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Developments, Dynamics, Positions

(2011-2023)

Eva Savelsberg, Jelena Kolar & Siamend Hajo

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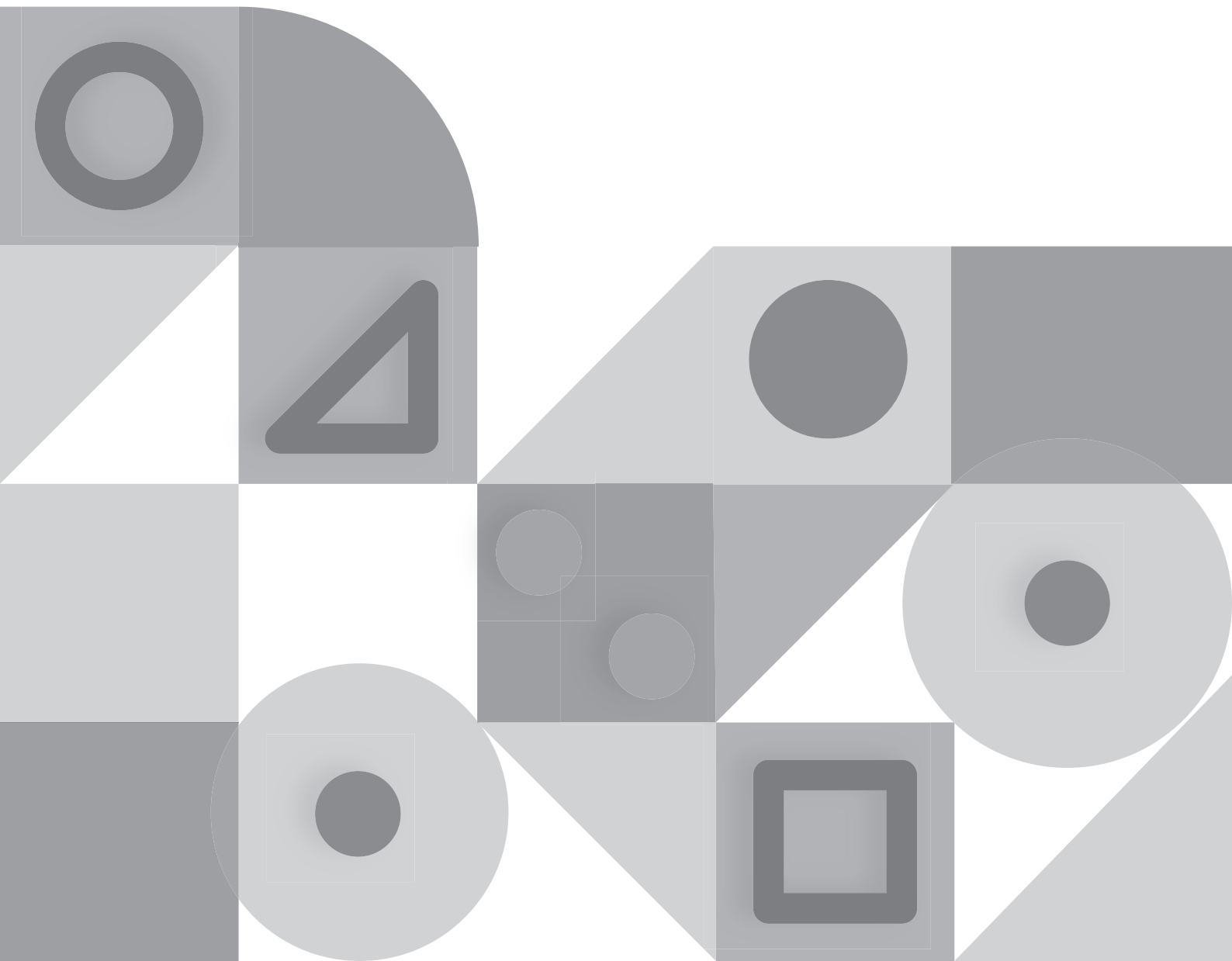
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Introduction

The Kurdish party landscape in Syria is viewed as confusing – a fact that prompted us to publish an article in 2011 at the beginning of the Syrian revolution with the topical title »Who is the Syrian Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties 1956-2011«. ¹ Our essay was met with considerable interest from scholars, politicians and journalists – as the Kurds were widely viewed as the most organised element within the Syrian opposition. At the time there were fifteen active Syrian Kurdish parties – with twelve of them originating from the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê, KDPS or the »Original KDPS«). This was the first Syrian Kurdish party and was established in 1957.

Today, twelve years after this first essay, the number of Syrian Kurdish parties has risen to over 60. Which circumstances have provoked the number of parties to increase by more than a factor of four? What ideological trends are represented within the party landscape – and which larger alliances? Can Syrian Kurdish parties – in regard to their objectives and structures – be described as democratic? What role do they play at present – in Syrian Kurdistan and within the Syrian opposition?

The first part of the study follows on from our 2011 essay and addresses the development of Syrian Kurdish parties from then until now. It presents the observable momentum within the Syrian Kurdish party scene over the last twelve years, against the backdrop of the Syrian revolution and civil war. Our main source in researching information up to 2016 was the KurdWatch website maintained by the European Center for Kurdish Studies (ECKS) between 2009 and 2016, which tracked developments in Kurdish regions of Syria on a daily basis.

The second part of the study investigates the question of which policies Syrian Kurdish parties currently advocate, whether their objectives and structures can be considered democratic and where their deficits lie. Among the sources to which we refer is a survey we conducted between April and June 2023, which, in addition to historical data on the parties' formation and split, also collected information concerning the most important party objectives, the representation of women and the links to one of the two large party associations in Syrian Kurdistan, the Kurdish National Council in Syria (Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyeyê, KNC) and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC).²

Part 1: Developments and Dynamics

As we mentioned in the beginning, there were fifteen Kurdish parties in Syria in October 2011.³ Twelve of them had emerged from the KDPS of 1957: four from the right wing, four from the left and four from the so-called '»Provisional Leadership«. The split between the right and left wings dates back to 1965: according to Salah Badruddin, leader of the party's left wing from 1969, an argument occurred at the decisive party conference in 1965 that, firstly, addressed the issue of whether the Kurds of Syria constituted a people or a minority, so whether they

1 Cf. KurdWatch, December 2011, »Who is the Syrian-Kurdish opposition? The development of Kurdish parties, 1956–2011« https://web.archive.org/web/20160706003121/http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf.

2 In particular, the co-author of this study – in his function as chair of the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (Şepêla Pêşrojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) and the Kurdistan Freedom Party (Şepêla Azadî ya Kurdistanî) – used his contacts with the KNC and other stakeholders to obtain a wealth of information on the structures of the KNC.

3 Cf. KurdWatch, December 2011, p. 13–14. The matching table is available at https://web.archive.org/web/20180424111843/http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_parteien_de_2.pdf The list and the table are both missing the Kurdish Reform Movement – Syria (Tevgera Çaksazî Kurdî-Sûriya), chaired by Faisal Yusuf, which split from the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) in 2010.

possess the right to self-determination or (only) cultural rights. The second bone of contention was whether the KDPS is part of the democratic movement in Syria and which positions it advocates in regard to the country's political and social issues, i.e. whether it sides with the current rulers or should become part of the political opposition. Ultimately, the argument centred on policy towards the Kurdish movement in Iraq and on the question of whether the party should endorse Mullah Mustafa Barzani or Jalal Talabani.⁴

The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP-I) exerted influence at a 1970 meeting in Iraqi Kurdistan, which resulted in a short-lived reunification of the two wings under the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (Provisional Leadership). Besides five independents, four members of the right wing and four from the left wing of the KDPS were represented in the Provisional Leadership, but neither 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish nor Salah Badruddin, who chaired the party's right and left wings, respectively. Daham Miro was appointed as the leader. But the alliance collapsed the same year, in 1970. Darwish left Iraq for Syria in 1971, where he revived »his« KDPS beyond the influence of Mullah Mustafa Barzani. Salah Badruddin also quit Iraq in 1971 – for Germany, where he continued the work of the other wing of the KDPS. Daham Miro remained at the helm of the KDPS (Provisional Leadership), irrespective of these developments. He was elected Secretary of the KDPS at its first party conference, which was held in Bamarni (Iraqi Kurdistan) in 1972, 15 years after the party's establishment.⁵ By the time the revolution began in 2011, there had been numerous splits and alliances, so that the three iterations of the KDPS that existed in 1971 had since evolved into twelve independent parties.

Split as an expression of inadequate democracy

What makes the early history of the KDPS so interesting is the fact that certain structures that emerged back then have persisted to this day. Aside from the ties between Syrian Kurdish parties and more influential parties outside of Syria, they include a lack of democratic party structures, which is reflected in splits and a 'reluctance' to hold regular party conferences, among other things. As we will see in a number of selected parties described in the following, these structural attributes do not apply merely to the successor parties of the KDPS anno 1957 and are equally true of other Syrian Kurdish parties.

The first party to look at is the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî) [Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (el-Partî)], which was led at the time by 'Abdulahkim Bashar. This party is the sister organisation to the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP Iraq) under Masud Barzani. Even then, it was directly financed by KDP Iraq and also benefited from its sister party's standing as what remains to this day the strongest Kurdish party in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as from the fame of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the organisation's founding figure. In April 2014, it merged with the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Azadî) under Mustafa Jum'a, the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Azadî) under Mustafa Oso and the Kurdistan Unity Party in Syria under 'Abdulbased Hamo to form the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (PDK-S); the four original parties were disbanded. However, previous members of el-Partî later argued that their party had not disbanded, rather that the three other parties had joined its ranks in 2014 and that their merger did not create a new organisation. To drive home this point, the PDK-S party conference of 2023 was not held as the 2nd of its kind (nine years after the first one in 2014) and was instead entitled the 12th party conference. After the elections to the Central Committee and the distribution of positions on the Politburo, some members of the party split off under

4 Another reason for the split was most likely the ideological differences between notable figures, religious leaders and landowners on the one hand, and former Communist Party members, most of them students, teachers and workers, on the other. The KDPS had brought these heterogeneous groups under a single roof, without actually resolving their differences.

5 Cf. KurdWatch December 2011: p. 12–13.

the leadership of Mustafa Jum'ā, former chairman of one of the two Azadîs and a member of the Politburo since the inception of the PDK-S in 2014. The back story to this split is that Jum'ā had not been re-elected to the Central Committee. He then went on to establish the Kurdistan Movement for Establishing Democracy (Tevgera Avakirina Demokratî Kurdistanî-Sûriyê). Apart from 2023, the party's logo also bears 1957 as the year of its foundation and hence fuels the claim to being the true or at least one direct successor party to the 'Original KDPS'.

The most important parties in 2011 also included the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Sûriyê). 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish served as its Secretary for 54 years, from 1965 until his death in 2019. The Progressive Party was close to, and received financial support from, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which at the time was the second strongest party in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Progressive Party has not succeeded in electing a new chair since the death of 'Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish. Part of the Central Committee supports Darwish's brother, while another faction does not. A split in the party currently seems imminent.

Also noteworthy is the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê), which was led, in 2011, by Isma'il Hami. The Union Party was the most active Kurdish party in the years leading up to the Syrian revolution, with its members organising numerous demonstrations and billboard campaigns. Unlike most of the other Kurdish parties, it also positioned itself on the side of the Syrian revolution right from the start. It has adopted – and still maintains – a rolling chair that is limited to two terms of two years each, the only party to have introduced this kind of arrangement as early as 2011. The Yekîti maintained long-standing ties to the PUK, which also provided financial backing. It has, however, been on the pay list of the KDP Iraq since 2014. Yekîti also experienced a split after 2011: 'Abdulsalam Khalaf Biro quit the party in 2021 and merged with an offshoot from the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (Yekîti) [Partiya Yekîti ya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Yekîti) under Hajar Ali] to establish the People's Party of Syrian Kurdistan (Partiya Gel ya Kurdistan-Sûriyê).

Another important party prior to the revolution was the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Democratic Yekîti). In 2011, it was perhaps the only Syrian Kurdish party to wield significant influence in the 'Afrin region. This party has also experienced a number of schisms since then: it was expelled from the Kurdish National Council in December 2014 because it – along with two other parties – voted for PYD instead of KNC candidates in the elections to the Kurdish decision-making body. While the expelled part of the party went on to join the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), other members founded their own Democratic Yekîti, which returned to the KNC fold under the chairmanship of Fasla Yusif. Hajar Ali split from Fasla Yusif in 2016 and founded the Third Democratic Yekîti, which, as mentioned earlier, entered into an alliance with a Yekîti offshoot in 2021 and from then on adopted the name of the People's Party of Syrian Kurdistan. This alliance held until August 2023, when Hajar Ali left once again and reactivated his former party.

Of the three parties that do not have a shared history in the Original KDPS, two are of particular interest: established in 2005, the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (Şepêla Pêşrojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) rose to prominence mainly due to its charismatic spokesperson Mish'al at-Tammu. Unlike the other Kurdish parties, he maintained good relations with the Arab opposition. The Syrian government was concerned that, under his leadership, a merger between Arab and Kurdish regime opponents might be on the cards – prompting his assassination on 7 October 2011, presumably by a PKK commando engaged by the regime.⁶ Siamend Hajo suc-

6 Cf. KurdWatch, October 10, 2011, »Al-Qamishli: Mish'al at-Tammu assassinated«, retrieved at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160706145708/http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2077&z=en>.

ceeded Mish'al at-Tammu as chairperson; the party experienced its first split in 2014, when Narin Metin left and founded her own eponymous party. Metin left this party as well in 2017 – which from then on was led by Fadî Marhê – and established another offshoot under the name Future Movement Kurdistan (Şepêla Pêrojê a Kurdistan). There was also a second split from Siamend Hajo's Kurdish Future Movement in 2017; its leader, Rezan Shaikmous, named 'his' party the Future Movement Syrian Kurdistan (Şepêla Pêrojê a Kurdistan Sûriye). In turn, Sulaiman Hussein split from this party in 2020. Siamend Hajo's Future Movement Kurdistan then united with Dr Tariq Kherki's Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria in the same year to establish the Freedom Movement of Kurdistan (Şepêla Azadî ya Kurdistanî). This means there are now four 'future movements', including the Freedom Movement of Kurdistan.

The second newly established party that deserves a mention is the Democratic Union (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), which was founded in 2003. The PYD is the Syrian sister party of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The expulsion of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in October 1998 was followed by the successive extradition of numerous high-ranking PKK members to Turkey, while PKK supporters were arrested and given long custodial sentences in Syria. Behind the establishment of the PYD was the intention to preserve the bonds between PKK sympathisers and members living in Syria and the party and at the same time to help them escape state repression. The latter was largely a failure: until the protests began in 2011, the PYD was not only the party with the largest contingent of prisoners, its members were – by and large – also sentenced to longer periods of incarceration than those of other parties and were subjected to systematic torture.⁷ The role of the PYD shifted dramatically with the onset of the Syrian revolution, which will be addressed in more detail later on.

The development of the aforementioned parties exemplifies one of the reasons why the number of Syrian Kurdish parties rose to over 60 between 2011 and 2023: almost all of them have experienced one or more splits. This fact points to a glaring deficiency: to this day, none of the assorted parties have managed to establish internal structures that enable the resolution of conflict by means of debate and majority decisions within the party. Where several persons are vying for the position of leader, seats in the Politburo or on the Central Committee, splitting from the original party is a widely accepted way for the losing candidate to become or remain leader/Politburo member. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that party conferences and their associated elections are frequently followed by schisms in the party. Reasons that are rooted in basic policy are largely irrelevant. The powers that be often perceive elections as a threat to their position. So it would be reasonable to assert that the statement made by the chair of an independent party is altogether typical: »Why should we hold a party conference? There are no problems.«

Presumably, universal and free elections, in which the population decides on the importance of the respective parties, would be the only way to end this endless succession of schisms and their inevitable increase in the number of Syrian Kurdish parties – or would decide which parties possess a noteworthy number of supporters.⁸ Approval ratings are an essential, though not the only, metric that lend legitimacy to a party, its objectives and personnel and enable a comparison with other parties. But this option is not available for Syrian Kurdish parties. This also explains why Syrian Kurdish parties are still so determined to position their

7 Cf. KurdWatch, September 2013, »What does the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition want? Politics between Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Damascus, and Qandil«, p. 12, retrieved at https://web.archive.org/web/20160705080401/http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/KurdWatch_A009_en_Parteien2.pdf.

8 Iraqi Kurdistan is a useful benchmark in this context: before the first elections were held in 1992, the region was home to as many parties in the region as there were in Syrian Kurdistan. But in the election results, three parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Islamic Movement – garnered over 94 percent of the votes. All the other parties – with the exception of the Socialist Party of Kurdistan, which took 2.6 percent of the vote – were below one percent. Some of them joined the larger parties, while others disappeared.

own organisation as the legitimate successor to the KDPS, which was established in 1957. A remarkable six of the 28 parties that participated in our survey claim to have been founded in 1957, which means that they define themselves as the direct successor to the »Original KDPS«. Another three assert that they were founded in 1965, the year of the split between the right and left wings of the »Original KDPS«.

The PYD is the only exception in regard to splits: founded in 2003, Kamal Shahin took Rêkeftin out of the party in 2004. He was killed in 2005 by PKK operatives in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁹ Rêkeftin then went underground, before joining the Kurdish National Council (KNC) at the onset of the revolution. Expelled in 2014, it then drew closer to the PYD and ultimately became part of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). One of the reasons why there were no further splits in the PYD is that the PKK is unscrupulous in the killing of dissidents. Secondly, anyone leaving the PYD will experience a dramatic loss in influence, at the latest since the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Strategic alliances

Like with the array of schisms, a variety of party alliances were established from 2011 onwards: the first important one of this kind that formed after the start of the revolution¹⁰ was the Kurdish National Council, which was founded in October 2011. It was established with the aim of benefiting from the popularity that the various youth groups had acquired through their participation in demonstrations criticising the regime, of uniting the Kurdish political parties behind a single programme and of pushing for Kurdish demands more effectively. None of these aims were achieved in any real sense: although successful, the attempt to integrate the youth groups went hand in hand with a rapid erosion of their significance. Meanwhile, the development of resilient, shared positions was never earnestly discussed within the KNC. The only aspect that was actually debated at the onset of the Syrian revolution was whether or not to support the uprising. Apart from the Kurdish Future Movement, only the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Partiya Yekîti ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) and – prior to its split – the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Partiya Azadî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê) voted for this option. These were the two parties – along with the Kurdish Future Movement – that joined the Syrian National Council after its establishment in August 2011. When the Kurdish National Council formed a few months later, it decreed that no party in the KNC could simultaneously belong to a Syrian opposition party. This prompted Azadî and Yekîti to quit the alliance, with only the Future Movement remaining. U.S. President Barack Obama issued a warning in August 2012, stating that the use of chemical weapons, or even preparations for their deployment, would constitute a »red line«. Given that the Syrian regime had already used poison gas by this time, the Kurdish National Council was not alone in suspecting that the U.S. would mount a military intervention in the war in Syria and that, as a result, the opposition could seize power. With this in mind, the KNC joined the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Etilaf), which was established November 2012 in Doha. The KNC has been part of this group ever since – despite the ubiquitous and serious disagreements about the implementation of minority rights within the coalition.

As far as effective advocacy for Kurdish positions is concerned, the KNC has gained recognition as an independent group on the Syrian Negotiations Commission (SNC). This is remarkable in that, as mentioned earlier, the KNC is a member of Etilaf and is therefore entitled, strictly speaking, to be represented by its assigned quota on the SNC. Moreover, two members

9 Cf. Ghadir Nasri & Arman Salimi, »The Syrian Kurds: Minority–Majority Relationship«, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 2, summer 2014, p. 135–163: 148, einzusehen unter file:///C:/Users/User5/Downloads/1035820141806.pdf.

10 This was not the first attempt by various parties to form an alliance; cf. KurdWatch, December 2011, p. 19–21.

of the KNC have sat on the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) since 2018, one of them on the *Small Body*. This, too, has given the KNC a certain visibility. At the same time, the former UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, made repeated calls in 2016 for ‘the Kurds’ to take part in the Geneva talks – a clear sign that he perceived the PYD in particular as representatives of the Kurdish population in Syria.¹¹

This is attributable to the fact that the PYD gained significant influence at the onset of the revolution: between 2012 and 2013, the Syrian government ceded control of large swathes of the areas of Syria populated predominantly by Kurds to the PYD and its militia, the People’s Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG).¹² In return, the PYD cracked down on the coordination groups that were committed to the revolution, especially during its first year. Later on, the PYD became increasingly concerned with consolidating its own power.¹³ What this meant – and continues to mean to this day – was that the parties within the Kurdish National Council would be granted virtually no political leeway. The closure and burning of party offices, the regular arrest of members of the KNC as well as the forced recruitment of young Kurds are common occurrences and have caused young people in particular to take flight, especially from the regions under PYD rule.¹⁴ What is more, the introduction of a school curriculum that spreads PKK ideology – coupled with the fact that these qualifications are recognised neither by the Syrian government nor internationally – has forced many Kurdish families to flee as they see no professional future for their children. The new curriculum is explicitly compulsory only for Kurds in the predominantly Kurdish areas of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.¹⁵

Political mediation between the PYD and the KNC has become a vital issue since the latter gained strength. Among the first mediators was the then Iraqi Kurdish President and Chair of the KDP, Masud Barzani. Barzani had already invited the Kurdish National Council and the People’s Council in Western Kurdistan (Encûmena Gel ya Rojavayê Kurdistanê), a PKK body with PYD participation, to Erbil on several occasions in summer 2012. This culminated in the conclusion of the ‘Erbil I Agreement’ and the establishment of the Supreme Kurdish Committee (Desteya Bilind a Kurd) in July 2012. Each side held fifty percent of the seats on this new committee, which was founded to assist with the administration of Kurdish areas in Syria. But the work itself soon turned out to be difficult. After a failed attempt by Barzani to resolve the differences in November 2012, he again invited the leaders of the parties on the Kurdish National Council and representatives of the PYD to Erbil in April/May 2013. However, the PYD delegation shunned the gathering, stating that the PYD is »not part of the problem«. Establishing the Supreme Kurdish Committee did not enable the parties on the Kurdish National Council to gain influence.¹⁶

Masud Barzani managed to convene a second gathering in Erbil and to initiate the Erbil II Agreement in December 2013. This took place against the backdrop of preparations for the Geneva II Conference, and the aim was to develop a common Kurdish position for presentation

11 Cf. AFP, March 12, 2016, »Kurds must be able to give views on Syria’s future: UN envoy«, retrieved at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3489206/Kurds-able-views-Syrias-future-UN-envoy.html>.

12 At present, so in September 2023, the PYD and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are dominated by their People’s Defense Units (YPG), control and administer northeastern Syria up to Deyr az-Zor, the predominantly Arab region of Ar-Raqqah, and the Kurdish Kobani (‘Ain al-‘Arab). By contrast, the areas around Sêrê Kaniye (Ras al-‘Ayn) and the ‘Afrin region – also predominantly Kurdish – are controlled by Turkey. Cf. in this regard <https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/post/690916739506208768/current-situation-in-syria>.

13 Cf. KurdWatch, September 2013: p. 16.

14 As regards the violations of human rights perpetrated by the PYD up to 2016, refer, for example, to <https://web.archive.org/web/20170715034120/http://www.kurdwatch.org/?cid=1&z=en>. Also refer to Human Rights Watch 2014, »Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria«, retrieved at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>.

15 With respect to the school curriculum, refer to Mehmet Emin Cengiz, April 19, 2021, »Decoding the Intra-Kurdish Dialogue in Syria«, Al Sharq Strategic Research, retrieved at <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/04/19/intra-kurdish-dialogue-in-syria/>.

16 Cf. KurdWatch, September 2013: p. 19.

at the peace talks. The parties agreed on a variety of points, but never on how the Kurdish regions should be placed under joint administration. Meanwhile, the PYD continued to expand its control over Kurdish areas, declaring the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of West Kurdistan (later North and East Syria) just one month after conclusion of the Erbil II Agreement. The Kurdish National Council protested against this step, asserting that the Autonomous Administration did not represent the KNC and had no legitimacy.¹⁷

In October 2014, the Islamic State (IS) captured large swathes of Syria, including the town of Kobanî, which is located in the Kurdish areas. The United States decided to provide military support to the YPG, while still relying on assistance from the Iraqi Kurdish regional government under Barzani.¹⁸ It was against this backdrop that another meeting was held between representatives of the Kurdish National Council and the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which had been established by the PYD and other PKK-affiliated parties in 2011, in Duhok from 14 to 22 October 2014. A press release issued on 22 October 2014 announced the formation of a »Kurdish Decision-making Body« to work out a common strategy and a unified Kurdish political position. Unlike on the Supreme Kurdish Committee, independent parties were to hold 20 percent of the seats on the Kurdish Decision-making Body, breaking the stranglehold of the Kurdish National Council and TEV-DEM. But which parties these should actually be was hotly contested.¹⁹

The inaugural session of the Kurdish Decision-making Body was held on 16 December 2014. It was attended by twelve representatives of the Kurdish National Council, who had been determined on 7 December, and twelve from TEV-DEM. Another six members were elected during the session. Five of them were affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), while one was a member of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Democratic Yekîti). The Kurdish National Council convened an investigation committee to clarify the facts, as the PYD candidates must have received votes from the KNC. On 24 December, the committee reported to the Kurdish National Council that the lost votes had indeed come from three KNC parties: the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Democratic Yekîti), Nasruddin Ibrahim's Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî), and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Reconciliation (Rêkeftin), an offshoot of the PYD. In response, the Kurdish National Council expelled these two parties and withdrew their seats on the Kurdish Decision-making Body. Three new members of the Kurdish Decision-making Body who were considered independent were appointed in their place. Aldar Khalil, the PYD's press spokesperson, then put forward that the Kurdish National Council should now hold a smaller number of seats in the Kurdish Decision-making Body due to the exclusion of three parties. It would otherwise not be permissible to replace members of the Decision-making Body.²⁰

The Dohuk Agreements finally collapsed in February 2015, when the Autonomous Administration organised regional elections in parts of the areas under their control without involving the KNC.²¹

17 Cf. Suhail al-Ghazi, May 14, 2021, »Kurdish-Kurdish Negotiations in Syria«, retrieved at <https://timep.org/2021/05/14/kurdish-kurdish-negotiations-in-syria/>.

18 Cf. KurdWatch, November 3, 2014, »`Ayn al-'Arab: Islamic State remains dominant«, retrieved at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160706082650/http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3261&z=en>, and KurdWatch, November 12, 2014, »`Ayn al-'Arab: Peshmerga and FSA arrive«, retrieved at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160706082117/http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3273&z=en>.

19 Cf. KurdWatch, November 7, 2014, »Duhok: Kurdish National Council and TEV-DEM form new body«, retrieved at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160706082640/http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3266&z=en>.

20 Cf. KurdWatch, December 28, 2014 »Al-Qamishli: Kurdish National Council fractures«, retrieved at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160706080517/http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=3302&z=en>. It is reasonable to assume that Aldar Khalil deliberately allowed the talks to break down, as he no longer needed the Kurdish National Council, i.e. the KDP Iraq, after the victory over Islamic State in Kobanî.

21 Cf. Suhail al-Ghazi, May 14, 2021, »Kurdish-Kurdish Negotiations in Syria«, retrieved at <https://timep.org/2021/05/14/kurdish-kurdish-negotiations-in-syria/>.

The PYD established the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) in December 2015 as an alternative party alliance to the KNC. This was just shortly before negotiations resumed in Geneva in February 2016 (Geneva III). The council perceives its role as that of an umbrella organisation for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and as the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It claims to be open to all political organisations and figures to shoulder their responsibility in saving Syria, to initiate sweeping democratic change, achieve gender equality and justice and to build a regime as the expression of a national project.²² The council's member parties are predominantly Kurdish, but also include Arab, Assyrian and Yezidi organisations. Other organisations such as TEV-DEM and the Autonomous Administration are listed as members as well. Numerous parties were founded after 2011. These newly established organisations are – aside from the splits – the second reason for the rapid growth in the number of Syrian Kurdish parties since the start of the revolution. However, the plans by the PYD to create a body, namely the SDC, that both Turkey and the Arab opposition would accept as a suitable interlocutor in Geneva did not work out.

In the wake of the military victory over Islamic State (IS) by the Democratic Forces in the northeast of Syria in March 2019, the PYD attempted to gain ground diplomatically and to secure official recognition of its administration. To this end, it participated in the Kurdish-Kurdish talks initiated by France and continued by the USA. The PYD presented a new coalition for this purpose in May 2019, known as the Kurdish National Unity Parties (Partiyên Yekîtiya Niştimanê Kurdistan, PYNK). It consists of 25 parties in total,²³ and all Kurdish parties within the SDC are also represented in the PYNK. Two rounds of talks, each comprising several parts, were held between the KNC and PYNK, which led to the establishment of the Supreme Kurdish Reference in June 2020. The Duhok Agreements were to serve as the basis for negotiations going forward. Among the main topics placed on the agenda was the KNC's integration into the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. However, the third round of talks is yet to take place – due in part to the lack of a unified position towards the negotiations within the SDF/PYD/PKK.²⁴ It is entirely unclear at present when and perhaps even if further talks will be held.

Part 2: Positions

As we have seen in the first part of this essay, there are currently two large blocs in Syria in which the various Syrian Kurdish parties work together: the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). But what does it actually entail to belong to one of these blocs, i.e. at policy level? Are the parties pursuing entirely different objectives, irrespective to which of the aforementioned blocs they actually belong?

The primacy of ethnicity

We wrote to 43 Syrian Kurdish parties as part of our study and received responses from 28. 14 of them belong to the KNC, 11 and the SDC, while 4 are independent. The two most important Syrian Kurdish parties – the PDK-S and the PYD – were among those that did not respond. What might seem like a material deficiency is actually unproblematic from a factual perspective: policy-wise, the PDK-S is no different to the other parties on the Kurdish National Council that participated in our survey; instead, the other KNC parties base their policies on the PDK-S programme. Moreover, there is sufficient information on both the PDK-S and the PYD available from public sources to infer valid statements about their positions, even without them partici-

22 Cf. »Who are we«, retrieved at https://m-syria-d.com/en/?page_id=4254.

23 Cf. ASO, Center for Consultancy and Strategic Studies, June 2020, »The Emergence and Development of the Kurdish Political Movement in Syria«, retrieved at <https://www.asocenter.org/files/The%20Emergence%20and%20Development%20of%20the%20Kurdish%20Political%20Movement%20in%20Syria%20Edited%20report.pdf>.

24 Cf. in this regard and in respect to the failure of the talks: Mehmet Emin Cengiz, 19 April 2021, »Decoding the Intra-Kurdish Dialogue in Syria«, Al Sharq Strategic Research, p. 4 and 8–12, retrieved at <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/04/19/intra-kurdish-dialogue-in-syria/>.

pating in our survey.

The first question to address explores which statements the 28 participating parties made in regard to their political objectives. Recognising the rights of the Kurds (23 mentions, including 14 KNC parties, 8 SDC parties and one independent party) and democracy (also 22 mentions, including 10 KNC parties, 9 SDC parties and 3 independent parties) were mentioned as the most important objectives. This was followed by the recognition of Kurds in the Syrian constitution (16 mentions, including 6 KNC parties, 9 SDC parties and one independent party), pluralism (12 mentions, including 4 KNC parties, 7 SDC parties and one independent party) and federalism (11 mentions, including 7 KNC parties, 3 SDC parties and one independent party). The following issues were mentioned as well: social justice (7 mentions, including 3 KNC parties; 3 SDC parties and one independent party); decentralisation (7 mentions, including no KNC party, 6 SDC parties and one independent party); self-determination for the Kurds (5 mentions, including one KNC party, two SDC parties and two independent parties); rule of law (5 mentions, of which 2 KNC parties, one SDC party and two independent parties); cultural rights (4 mentions, one KNC party and 3 SDC parties); women's rights (5 mentions, including no KNC party, 4 SDC parties and one independent party); language rights (4 mentions, including 3 KNC parties and one SDC party), protection of Kurdish identity (4 mentions, including 3 KNC parties and one SDC party) and secularism (3 mentions, including two SDC parties and one independent party). Protecting the environment is mentioned just once as a party's objective on the SDC and economic objectives are not formulated at all.

It is quite evident that the overwhelming majority of Syrian Kurdish parties are focused on issues of ethnicity, so relating to the specific rights of the Kurdish population. In total, six different objectives are put forward in this area, ranging from the recognition of Kurds to language rights. Within this framework, language or cultural rights tend to flesh out other ethnic demands. There is no difference in this regard between the parties that belong to the KNC or the SDC, nor do the independent parties play a special role. The fact that the demand for ethnic rights takes centre stage within the spectrum of Kurdish parties is a response to decades of disregard for the rights of Kurds in Syria. Also contributing to this is the reality that economic or socio-political ideas are irrelevant to the Syrian Kurdish parties we surveyed – leaving aside the more general mention of social justice. The issue of ecology – probably the most serious challenge of our times from a global perspective – is also mentioned just once, as indicated above. However, merely interpreting the paucity of clear policy as an individual deficiency would be inadequate: instead, it is reasonable to assume that a shift from ethnic to more general issues can only take place once the basic human and especially minority rights of the Kurdish population, the parties' clientèle, have been guaranteed. This is the only way to establish the necessary leeway to address other issues and to build coalitions on particular matters that extend beyond ethnicity.

The reference to the necessity of recognising ethnic rights in the constitution underscores the awareness among the Kurdish political elite that a right that is enshrined in the constitution is less easy to withdraw than one that is right based on a simple law. Indeed, the only way is to introduce a constitutional amendment, which requires a qualified majority.

The PYD statutes address the Kurdish issue as follows:

»Thus, the PYD works towards finding a democratic and just solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria and Rojava within a democratic Syrian constitutional framework.«

Thus, the PYD also relies on the solution of the Kurdish question within the framework of the constitutional process. It should be mentioned, however, that some party leaders of Kurdish

parties in the SDR criticized in conversation that the PYD is not really interested in making policy for the Kurdish population. This is already clear from its name, in which the term »Kurdish« does not appear. It never speaks of the Kurds' right to self-determination, but treats them as one of many ethnic groups in the region. Ironically, the only identity policy decision that the PYD has made - the introduction of Kurdish as the language of instruction in the schools of the Jazirah region - has led to the flight of numerous Kurdish families because the degrees are not recognized. The Arabization of the formerly predominantly Kurdish region was thus further advanced.

Therefore, it should be noted at this point that focus on ethnic issues among Syrian Kurdish parties has not changed since our survey in 2011. At that time, the core demands of the KNC parties we interviewed were the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people as a second nation within Syria and the acknowledgement that the Kurdish people in Syria are inhabiting their historical territory. The demand for cultural rights, including language rights, have since been added.²⁵

Decentralisation, federalism and the »free human«

The parties' statements are also consistent compared to 2011 in that they do not contain a demand for an independent Kurdish state or annexation, for example to Iraqi Kurdish territory. None of the parties – and here we see a difference between the Kurdish movement in Syria and the Kurdish parties in Iraq and Syria – are seeking to exercise the rights of the Kurdish population by military force, nor have they ever propagated such a policy.²⁶ This applies also to the PYD, although it does have armed units in its ranks.

However, the mention of federalism and decentralism as the preferred forms of government is new. The majority of parties in 2011 stated only the concept of 'self-government' and failed to mention the terms decentralisation or federalism at all. This is clear evidence of influence from the Geneva talks and the discussions in the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC). A regular question raised in these contexts was whether Syria should become a decentralised state and, if so, what decentralisation actually entails.²⁷ Among the more interesting facts is that the concept of federalism is mentioned predominantly by KNC and independent parties (only one of the SDC parties mentions the term), while parties belonging to the SDC – in contrast to their KNC counterparts – speak largely of decentralisation. It is difficult to say whether these different terms also stand for different concepts. Further research would be necessary

25 Cf. KurdWatch December 2011: p. 17.

26 There are many reasons for the absence of any armed struggle for Kurdish rights in Syria. Firstly, the geographical and demographic circumstances are barely conducive to armed conflict and the demand for an independent state. There are only around two million Kurds in a country of approximately twenty million, which means that they account for a much smaller part of the population compared to Iraq and especially Turkey. In addition, Kurds have largely settled in three geographically separate regions – the Jazira, 'Afrin and 'Ain al-'Arab (Kobani) – which runs counter to traditional concepts of independent statehood. Moreover, there are no mountainous regions where armed fighters could retreat, at least in the Jazira Region, the most populous Kurdish settlement area. Although it would be possible in theory to establish 'urban guerilla forces', there is a distinct lack of any relevant Kurdish predecessors. At the same time, Syrian Kurds have participated in the armed struggle for the liberation of their compatriots in Turkey and Iraq for decades. Even during the time of the French mandate, the Khoybun organisation provided both propaganda and military support in the struggle for Ararat. Later on, Syrian Kurds fought for the KDP and the PUK in the Iraqi Kurdish Liberation Movement, as well as for the PKK. President Hafiz al-Assad gave Kurdish parties from neighbouring Iraq and Turkey relatively free rein to operate in Syria. The PKK ran training camps for its guerilla force in Lebanon – still under Syrian control at the time – until Öcalan's arrest in 1998, while the KDP and PUK had party offices in Damascus until the outbreak of the revolution. Assad pursued this policy, not only to obtain leverage in negotiations with neighbouring states, but also to channel the efforts of Syrian Kurds towards Iraq and Turkey and hence distract attention from the issue closer to home. This strategy was also successful because, despite numerous defeats, the KDP, PUK and PKK repeatedly secured victories in their struggle against the respective governments. When Öcalan echoed the Syrian government's position and declared that there was no Kurdish issue in Syria and that the Syrian Kurds were actually refugees from Turkey, this also helped to minimise the following of Syrian Kurdish parties and to integrate their more radical protagonists into his own armed movement. Adopting this position weakened the Kurdish movement in Syria and prevented in part the development of an effective opposition, even beyond the realm of armed struggle. Cf. KurdWatch, December 2011, p. 15–16.

27 As early as 2016, the Kurdish National Council drafted a model – albeit never adopted officially – for a federal Kurdish region. Cf. https://power-sharing-syria.ezks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2-Workshop-Paper_02_Erbil_2016_DE.pdf.

to shed light on this question. Even the 2015 statutes of the SDC use decentralisation and federalism as synonymous words, while emphasising nonetheless that elements of centralisation remain necessary:

»As the Syrian crisis is a structural crisis based on one nation-state, tyranny, and exclusion, the solution in Syria must be directed towards decentralization, partnership and true democracy to enable all components, regardless of their views and affiliations, to achieve their aspirations in the common homeland, which must include all without exclusion or monopolization or domination. [...]

On the other hand, the insistence on a decentralized federal Syria does not mean abolishing the centralization entirely. Rather, the centralization will shift from being a tool of control to a mean of co-ordination and unification of all the regions that constitute the whole of the country, while maintaining of management specific functions that are generally strategic.«²⁸

The form of federalism outlined here appears based on the theoretical misunderstanding that federalism seeks exclusively to decentralise competences – while it actually comprises both: decentralised competences held by the regions/provinces and the central assignment of joint competences. Cooperation is a linchpin of federal concepts.

The PYD, as the strongest party in the alliance, describes in its statutes that democratic self-government in Rojava should be further developed as the most successful solution to all socio-political issues. This system must be extended to all parts of the country to create a democratic, pluralistic and decentral Syria.²⁹ Moreover, the PYD statutes call for a confederal model with other parts of Kurdistan and in relation to other states in the Middle East.³⁰ PYD co-chair Ilham Ehmed stated in February 2016 that the establishment of a federal Syria consisting of three regions was currently under discussion: North Syria, South Syria and Central Syria. All of these federal regions would retain their own identities and ethnic diversities. A federal parliament would also be established in each of these regions to reflect the will of the Syrian people, as well as that of international powers such as the United States and Russia.³¹ By contrast, Salih Muslim Muhammad – second co-chair of the PYD – called for »democratic autonomy« in a 2011 interview, a concept he defines as separate from federalism and confederalism: »We, the Kurdish freedom movement, reject the classic understanding of power. We reject classic models like federalism, con-federalism, 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.«³² Here, Muhammad is repeating the ideology embraced by Abdullah Öcalan, whom the PYD describes in its statutes as an »inspiration«. An essential component of this ideology is a grass-roots democratic concept of society, which should be built in opposition to the state and has allegedly materialised in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.³³

Ultimately, it is impossible to infer any stringent concept regarding the envisaged decentralisation from the current PYD or SDC programmes or from Öcalan's ideas. What is certain, however, is that the self-administrative structures established according to Öcalan's concept

28 Cf. Meclîsa Sûriya Demokrat, »Who are we«, retrieved at https://m-syria-d.com/en/?page_id=4254.

29 »B. Develop the Democratic Self-administration system, which currently exists in Rojava, and is considered the most successful solution to all socio-political issues. Furthermore, it should be disseminated to all parts of Syria to achieve a democratic, pluralist and decentralised Syria«, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Internal System, retrieved at <http://pydrojava.org/english/internal-system/>.

30 »D. Support the democratic liberation struggle in all parts of Kurdistan in order to achieve and consolidate Kurdish national unity based upon the principle of democratic communal confederalism without compromising political borders

E. Work towards a democratic confederate Middle Eastern union and to move forward towards building a political, moral and ecological community that takes women's freedom as its foundation«, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Internal System, retrieved at <http://pydrojava.org/english/internal-system/>.

31 Cf. ANF News, 23 February 2023, »Ehmed: Three federal regions will be formed in Syria – PART II«.

32 Cf. KurdWatch December 2011: p. 18.

33 Cf. Christopher Wimmer 2023, »Land der Utopie? Alltag in Rojava«, Nautilus Flugschrift, p. 72.

are quasi-state and not in opposition to the state. The social contract corresponds to the civil constitution, while the Legislative, Executive and Judicial Councils reflect the classical separation of powers and the various committees of self-government are comparable to ministries. What is more, the administration levies taxes and fees and organises what some might call compulsory military service and others compulsory recruitment – both classic state tasks.

Democracy between aspirations and reality

The findings of our survey indicate that democracy today retains the same value it held as a political goal in 2011.³⁴ Democracy received the second highest approval ratings, and there are no differences between the parties from the two blocs or their independent counterparts. But then as now, appreciation of democratic structures is in marked contrast to the internal structures encountered within Syrian Kurdish parties. As mentioned above, they are yet to succeed in establishing internal structures that might be used to resolve conflicts – whether in regard to personnel or policy issues. Anyone dissatisfied with the outcome of a party conference is more likely to split from their own party and establish an offshoot than to campaign for approval in the next internal party elections. Neither is the free choice of candidates self-evident, as exemplified by the PDK-S shows:

As mentioned earlier, the PDK-S party conference was held in the summer of 2023, nine years after the previous one in 2014. The elections to the Central Committee, which according to the resolution of the party conference should comprise 27 members and whose tasks include electing Politburo members and the party chairperson, mainly selected persons without prior experience of leadership positions. Previous members of the Politburo received a particularly small number of votes. Also ignored were a few persons that KDP Iraq would have liked to have seen on the Central Committee. In response, Azad Berwari from Masud Barzani's office and Hamit Darbandi, responsible for the Syrian Kurds in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, then decided that the Central Committee should be expanded to 30 members and nominated the candidates who would hold these three seats. The number of votes these persons had received was entirely irrelevant to the process. Moreover, Berwari and Darbandi also picked six of the nine Politburo members and appointed the chairperson. Again, the number of votes with which these persons had been elected to the Central Committee did not matter at all. Only three Politburo members were elected by the Central Committee itself.

A popular explanation for this gap between aspiration and reality is that it is far more difficult to build democratic structures in a repressive environment like Syria than in a setting that is at least pluralistic. Syrian Kurdish parties had no legal status under the Assad regime and were therefore not subject to any laws. With this in mind, the temptation to operate without a reliable set of rules was strong, especially if secrecy and a lack of transparency were justified by the political repression to which party members and their leaders were repeatedly exposed. The situation among KNC parties is similar under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, especially for those that are not officially registered. Irrespective of these unfavourable circumstances, the parties certainly have the mechanisms in place to hold real elections on a regular basis and to conduct themselves in accordance with their own statutes.

It is also striking that, while the parties claim to uphold a Western code of values (democracy, decentralisation/federalism, pluralism), one principle that is commonly viewed as central to democracies plays only a subordinate role. This principle refers to women's rights and gender equality. Only 5 of the 28 parties mention gender equality among their material objectives and none that belong to the KNC.

34 Cf. KurdWatch December 2011: p. 19.

This translates into a low number of female leaders within the Syrian Kurdish party spectrum: of the 28 parties, only 2 had a women's share of 53 and 50 percent respectively in their highest party body. The first belongs to the SDC, while the second is independent. Another 5 parties at least had a women's share of above 25 percent, that is, between 31 and 40 percent female leaders. One of them belongs to the KNC, another is independent and three are members of the SDC. 11 other parties had a share that is below 25 percent, that is, between 13 and 23 percent, and 8 parties did not have a single woman in their highest leadership body – of these, 5 belong to the KNC and 3 to the SDC. Two parties did not disclose any details concerning the number of women in leadership positions. One of nine persons on the PDK-S (which did not take part in the survey) Politburo is female – so the share of women is only just over 10 percent. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that only 3 of the 28 party chairpersons are women – one of these parties is independent, one belongs to the KNC and one is a member of the SDC. Overall, therefore, the independent parties and those affiliated in the SDC show a slightly better result in regard to the share of women in their leadership body compared to the KNC parties. However, even the majority of these parties fall significantly short of the official goals embraced by the SDC, which envisage a 50 percent quota of women across all areas of society.³⁵ The only exception is the PYD, in which each leadership position is occupied by a man and a woman. It should be noted nonetheless that executive power still rests predominantly with men, even in the PYD and PKK. Therefore, it is mainly the men that are known beyond the PKK circles themselves: Relevant figures in this regard include Cemil Bayik, Co-chair of the Executive Council of the Koma Civakên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Communities Union, KCK), the PKK umbrella organisation, Murat Karayılan (Supreme Commander of the Hêzên Parastina Gel, the People's Defence Forces and therefore the armed branch of the PKK), Duran Kalkan (Member of the Executive Council of the KCK), Mustafa Karasu (member of the KCK)³⁶, Salih Muslim (Co-chair of the PYD), Aldar Khalil (Member of the Executive Committee of TEV-DEM) or Mazlum Abdi (Supreme Commander of the SDF). There are therefore no women in similarly important or prominent roles.

Some parties have introduced quotas to change the inadequate representation of women within their bodies. The Democratic Green Party (Partiya Kesk a Demokrat, KESK), for instance, stipulates a mandatory 40 percent share of women in all party bodies. The Kurdistan Freedom Movement (Sepêla Azadî Kurdistanî) has adopted a provision whereby half of its board members must be female. But the introduction of women's quotas is dogged by problems. It is common for many female members of the Freedom Movement to refrain from attending party meetings in response to the unequal distribution of mandates and due to the patriarchal reservations that male relatives express towards women and men being jointly involved in political life. As a result, numerous male members of the party's executive board are highly critical of the 50 percent quota. There are also justified reasons to doubt how seriously many parties are attempting to raise their share of women by any significant margin: The PDK-S, for instance, resolved at its 2014 party conference that three of the 52 seats on the party's Central Committee should be reserved for women. In the election, four women secured the necessary share of the vote to become members of the governing body. One woman was then replaced with a man, although he had fewer votes. The stated reason was that only three seats had been reserved for women.

Despite the inadequate representation of women in Syrian Kurdish parties and the inter-

35 Cf. »Who are we«, retrieved at https://m-syria-d.com/en/?page_id=4254.

36 The KCK is the new organisational form of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which aims to implement the »democratic confederalism« declared by Abdullah Öcalan on 20 March 2005. As explained earlier, this principle is to act as the nucleus for a non-state society. The name was changed from Koma Komalên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Democratic Confederalism) to Koma Civakên Kurdistan in June 2007.

nal resistance to quotas, the male decision-makers in many parties are well aware that the lack of gender equality might be viewed as regressive and damage the party's reputation, at least on the international stage. Only this fact might sufficiently explain why nineteen party leaders, when asked in our survey about the proportion of women in their highest party body, stated their representation on the Central Committee, but not in the Politburo. While the Politburo makes the actual decisions, the Central Committee in most parties is a form of advisory body. Women are also underrepresented on these advisory bodies, but to a less significant extent compared to the Politburos. It follows, therefore, that many party leaders have inaccurately declared the Central Committee to be their highest body in order to window dress their numbers regarding the representation of women. Although little has changed on the factual level to improve the status of women's representation, an incipient transformation in awareness can still be observed on this issue – this, at least, would be a positive interpretation of the circumstances outlined here. A less optimistic view is that the parties have merely adopted disparate ideological notions from those actors whose support they are seeking to obtain, namely the Western community of states.³⁷

Leaving aside that the Syrian Kurdish parties which have come together in the SDC appear somewhat more progressive in regard to the representation of women or the declaration of gender equality as an objective of their party, there are, in the end, no significant programmatic differences between the parties belonging to the KNC and the SDC. It is therefore reasonable to enquire as to the reasons that prompt parties to join the KNC or the SDC.

KNC or SDC?

Of the parties that took part in our survey and belong to the KNC, 9 describe themselves as charter members (with 2011 as the founding year), while the other joined between 2012 and 2022. The necessity to establish a joint representation of Kurdish interests in the Syrian revolution is cited as the factor that tipped the balance for founding or joining the KNC. It is a question of developing a shared programme and strengthening the 'Kurdish voice' in Syria. Within this context, the KNC is viewed as the legitimate representative of Syrian Kurds, as the organisation that advocates for the 'Kurdish project' in Syria. Moreover, responses refer repeatedly to the fact that the KNC represents Kurdish interests on the international stage or is recognised within the global community. The fact that the KNC belongs to the opposition (i.e. Etilaf) and champions the Kurds on the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) is emphasised as a positive factor. Expectedly, the KNC's membership (but not the PYD or the SDC) of the opposition and hence its status as an official part of the UN peace process has therefore strengthened the alliance. Moreover, one respondent also stresses the efforts undertaken by the KNC to pursue its objectives – establishing the rights of Kurds of Syria – by peaceful and democratic means, as well as its rejection of violence. Another argument put forward for membership in the KNC is the wish to place support for the Kurds on a broader footing. This goal can be achieved with support from the KNC, as it consists not only of parties. Indeed, 50 percent of its members are NGOs and independent persons.³⁸ In regard to the last point, however, it is important note that the 'independent' members of the KNC are everything other than that. They may be, instead, members of NGOs that are funded by the PDK-S or of youth or women's organisations within the PDK-S or quite simply persons who do not hold office but nevertheless belong to the PDK-S.

³⁷ And the Kurdish movement in Syria has some history in this regard: at the time of the mandate and during the Second World War, Khoybun and the Kurdish League also espoused ideologies from powers whose support they requested, whether it was the Soviet Union, Germany, France or the United Kingdom. It also shaped the general policies of the KDPS and its successor parties during the 1950s, when Kurds turned to the Communist Party in increasing numbers. Cf. in this regard KurdWatch December 2011: p. 19–20.

³⁸ In fact, the KNC constitution stipulates that independents should account for 51 percent of its membership.

The most frequently heard argument in favour of the SDC is its status as an inclusive body that represents all areas of Syrian society, so all ethnicities living in the country. It is claimed that the SDC is the only bloc that calls for the equality of all national and religious groups in Syria. The SDC brings together the Syrian forces that are seeking genuine change and advocates an open oppositional group. Real progress, it is claimed, will require a national and not just a regional approach. There is a need for an opposition that represents the whole country and works for a democratic, decentralised Syria. Democracy can only be achieved by bringing together all forces within society. So while the KNC seeks unity within the Syrian Kurdish forces, the SDC adopts a national approach. However, this does not mean that the Kurdish parties within the SDC would consider the Kurdish question as secondary. Instead, they emphasise that the Kurdish issue must be resolved within the overall framework of the SDC's work.

Respondents stress repeatedly, however, that the SDC is an organisation whose roots are within Syria – making an at least implicit distinction from the KNC, whose dependence on the KDP Iraq and close ties to Turkey are repeatedly criticised. Finally, several respondents speak positively of the SDC's commitment to the intra-Syrian dialogue as a means of resolving the Syrian issue – i.e. that it supports negotiations between the opposition and the regime. And indeed, none of the parties organised within the KNC name this aspect as a KNC objective. But this difference may be less pronounced than it might appear at first glance, as the KNC belongs to Etilaf and is therefore part of the Syrian opposition and holds a seat on the *Small Body* of the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC), which also includes regime delegates.

It is therefore important to note that there are no fundamental and substantive reasons why some Syrian Kurdish parties have joined the KNC and others the SDC. In other words: the reasons given by the various parties for having joined or co-founded one bloc or the other tend to be very similar. All Syrian Kurdish parties we interviewed stated their material goals as the attainment of political and cultural rights for the Syrian Kurdish population as well as the establishment of typical freedoms in a decentralised or federal Syria. While the KNC parties claim to pursue these goals by first uniting the Syrian Kurdish parties as a means of exerting holding sway over the Syrian opposition, the SDC – according to its Kurdish member parties – has adopted the strategy of promoting Kurdish as well as pan-Syrian demands within the framework of an ethnically and religiously diverse alliance.

Thus, the only unanswered question is the extent to which the internal structures within the KNC and SDC are fundamentally different – and might therefore be used as a reason for joining one or the other alliance. In regard to the KNC, it is important to state first of all that it was never an alliance of equals. Given that the Iraqi Kurdish KDP Iraq has funded KNC from its very inception, the PDK-S is automatically assigned a leadership role. In the early years, however, there was a kind of agreement between the PDK-S, Yekîti and the Progress Party to decide jointly on the political direction of the KNC. But the Progress Party quit the Kurdish National Council in 2018 when the PDK-S distanced itself increasingly from this agreement.

In our survey as well, several (former) parties in the KNC criticised its structures as undemocratic and opaque, stating in particular that KNC policies are dominated by just one or two parties. When the Kurdistan Freedom Party left the KNC in June 2023, it justified its decisions by saying that the PDK-S and the four other parties assembled on the executive board made all political decisions alone, without participation from the other parties. Moreover, it claimed, the PDK-S president makes all financial decisions for the KNC, irrespective of whether they are also president of the KNC. There is a lack of transparency in regard to income and expenditure, and statements of account are not prepared.³⁹ The events during the most recent

39 For the statement by the leadership body of the Kurdistan Freedom Movement of February 16, 2023, cf. <https://www.facebook.com/Shepel.europa/photos/a.488485937916705/5713489242082989/>.

conference of the Kurdish National Council in November 2022⁴⁰ confirms its lack of participatory democracy: after security forces of the Autonomous Administration refused to allow delegates to enter the venue, the executive board with the party leaders or their representatives withdrew to meet in private. Meanwhile, the other party representatives and the so-called independents gathered in the KDP-S office. Following their meeting, the executive board went to the party office, but were prevented from initiating discussions with the delegates by the administration's security forces. The board then declared that the KNC conference had been held successfully and that they had been given the mandate to elect members to other committees. In fact, though, it had neither been established that the conference held a quorum, nor had there been discussions with the delegates. To be in any way valid, the meeting should actually have been reconvened. The Kurdistan Freedom Movement was the only organisation to protest publicly about this procedure.⁴¹ In September 2023, ten months after the party conference was 'held', the KNC declared – albeit without holding elections – that the old (also unelected) executive committee, which had been in office since 2014, would continue its work unchanged. There was barely any protest against this decision – leaving the national council would strip the parties, i.e. the party leaders, of their access to funding.

Our survey did not yield any official criticism of the SDC's internal structures. Unlike the KNC statutes, the SDC's political objectives and internal decision-making structure are publicly available online. However, discussions with several chairpersons of Kurdish parties within the SDC make clear that the organisation only maintains a democratic, participative structure on paper. In actual fact, all decisions within the SDC are essentially made by the PYD. They state that the PYD is also the only party with access to the SDC finances, and that there is no transparency regarding income and expenditure. Even more, resolutions that had already been adopted by the SDC or PYNK bodies are regularly overturned because 'the friends' – a euphemism for PKK grandees – had decided otherwise. This means that policy decisions are made neither in the bodies of the SDC, nor in those of the PYD. Neither are they made by the quasi-governmental institutions of the Autonomous Administration and most certainly not in the municipalities as the smallest unit within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Framed in a positive light, the intricate system of councils and committees serves the administration of the region. Put less optimistically, though, its purpose is to generate income and muddy the waters as to the actual balance of power. Decisions are made at the PKK leadership level and put into practice by PKK cadres, who hold the majority of leadership positions within the PYD.⁴² Only at this level do people know which revenues – for instance from the sale of oil or the levying of taxes and charges – are generated in the autonomous region and how they are spent. Estimates suggest that at least 40 percent of the income simply »disappears« – or, more accurately, is sent to the PKK.⁴³

It follows, therefore, that the principal difference between the SDC and the KNC refers neither to their goals nor their structures, rather to the fact that the PKK exploits the PYD's hold over the SDC to influence decisions in Syria, while the KDP Iraq uses the KNC for the same purpose. But unlike the KDP Iraq, the PKK has real power in the region.

Up to a certain point, it is coincidence whether a party belongs to the KNC or the SDC. Not for the PYD or the PDK-S, but certainly for many of the smaller parties. Everything hinges

40 The last meeting of the KNC had taken place in 2014. PYD had thwarted a meeting scheduled for 2017.

41 For the statement by the Kurdistan Freedom Movement of November 16, 2022, cf. <https://www.facebook.com/Shepel.ewropa/posts/pfbid0WyqyTBu5bT35mKuA81vUJQvh1XB3hmZzPs6g8xzCx8KozJw1AbZ2dUXunnCnGtAzl>.

42 Cf. Wimmer 2023: p. 56. Wimmer's book is interesting because he – almost inadvertently – completely unmaskes the system of rule within the PYD or PKK in Syrian Kurdistan.

43 Interview with the director of a Syrian Kurdish NGO, September 10, 2023.

on the question of which financial benefits the party will receive in return for its membership. The SDC and KNC therefore have an interest in maximising their membership, as having a large number of parties on their books suggests that the alliance actually represents broad sections of the population. The KNC is therefore not always averse to splits in its member parties. Rather, it sometimes recognises parties as members even when the separation contravened its statutes, and in doing so legitimises their secession. For its part, the SDC also accepts parties that adorn their offices with portraits of Mullah Mustafa Barzani – at least if they are quite insignificant and hold back from criticising the administration, the PYD and PKK ideology. By doing so, it maintains an outward semblance of diversity, without actually creating democratic structures on the inside.

SDC parties that are involved in the administration are able to create public sector jobs for their members. In addition, the SDC provides direct funding to engender loyalty in its member parties: they receive support based on the number of party members or offices. Reports suggest that the amounts were initially between US\$5,000 and US\$10,000, but are now around US\$2,000 to US\$3,000.⁴⁴

For its part, the KDP Iraq is said to pay KNC in Syria approximately US\$20,000 per month, with at least US\$100 of this going to each member party. The parties on the KNC board – with the exception of the PDK-S and the Yekîti – each receive between US\$2,000 and US\$2,500. It is unclear what happens to the rest of the money. Unlike the other KNC parties, the PDK-S and Yekîti receive direct payments from the KDP Iraq; these amounts are reputedly \$80,000 per month for the PDK-S and \$30,000 per month for the Yekîti. In addition, the KDP Iraq additionally pays all KNC parties in Iraqi Kurdistan around US\$500 to finance an employee at the KNC office in Erbil. Some of the smaller parties are genuine »family businesses« in which fathers and sons are the designated – and remunerated – functionaries – however, this also applies to some parties of the SDR. In addition, Central Committee and Politburo members of the PDK-S receive US\$300, i.e. US\$2,000, respectively. In addition, some of the leading members of the KDP-S are provided with an apartment in Iraqi Kurdistan, a car, and a salary.

Conclusion

In view of the conditions described above, some parties have come up with the idea of founding a new alliance to include all those parties that are dissatisfied with the undemocratic conditions in the KNR as well as in the SDR. In the meantime, about ten parties have declared their interest in such a project. However, even such an association cannot do without regular funding. Without the ability to finance political activities, it is almost impossible to be effective. This was already true before 2011 – in view of the much more difficult economic situation in 2023, the problem has become more acute. There is no easy solution to this problem in sight.

44 Interview with a former colleague of Aldar Khalil, autumn 2018.

Kurdish Parties in Syria

Developments, Dynamics, Positions

(2011-2023)

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