Kurdish regions in a united Kurdistan. None of the parties—and here the Kurdish movement in Syria differs from the Kurdish parties in Iraq and Turkey—wants to claim the rights of the Kurdish population by force of arms nor have they ever propagated this. There are multiple reasons for this.

First of all, the geographic and demographic conditions in Syria are poorly suited to supporting armed conflict or the demand for an independent state. With a share of approximately two⁴¹ out of twenty million, the Kurdish population is proportionately smaller than in Iraq and especially in Turkey. Moreover, the three main Kurdish settlement areas—the Jazirah, the Kurd Dagħ (Çiyayê Kurmênc), and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab (Kobanî)—are geographically separate, which runs contrary to at least the classical concepts of statehood. In addition, at least in the most populous Kurdish settlement region, the Jazirah, there are no mountainous regions that would be suitable as areas of retreat for armed fighters. Though it would be possible in principle to organize as »urban guerrillas«, there are hardly any models for this in the Kurdish context.

At the same time, Syrian Kurds have been taking part in the armed conflict for the liberation of the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq for decades. Already at the time of the French mandate, Khoybun supported the battle on

40 The PYD was founded in 2003 by PKK members in Iraqi Kurdistan.

41 The number two million is based on data from the French mandatory power as of January 1943 that has been projected according to general population growth in Syria.

Ararat both militarily and with propaganda. Later, Syrian Kurds fought for KDP and PUK in the Iraqi-Kurdish liberation movement, as well as in the PKK. President Hafiz al-Assad allowed the Kurdish parties from neighboring Iraq and Turkey to operate with relative freedom in Syria. Until Öcalan's arrest in 1998, the PKK held training camps for its guerrilla troops in what, at the time, was still Syrian-controlled Lebanon. To date, the KDP and PUK still have party offices in Damascus. In this way, Assad not only assured himself a means to apply pressure in negotiations with neighboring states, he also succeeded in channeling the engagement of Syrian Kurds towards Iraq and Turkey and away from the Syrian-Kurdish question. This strategy was also successful because despite countless defeats, the KDP, PUK, and PKK were consistently able to score victories against their respective governments. When Öcalan joined the position of the Syrian government and declared that there was no Kurdish question in Syria, but rather that the Kurds in Syria were actually refugees from Turkey, his position contributed to minimizing the followers of the Syrian-Kurdish parties and integrating the more radical protagonists into his own armed movement.⁴² This weakened the Kurdish movement in Syria and helped prevent the development of an effective opposition—including one that moved beyond an armed conflict.

The Syrian-Kurdish parties seek a solution to the Kurdish question by democratic means, respecting Syria's territorial integrity.⁴³ The main demands are the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people as a second nation within Syria, as well as the recognition that the Kurdish people in Syria are living on their historical territory. The concrete rights that derive from this are not defined. Only the Progressive Party has a more careful formulation, describing the Kurds as a »part of the national Syrian structure.« In contrast, the Future Movement is the only party that explicitly points to the fact that Syria's Kurds are »a part of the Kurdish people and their territory is a part of Kurdistan.« Furthermore almost all parties mention »self-administration« of the Kurdish regions as a goal, however, it is never explained what this self-administration actually

42 For information on the relationship between the PKK and the Syrian government under Hafiz al-Assad, see McDowall 1998: 69–70 and Montgomery 2005: 134–135.

43 The following information on the focus of the Syrian-Kurdish parties is based on statements made by the following parties to KurdWatch in June 2009: The Democratic Yekîî, Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî, the Progressive Party, the Left Party, 'Abdulkhakim Bashar's el-Partî, the Yekîî, and the Future Movement. For more on PYD positions, see especially KurdWatch, November 8, 2011, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: »Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here««, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html>>. For more on the demands of the Kurdish Patriotic Movement—a coalition originally made up of twelve of the fourteen parties—see KurdWatch, May 19, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Since the beginning of the revolution, Kurdish parties present demands publicly for the first time«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1541>>. Information on the Rêkeftin was taken from the organization's party program, accessible at <http://rekeftin.org/ar/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=145:2011-01-03-17-53-07&catid=39:2010-10-02-19-21-40&Itemid=58>.

entails. Only the Yekîî demand »self-government«⁴⁴ and explain that they are seeking an administrative unity of all Kurdish regions.

Moreover, they, the Future Movement, and the Left Party demand that the Kurds be taken into account within the various legislative, executive, and judicial institutions on the basis of their proportion of the total population.⁴⁵ In contrast, the Progressive Party and Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî do not use the term »self-administration,« but instead advocate solely for the realization of the »cultural, political, and social rights« of the Kurds in Syria. The aforementioned cultural rights also belong to the catalogue of demands made by all the other parties, including language rights. Moreover, one sees formulations such as »national« or »ethnic« rights: it remains unclear how these rights are defined and to what extent these rights go beyond cultural rights. The PYD in turn demands »democratic autonomy,« a concept that its chairman, Salih Muslim Muhammad, defines as the following: »We, the Kurdish freedom movement, reject the classic understanding of power. We reject classic models like federalism, confederalism, self-government, autonomy. Our goal is the creation of a new Kurdish society, the creation of free people, a people with free will and free thought.«⁴⁶

A second set of demands calls for an end to all »racist« and »chauvinist« measures against the Kurdish people. This means the reversal of the policies of the »Arab Belt,« the repatriation of those Kurds who were deprived of citizenship in 1962, as well as the repeal of Statute 41 from the year 2004 and Decree 49⁴⁷ from the year 2008.⁴⁸

Ultimately, all of the parties formulate common Syrian goals and in doing so draw on Western terminology. Their demands include: a democratic form of government, free elections, the separation of powers, freedom of assembly and speech, a modern law on political parties, the equality of men and women, as well as a separation of state and religion. In fact, none of the parties has an Islamic religious orientation. Not only in Syria, but also in Turkey and Iraq, the nationalist orientation of the various parties has been resistant to explicit religious influence. Kurdish ethnic rights were and still are

44 See KurdWatch, September 17, 2011, »Isma'il Hami, Secretary of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîî): ›Our goal is the self-government of the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan‹«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview5.html>>.

45 The Left Party restricts this to judicial institutions, the Yekîî to »centralist, international« bodies.

46 KurdWatch, November 8, 2011, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: ›Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here‹«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html>>.

47 For information on the consequences of Decree 49, see KurdWatch, July 2010, »Decree 49—Dispossession of the Kurdish population? Commentary on the political implications and economic consequences of a decree«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_dekret49_nivisar_en.pdf>.

48 In the meantime, some of these demands have been met, for more on this, see below.

placed in the foreground. For example, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Islamic-Kurdish parties did not begin to play a role until the moment that the KDP and PUK took control; there was a Kurdish government, and alternatives developed in competition with this government. This does not mean that the Syrian-Kurdish parties—or the KDP and PUK—are firmly secular. In a society shaped by religion, this would hardly promise success.

It is questionable whether the adoption of the western values outlined above is, in fact, among the central demands of Syrian-Kurdish parties or whether the parties have simply adopted ideological clichés from those actors whose support they currently hope to gain, namely the community of western states. In this respect, there is a certain tradition within Syria's Kurdish movement: As early as the time of the mandate and during the Second World War, Khoybun and the Kurdish League adopted the ideologies of whichever powers they were asking for support—whether the Soviet Union, Germany, France or Great Britain. In the 1950s, as more and more Kurds turned to the Communist Party, this party also influenced the direction of the KDPS and its successor parties, added to this was influence from the KDP and PUK.

The inner organizational structure of the Syrian-Kurdish parties blatantly contradicts the commitment to democracy. The numerous splits—mostly personal, in a few cases motivated by the program—make it clear that the various parties still have not managed to establish a structure in which it is possible to resolve conflict through discussion or, in case of doubt, through a majority decision within the party. Some party leaders have held this office since the formation of the party, in other cases, a successor was only elected or appointed because his predecessor died.⁴⁹ Party mergers or splits offer yet another way to become head of a party. Furthermore in the Middle East, there is the classic example of the son taking over the office of his father—as, for example, Jamal Muhammad Baqi. The Yekîî represent an exception insofar as the chairmanship rotates every three years. The PYD elects a new chairman every four years. The ways in which party leaders are chosen reflects the tradition of the »origi-

49 As in, for example, the case of 'Abdulkakim Bashar. It is incorrect, however, that he now holds this position for life, as Sinclair & Kajjo 2011 claim.

nal KDPS«—which was characterized by a lack of democratic structures. The influence of Syrian politics since independence is also visible: Until 1970, regime change largely took place through coups, followed by the de facto one-party rule of the Assads.

While the lack of democratic legitimacy does not seem to be an issue within the parties, policymakers are well aware that the extreme fragmentation of political parties weakens their importance and serves to make them susceptible to the Syrian regime's divide-and-rule politics. This background helps explain a phenomenon, observable since the 1990s, that is quasi diametrically opposed to the various factions of the KDPS: the formation of party alliances that make joint declarations or organize single activities.

The Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria (Hevbendîya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê) was already formed in 1994. In terms of its approach to the Syrian government, it is considered a conservative, careful alliance of parties that relies more on negotiations with the regime than on demonstrations. The Democratic Yekîî, Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî, the Progressive Party, and the Left Party belonged to the Alliance. The Left Party broke from the Alliance in 1999, but returned in 2005. Three years later, in 2008, the party again left the Alliance in order to join the Kurdish Democratic Patriotic Front in Syria (Eniya Niştimanî ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê); this time they were joined by Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî. The Front was formed in 2000; the original members were 'Abdulkhikim Bashar's el-Partî (back then still headed by Muhammad Nazir Mustafa), the Equality Party (at that time still named Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria), and the Patriotic Party; later they were joined by the Azadî. Furthermore the Azadî, the Yekîî, and the Future Movement formed the so-called Coordinating Committee in 2006. The latter three comprised the more radical wing of the Kurdish parties. The Yekîî, which was formed in 1999, had begun to organize political rallies as early as 2002.⁵⁰ Along with the Azadî, the party appeared as an organizer of various demonstrations in connection with the al-Qamishli riots in 2004. The Future Move-

50 The Yekîî is a splinter group of the Democratic Yekîî. The explicit goal of this party was more »visibility« of Kurdish political activities. Already a year before the party was officially founded, its later activists made an appearance by hanging posters that criticized the government policies against stateless Kurds (catchword: denaturalization campaign of 1962) in several Syrian cities. The political message itself was not new, but its public presentation was. It was the first time that Kurdish activists in Syria hung dissident posters in public. The splitting off of the Yekîî followed in 1999, because some members were of the opinion that the Democratic Yekîî had moved too close to the other parties and were no longer active enough.

ment, which was formed in 2005 in reaction to the riots, joined them after the death of Shaykh Khaznawi.

On December 30, 2009, the so-called Political Council (Majlis Siyasi) was formed with the goal of facilitating more effective and unified representation of Kurdish interests—and at the same time, the Front was dissolved.⁵¹ All of the Kurdish Parties became members of the Political Council, with the exception of the PYD, the Rêkeftin, ‘Abdurrahman Aluji’s party, and those parties who remained united in the Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria, in other words, the Democratic Yekîî and the Progressive Party.

In May 2011, the Kurdish Patriotic Movement, which united the members of the Political Council, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, and the PYD, was formed.⁵² In the case of the Rêkeftin, the PYD has prevented its »splinter group« from being accepted into the movement; in the case of ‘Abdurrahman Aluji’s party, ‘Abdulkhakim Bashar’s el-Partî, from which Aluji split in 2004, was against including them. The formation of this alliance during the Syrian revolution reflected the parties’ wish to speak with one voice at a time when far-reaching concessions by the state seemed possible. In a way, this has succeeded: Bashar al-Assad’s offer to include some Kurdish party leaders in talks, while others remained excluded, was rejected, and ultimately, the parties also unanimously declined an invitation to talks in June 2011. However, the position against participating in talks was first and foremost the result of pressure from activists engaged in the Syrian revolution and Kurdish activists in exile, and it did not so much reflect the convictions of party leaders in Syria.

The discussions within the Kurdish Patriotic Movement are anything but conflict-free: Thus the Future Movement already left the alliance of parties on May 28, 2011, because, in their opinion, the other parties did not sufficiently support the dissident demonstrations.⁵³ As this report was being written, the relationship between the Future Movement and the other Kurdish parties has been tense. The latter have accused the speaker of the Future Movement of positioning himself too much as a part of the revolution and too little as a representative of Kurdish interests,

51 According to Salih Gado, a member of the politburo of the Left Party, the formation of the council was the result of a meeting of high-ranking party functionaries in January 2009 in Cairo. At this meeting it became clear to the party representatives that only a united outward appearance can lead to an effective representation of interests that will also be internationally recognized; conversation with Salih Gado, Berlin, early 2010.

52 See KurdWatch, May 19, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Since the beginning of the revolution, Kurdish parties present demands publicly for the first time«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1541>>. Presumably in answer to this coalition, the Rêkeftin, ‘Abdurrahman Aluji’s party, and the Kurdistan Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîtiya Kurdistanî li Sûriyê)—a party that split from the Yekîî on October 10, 2010 and only exists in exile—formed a coalition: The Charter of Kurdish Patriotic Labor in Syria (Mithaq al-‘amal al-watani al-kurdi fi Suriya).

53 See KurdWatch, June 11, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish parties refuse dialogue with Bashar al-Assad«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1651>>.

and they no longer see the Future Movement as part of the »Kurdish movement.«⁵⁴ Moreover, it has repeatedly been the case that joint declarations by the parties are issued, only to have a single party distance itself from the declaration only a short time later.⁵⁵ Thus the existence of the various associations can hardly hide the fact that the parties' ability to outwardly represent common positions is limited. Moreover, it is striking that the positions announced by the Kurdish Patriotic Movement in May do not demand »self-administration« for the Kurds, nor do they state that the Kurds should be mentioned as a »second nation« in the Syrian constitution. Instead, they read that the Kurds must be recognized as a »significant component of the Syrian people« and that the »cultural rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria« must be protected and guaranteed.⁵⁶ Clearly the cautious positions of the Progressive Party prevailed here—even though a majority of the parties disagree with them. 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish thus is certainly among the »winners« within the new association—especially considering the fact that he has seemed largely isolated since 2008. Aside from his party, only the Democratic Yekîî has remained a member of the Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria. Both of the other member parties had changed to the Kurdish Democratic Patriotic Front in Syria. The PYD, which prior to this was not present in any of the Kurdish associations, and which has now become acceptable in a certain sense, is also among the winners. In contrast, the Future Movement is among the losers. It is no longer represented in the Kurdish Patriotic Movement; its request to return following its self-imposed departure was rejected by the other parties.⁵⁷

Social Significance

In light of the fact that only the Ba'th Party and the bloc parties associated with it are legal in Syria, the Kurdish parties provide little competition within the political system. This means that they do not have the opportunity to legally realize their goals—neither as part of the opposition nor as part of the government. Beyond their potential ideological appeal, this makes them highly

54 Telephone conversation with Salih Gado, member of the politburo of the Left Party, July 18, 2011.

55 For example, on August 22, 2011, the Yekîî distanced itself from a recent declaration that was also made in its name, concerning the condemnation of air attacks by the Turkish army on PKK positions in Iraq; see »Tawdih hawlah al-bayan as-sadir 'an 'ahzab al-harakah al-wataniyah al-kurdiyabi sha'n al-qasf at-turki« [»Clarification of the declaration by the parties of the Kurdish Patriotic Movement on the Turkish attack«], accessed at <http://www.yekiti-party.org/ara/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2037:2011-08-22-20-25-00>.

56 See KurdWatch, May 19, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Since the beginning of the revolution, Kurdish parties present demands publicly for the first time«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1541>>.

57 See KurdWatch, September 17, 2011, »Isma'il Hami, Secretary of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîî): »Our goal is the self-government of the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview5.html>>.

unattractive to potential supporters. A membership in one of the parties does not offer the possibility of a political career, but rather harbors the danger of political persecution and thus the danger of losing career opportunities. Financial advantages are also rarely connected with assuming office. The PYD is an exception: as a cadre organization, it provides for all those who work for the party full-time.

The Syrian-Kurdish parties are not subsidized by the governments of the surrounding states, nor do they have any significant income—as does, for example, the PKK (and therefore also the PYD) through raising donations, or as the KDP and PUK had in the 1990s due to their control of customs revenue from border trade with Turkey. The extent to which ‘Abdulahkim Bashar’s el-Partî, which is the Syrian-Kurdish sister party of the KDP-Iraq,⁵⁸ and ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish’s Progressive Party, which is the Syrian-Kurdish sister party of the PUK, receive support from these two parties is unknown. Such support, however, could hardly suffice for more than the financing of the party secretary and the members of the Central Committee, as well as for party publications and smaller events.⁵⁹

Being a leading member of a Kurdish party brings with it social duties and requires an investment of time and money, without corresponding revenues. In this respect, a certain financial security—whether through contacts with the KDP and PUK or through one’s own financial resources—is a prerequisite for being active in such an office. Moreover, the social prestige associated with party membership is limited: On the one hand, the »old men« in the party in particular enjoy a certain respect. On the other hand, many Syrian Kurds, both those in exile and those in Syria, complain about the fragmentation of the Syrian-Kurdish movement and are of the opinion that the parties have achieved nothing for the Kurds.

The parties can only gain a profile through internal competition with the other Kurdish parties, whether by taking a more radical position towards the government, or by vilifying other parties as being »close to the government.«⁶⁰ In this process, the possible activities to attract followers are limited. Since 2002 when

58 Despite the close ties to the KDP-Iraq, it is not the case, as Sinclair & Kajjo 2011 claim, that Barzani named ‘Abdulahkim Bashar Secretary of the KDPS in 2008.

59 Regardless of this, the close ties to the Iraqi-Kurdish parties have the consequence that neither ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish nor ‘Abdulahkim Bashar would make decisions contrary to the interests of the PUK or KDP.

60 More than one Kurdish party leader has been or is accused of having close contacts to the government; for more on this see also Tejel 2009: 89.

the Yekîî became active and the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan raised hopes for a change in Syria, typical activities have included commemoration ceremonies, minutes of silence, and demonstrations. Demonstrations, in particular, have been regularly answered with sanctions (dispersal, the arrest of demonstrators). The anniversary of the death of Shaykh Khaznawi (June 1), the anniversary of the special census of 1962 (October 5), the day of martyrs, which commemorates the al-Qamishli Uprising (March 12), the anniversary of the 1960 cinema fire in 'Amudah (November 13), the anniversary of the 1988 poison gas attack on Halabjah (March 16), the founding day of each party or the founding day of the KDPS in 1957 (June 14) are all occasions for such events. International holidays such as the Day of Human Rights, Labor Day, International Women's Day, or World Children's Day serve as additional occasions. Rallies and demonstrations that call for the release of political prisoners, the renaturalization of the stateless, or the repeal of Decree 49 are also noteworthy. The parties take part in the Kurdish Newroz festival (March 21) with speeches and the presentation of folklore; numerous parties maintain groups for these purposes. The release of (party) publications and websites operated from exile provide additional opportunities for image cultivation.

Only the PYD has a special role: on paper its Syrian-specific positions hardly differ from those of the other parties. At the same time, however, the PYD focuses on Turkey. Numerous PYD activities in Syria are aimed at the release of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan; there are hardly any Syrian-specific activities. For the PYD and PKK, Syria remains to this day a place where their fighters can retreat, and where they can recruit new fighters for the armed conflict against Turkey.

Most parties maintain one or more folklore groups—the Yekîî and the Democratic Yekîî stand out, with ten and twelve groups respectively. This can be seen as an indicator of a proportionally high number of supporters. Additionally, the parties sustain committees for women, youth, the general public, and the like. It is striking, however, that none of the Kurdish parties implement social projects, for example, edu-

cation projects for women and youth, aid projects for the poor, environmental projects, etc. The lack of such socio-political engagement cannot solely be explained by the fact that such activities are unauthorized; this is also true for demonstrations and rallies. The lack of resources is also only a superficial reason. In fact, the parties do not try to acquire such resources, for example from wealthy party members or through volunteer work. The parties do not yet identify social interests as potential areas of activity. As a participant at the gathering of Kurdish parties in Cairo in 2010 explained: »It hasn't yet occurred to us to implement such projects.«

The aforementioned activities of the Kurdish parties have not led to an improvement in the situation of the Kurds in Syria—they have, however, significantly contributed to the fact that to date large portions of the Kurdish population explicitly consider themselves Kurds or part of the Kurdish nation. In this respect, the parties have successfully practiced »identity politics.«

With the exception of the PYD, it is generally true that all parties are very active in the Jazirah, in other words in al-Hasakah province, and are less active in 'Afrin. The largest portion of the Kurdish population lives in the Jazirah; moreover, the center of the Kurdish movement was located there as early as the time of the mandate. This in turn is connected to the fact that a large number of the Kurds who became politicized in Turkey settled in this region starting in the 1920s. The »original KDPS« gained members first and foremost in the Jazirah—today most of the Kurdish party leaders live there. That the PYD could become strong in 'Afrin is primarily connected to the weakness of the other Kurdish parties in this region.

There are no reliable figures on the number of supporters of the individual parties. We only have self-reported numbers from several parties from the year 2009. According to these numbers, the Democratic Yekîti had around 4,000 members, 300 of which were women; the Left Party counted 2,580 members, fifteen percent of whom were women; 'Abdulahkim Bashar's el-Partî claims to have thousands of members and describes itself as the strongest Syrian-Kurdish party; and 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish's Progressive Party

states that 160 delegates took part in its last party congress. With each delegate representing 60 members, this would mean a total of 9,600 members.

A party's visibility and significance are not only dependent on financial resources and the number of members, but also on the party leadership's willingness to appear in public. Thus despite its limited following, the Future Movement belongs to those parties especially active and calls for participation in demonstrations and commemorative ceremonies. Moreover, the party manages to influence discussion by publicly supporting positions that run counter to the other parties. In contrast, 'Abdulahakim Bashar's el-Partî appears in public far less frequently, despite the fact that it apparently has far more sympathizers and members. The reason for the party's high following has to do with the fact that it is seen both as a legitimate successor of the »original KDPS« and as a sister party of the KDP-Iraq, and they continue to profit from the mythos of Mulla Mustafa Barzani to the present day.⁶¹ Fundamentally, the parties can be divided into two groups: the Progressive Party, 'Abdulahakim Bashar's el-Partî, the Yekî-tî, the Azadî, the Democratic Yekî-tî, the Left Party, the Future Movement, and the PYD are among the active parties and/or the parties with the highest number of members, while Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî, the Patriotic Party, the Equality Party, the Syrian-Kurdish Party, 'Abdurrahman Aluji's party, and the Rêkeftin are rather insignificant.

All of the parties have »classic« party bodies, such as the party congress, which takes place more or less regularly, and the central committee. Moreover they maintain regional structures with regional heads, who are responsible for smaller groups of party members.⁶² The formal party structure ultimately seems less important: significant decisions—for example the question of whether or not one should still negotiate with the government under Bashar al-Assad—are made by the party leader, and are at best discussed within the central committees. This hierarchical structure makes the parties rather unattractive to young people who would like to become active themselves. This is only partially true for the PYD: As a cadre organization, its

61 It is no coincidence that various parties describe themselves as legitimate successors to the KDPS: Along with 'Abdulahakim Bashar's el-Partî this also includes Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî, the Progressive Party, the Syrian-Kurdish Party, as well as 'Abdurrahman Aluji's party.

62 For information on the structure and acceptance process of the parties, see Sinclair & Kajjo 2011.

structure is indeed extremely hierarchical—it must be assumed that the party receives its directives from the PKK leadership in Turkey. At the same time, the party nevertheless offers its members the opportunity to take on concrete tasks and areas of responsibility.

Although all of the parties claim to also have female members, politics in the Syrian-Kurdish parties remains a male domain. Activists explain this, among other things, by the fact that women can be disproportionately affected by state repression, especially if they are arrested.⁶³ The unspoken reference here is to the possibility of sexual violence as a means of torture; even the suspicion that a woman might have been sexually harassed or raped while in custody would destroy a family's »honor.« Within the sphere of party work, typical activities—evening gatherings in private apartments or tea houses, participation in events in other cities—are considered unseemly for women in many circles and moreover are difficult to reconcile with the typical day for many women, namely the care for the household and children. Students groups involved in party politics in larger cities like Aleppo or Damascus and especially the PYD are the exceptions. In these contexts, women are also involved; in general, however, politics remain within the male domain.

Political Significance

Until recently, the Syrian government has not accepted the Kurdish parties as negotiating partners. Talks have repeatedly taken place between Kurdish figures, including party representatives, and Bashar al-Assad.⁶⁴ From the perspective of the government, these talks served first and foremost to control the Kurdish parties, and thus also the Kurdish population. In the context of the events in al-Qamishli in March 2004, it becomes especially clear how the government tried to calm the »street« with the help of the Kurdish parties.⁶⁵ Party leaders, however, were not invited to such talks as representatives of their parties. An invitation to appear as party representatives occurred for the first time in June 2011, after the continuing demonstrations had already put significant pressure on the government.⁶⁶ The

63 Interview with a member of 'Abdulkhakim Bashar's el-Partî, Istanbul, December 2010.

64 For example, in talks about the situation of the stateless in 2002; see also KurdWatch, March 2010, »Stateless Kurds in Syria: Illegal invaders of victims of a nationalistic policy?«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_staatenlose_en.pdf>.

65 See also KurdWatch, December 2009, »The ›Al-Qamishli Uprising‹: The beginning of a ›new era‹ for Syrian Kurds?«, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_qamischli_en.pdf>.

66 See KurdWatch, June 11, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Parties refuse dialogue with Bashar al-Assad«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1651>>.

invitation to Syrian-Kurdish party leaders in June 2011, which was ultimately declined, was part of a host of »pro-Kurdish« measures that the Syrian government had embraced since the beginning of the revolution. The naturalization of registered stateless people (*ajanib*) on April 7, 2011⁶⁷ and the effective repeal of Decree 49 on March 26, 2011⁶⁸ had already fulfilled two of the main programmatic demands of the Kurdish parties. These concessions are not the result of successful negotiations by the Kurdish parties, but seem rather to have occurred preventatively, in order to hinder or at least minimize Kurdish participation in the revolution. The fact that until the assassination of Mish'al at-Tammu, speaker of the Future Movement, not a single person had been killed in demonstrations in the Kurdish regions also speaks to this intention. Intelligence services observed the demonstrations, but largely let them take their course.⁶⁹ Before his death, Mish'al at-Tammu explained the circumstances as follows:

»The regime has gained experience with us. When shots were fired at Kurdish demonstrators in the Kurdish regions in 2004, hundreds of thousands of Kurds took to the streets in Damascus and Aleppo as well. The murder of protesters binds people together. The government is well aware: If a Kurd is killed at the demonstrations in the Kurdish regions, hundreds of thousands of Kurds will take to the streets. As weak and at odds as the political groups may be, in such a situation, the Kurds will hold together. This is one reason why the security forces do not interfere in the demonstrations in the Kurdish regions. They know that then the Kurds in Damascus and Aleppo will also demonstrate. They most certainly want to avoid this.«⁷⁰

In fact, the Kurds were the only group since the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, who had taken any noteworthy resistance »to the street.« This led the Syrian government to fear that they might also actively take part in the Syrian revolution and bring it into the major cities, which were still comparatively quiet.

Mish'al at-Tammu was mistaken insofar as after his assassination the Kurdish regions are still far from holding mass demonstrations like those in 2004. Ap-

67 See KurdWatch, April 8, 2011, »Damascus: Registered stateless Kurds to be naturalized«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1401>>.

68 See KurdWatch, May 2, 2011, »Damascus: Decree 43 makes it easier to transfer land in border regions«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1475>>.

69 Tear gas was used, however, at several demonstrations in al-Qamishli at the end of July; see, for example, KurdWatch, August 1, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Again tear gas against demonstrators«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1848>>. Moreover at the beginning of August, cases of severe torture of detained demonstrators in al-Qamishli became known, prior to this such cases had only been reported from other regions; see KurdWatch, August 10, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Demonstration participants severely tortured«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1877>>.

70 KurdWatch, July 20, 2011, »Mish'al at-Tammu, Kurdish politician: »All our actions should be aimed at the fall of the regime««, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview2.html>>.

proximately 100,000 people in al-Qamishli took part in the funeral march for at-Tammu. This was far more than what was usual; the number of those who take to the streets every Friday was previously estimated at between 10,000 and 25,000.⁷¹ A week later, however, the number of demonstrators had already dropped considerably, even though security forces had killed two people during the funeral march.⁷² In this respect, the Syrian government's strategy has been successful. Although they are presumably the most organized part of the Syrian opposition, the Kurdish parties have thus far not played a decisive role in the revolution; only a few of the parties—for example the Future Movement and the Yekîî—are even calling for the demonstrations. With the exception of the Future Movement, the parties do not yet seem to have conclusively decided whether they actually should count on the fall of the regime. This indecision is clearly reflected in statements by the Yekîî secretary, Isma'il Hami: »We, members of the Kurdish movement, have not yet explicitly called for the fall of the regime, but rather we have called for a change in the system. This is a clearer demand than calling for the fall of the regime. We, as Yekîî, have repeatedly issued declarations in which we say that the regime no longer has any legitimacy.«⁷³ The fact that Hasan Salih, assistant secretary of the Yekîî, stated on October 8, 2011 at the grave of Hasan Mustafa 'Abdullah, who had been assassinated in al-Qamishli, that the opposition demands the fall of the regime has not yet led to a concrete change in the politics of the Kurdish parties.⁷⁴

The motives for such restraint are varied. They range from fear that massive involvement by the Kurds could lead to sanctions against the population, to fear for their own safety, to skepticism towards the Arab section of the Syrian opposition.⁷⁵

The role of the PYD within the framework of the revolution is unclear. In the Jazirah, PYD activists were notable first and foremost for displaying posters of Öcalan at dissident demonstrations and thus inciting conflicts.⁷⁶ At events currently organized by the PYD in Syria, folklore is put forward and there are dances. Additionally, various Kurdish language schools have

71 See, for example, KurdWatch, July 18, 2011, »Damascus: Kurds killed for the first time in anti-regime protests«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1799>>; KurdWatch, June 28, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: »Bashar is not my president and the government does not represent me««, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1724>>.

72 See KurdWatch, October 11, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Two dead and numerous injured at demonstrations«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2078>>.

73 See KurdWatch, September 17, 2011, »Isma'il Hami, Secretary of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîî): »Our goal is the self-government of the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan««, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview5.html>>.

74 See KurdWatch, October 12, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Assistant Secretary of the Yekîî demands the fall of the regime«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=20854>>.

75 Interviews with activists and party members in al-Qamishli, March/July 2011.

76 See KurdWatch, August 1, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Again tear gas against demonstrators«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1848>>.

been opened that have been tolerated by the government thus far; demands for reforms or the resignation of the government have not been formulated. The fact that to date there have been almost no dissident demonstrations in 'Afrin, the bastion of the PYD, can primarily be attributed to the influence of the PYD, and therefore also to the influence of the PKK. The PYD does not appear to want to spoil its relationship with the government; if the regime should survive, the party could point to its loyalty and possibly improve its position in Syria.⁷⁷ At the same time there are hints that the PYD is preparing itself to fill a possible power vacuum in the Jazirah that could arise after the fall of the government. In several cases, activists critical of the PYD have been kidnapped and tortured; members of other parties have been threatened.⁷⁸ Even though publicly the Syrian regime is held responsible for the assassination of Mish'al at-Tammu, there are indications that the PYD was not only responsible for the first, failed attempt against his life—as he himself suspected—but also for his assassination.⁷⁹ These events are reminiscent of the PKK approach to opposition groups in Turkey in the 1980s. Currently the PKK is, in fact, coming under increasing pressure in Iraqi Kurdistan and needs Syria more than ever as an area of retreat. The other Kurdish parties do not appear to find this stance problematic; there has been no public criticism of the PYD. That the PYD was accepted into one of the associations of Syrian-Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Patriotic Movement, in April of 2011, also speaks for a relative consolidation of relations.

As far as contacts between the Arab and Kurdish opposition are concerned, these have been formalized in several oppositional coalitions. The oldest of these is the Damascus Declaration, which was formed in 2005. On the Kurdish side, the Democratic Yekîî, the Patriotic Party, the Equality Party, the Progressive Party, 'Abdulahakim Bashar's el-Partî, Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî, the Left Party, and the Rêkeftin are represented. The Yekîî, the Azadî, the Future Movement, and the PYD have stayed away from the Damascus Declaration because they do not believe its position on the Kurds goes far enough. The reservations rest primarily

77 It must not be forgotten that in recent years PYD activists in particular have been the focus of government persecution, as far as arrests and torture are concerned—see also KurdWatch, Human rights violations since 2009, <http://kurdwatch.org/statistics/statistics_en.html>.

78 See KurdWatch, August 11, 2011, »Ra's al-'Ayn: Two activists kidnapped and tortured by members of the PYD«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1879>>; KurdWatch, August 30, 2011, »Damascus: PYD threatens Future Movement activist«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1936>>. Moreover, there are numerous known cases from 'Afrin and Aleppo, in which activists have been threatened with sanctions if they organize dissident demonstrations; telephone conversations with activists from the aforementioned regions, September 2011.

79 See KurdWatch, October 10, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Mish'al at-Tammu assassinated«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2077>>. In addition, a member of the Future Movement told KurdWatch before Mish'al at-Tammu's death that the members of the Future Movement were more afraid of the PYD than the regime.

on the fact that the document does not contain a passage in which the Kurds are explicitly recognized as an independent nation along with the Arabs in Syria.⁸⁰ The Damascus Declaration has formulated its goal as a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish question »in a manner that guarantees the complete equality of the Syrian-Kurdish citizens with other citizens. Civil rights, culture, learning the national language, and other constitutional, political, social, and civil rights should be taken into account on the basis of the unity of Syrian territory. Those who were stripped of their citizenship and civil rights must have these recognized again in order to finally settle this issue.«⁸¹

The second large coalition is the National Union of the Forces for Democratic Change, which was founded on June 30, 2011 in Damascus. Among the founding groups on the Kurdish side are the Yekîî, the PYD, the Left Party, Nasruddin Ibrahim's el-Partî, and the Syrian-Kurdish Party. Their position on the Kurdish question reads as follows:

»The Kurds have historically been a significant part of the patriotic Syrian structure. Out of this comes the necessity to find a just solution to the Kurdish question. This must occur within a patriotic framework and on the basis of the unity of both the country and the people. In order to achieve this, constitutional guarantees are necessary. This does not contradict the fact that Syria is an indivisible part of the Arab Nation.«⁸²

The extent to which this position is significantly different from that of the Damascus Declaration is unclear—nevertheless, the Yekîî and the PYD joined the new coalition. In the case of the Yekîî, membership was admittedly only a short guest performance: On August 16, 2011, they already announced their withdrawal and justified this step with the fact that the founding declaration did not formulate the Kurdish question clearly enough. According to the Yekîî, it does not currently make sense to be part of an oppositional Syrian coalition. Thus the other parties are being encouraged to withdraw from both the Damascus Declaration and the National Union of the Forces for Democratic Change. In the view of the Yekîî, the Kurdish parties should form an independent bloc in order to jointly

80 Interviews with representatives of the Kurdish parties in Cairo, January 22–25, 2009.

81 For the original text of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change see <http://ar.wikisource.org/wiki/إعلان_دمشق_للتغيير_الوطني_الديمقراطي>.

82 See KurdWatch, July 4, 2011, »Damascus: New opposition coalition with Kurdish participation«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1753>>.

form a new union with the two large Syrian coalitions. In this way, according to Yekîî secretary Isma‘il Hami, the Kurds can more effectively assert their demands.⁸³

On the other hand, the Future Movement, with its previous speaker Mish‘al at-Tammu, was significantly involved in preparations for the National Rescue Conference. After the conference was held in Istanbul, however, at-Tammu too announced his party’s withdrawal. In a statement, he criticized, among other things, the fact that the participants did not keep to prearranged agreements and that in the closing statement in Istanbul the existence and the rights of the Kurds in that »part of Kurdistan that was annexed to Syria« were not mentioned. Following this critique, the participants in the Istanbul conference adopted the declaration that was originally developed in Damascus. According to this declaration, the goal is »a diverse, democratic, civil state with changing leadership,« »in which all Syrians—Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, and all other minorities—as well as all religions—both Muslims and Christians« are included. All Syrians should enjoy equal civil rights in a mutual state based on constitutional principles, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations.⁸⁴

Here too it is unclear to what extent the political position taken by the National Rescue Conference towards the Kurds differs from that of the Damascus Declaration or the National Union of the Forces for Democratic Change. Rather, the Kurd-specific content of the oppositional coalitions seems as equally interchangeable as the party programs of the Syrian-Kurdish parties. At the same time they remain quite vague. This vagueness reflects not only the Arab opposition’s fear of making overly broad concessions to Kurdish nationalism, but also and above all the vagueness of the Kurdish positions themselves. This vagueness—especially with regard to an overthrow of the regime—is also responsible for the fact that even though Kurdish party representatives are members of the Syrian National Council, an oppositional coalition formed in October 2011 in Istanbul, their political action is not yet publicly visible.

83 See KurdWatch, August 18, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Union Party withdraws from the National Union of the Forces for Democratic Change«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1896>>. See also KurdWatch, September 17, 2011, »Isma‘il Hami, Secretary of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîî): ›Our goal is the self-government of the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan‹«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview5.html>>.

84 See KurdWatch, July 20, 2011, »Istanbul/Damascus: ›National Rescue Conference‹ reveals conflicts over rights of Kurds and the relationship between religion and state«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=1802>>.

On October 26/27, 2011, a new coalition, the Kurdish Patriotic Conference in Syria, was founded. Members include all of the parties in the Kurdish Patriotic Movement, with the exception of the PYD.⁸⁵ The inaugural session addressed, among other things, the question of whether or not the Conference should call for the overthrow of the regime.⁸⁶ The majority of the delegates voted against this demand. At the same time, it was declared that: »The crisis in Syria can only be resolved through a change in the authoritarian and totalitarian system and its organizational, political, and intellectual structures. The security state must be dissolved and a more secular, democratic, diverse, parliamentary, and decentralized state must be constructed.«⁸⁷

In the Kurdish regions, conflicts temporarily did arise between Conference representatives and independent youth groups, when the former tried to co-opt dissident demonstrations.⁸⁸ At the same time, the Kurdish Patriotic Conference is beginning to be recognized internationally: On November 22, Conference representatives under the leadership of ‘Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish met with the Secretary General of the Arab League, Nabil al-‘Arabi.⁸⁹ As opinions and sentiments within the Kurdish parties lean more and more towards the endorsement of a regime change, Darwish apparently continues to play a leading role, even though his party previously advocated for a moderate policy towards the regime.

Parallel to this development, the Syrian National Council presented a draft of a political program on November 20, 2011 in which it pledges, among other things, that the constitution of the »new Syria« will guarantee the Kurds their »national rights,« as well as a just solution to the Kurdish question within the framework of the unity of the Syrian state.⁹⁰ On the Kurdish side, criticism immediately came, first and foremost, from the PYD,⁹¹ which accuses the National Council of pursuing policies towards the Kurds that are no different than those of the current Syrian regime.⁹² At the moment, it remains to be seen which concrete political rights the Kurds will be able to negotiate in the »new Syria« as a result of this pledge.

85 A total of 100 of the 257 participants in the Conference were members of Kurdish parties, 25 were representatives of youth groups, and 132 were well-known figures chosen by the parties.

86 Telephone interview with a conference participant, October 28, 2011.

87 See KurdWatch, November 1, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish Patriotic Conference in Syria founded«, <<http://kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2142>>.

88 See KurdWatch, November 7, 2011, »Al-Qamishli/‘Amudah: Conflicts with the Kurdish Patriotic Conference lead to division of protest movement«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/index?aid=2168>>.

89 See Avestakurd, November 22, 2011, »Civînek di navbera Encûmana Nîştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê û Elerebî de«, <http://avestakurd.net/news_detail.php?id=16400>. Representatives of the European delegations of the Yekîtî, ‘Abdulahakim Bashar’s el-Partî, the Democratic Yekîtî, and Mustafa Jum’a’s Azadî were also included in the delegation.

90 See Syrian National Council, November 20, 2011, »Political Programme for the Syrian National Council«, <<http://us2.campaign-archive1.com/?u=556aeef60722f6e5811ea2519&id=b352973981&e=717e877a47>>. Of the 26 seats in the General Secretariat of the Syrian National Council, four are currently reserved for Kurdish

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- representatives: Along with a common representative for the Yekîtî and Khayruddin Murad’s Azadî, the Future Movement has one seat (formerly held by Mish‘al at-Tammu). In addition, ‘Abdulbasit Sayda, who is non-partisan, is a member of the General Secretariat. Sayda is also part of the seven-member Executive Committee of the Syrian National Council. An additional »Kurdish« seat in the General Secretariat is not currently occupied; see KurdWatch, November 18, 2011, »Dr. ‘Abdulbasit Sayda, member of the Executive Committee of the Syrian National Council: ›There is no agreement between the Syrian National Council and the Turkish government‹«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/de/interview7.html>>.
- 91** The National Union of the Forces for Democratic Change, founded in June 2011 in Damascus, is also among the critics. In contrast to the second large oppositional coalition, the Damascus Declaration, the Union, which includes the PYD, is not represented in the Syrian National Council.
- 92** See Kurd Net, November 21, 2011, »The revolt in Syria, a great opportunity for Kurds to obtain their fair basic rights«, <<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/11/syriakurd390.htm>>; see also KurdWatch, November 8, 2011, »Salih Muslim Muhammad, chairman of the PYD: ›Turkey’s henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here‹«, <<http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/de/interview6.html>>.

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