

# The Syrian Kurds: Minority – Majority Relationship

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## Abstract

Following the start of clashes between the state, salafi and Kurdish forces in Syria and the resulting intensification and prolonging of the civil crisis (2011-2013), the role and approach of the Kurds in the Syrian political equations has attracted substantial attention. The Syrian Kurds have gained control of the majority of the Kurdish areas of the country and pursue their freedom and civil rights through the two movements of “Kurdish National Council” and “People’s Council of Western Kurdistan”. Practical examination of the future of the Kurdish demands in relation to the Kurds’ capabilities and weaknesses is of great importance. The reality is that in the aftermath of the Iraq war in 2003, Syrian Kurds’ demands for protection of their identity rights have increased dramatically. But the path to realization of such demands, including local administration of their areas and creation of federal regions, is impeded by a number of domestic, regional and international obstacles. Regional complexities and international necessities have turned the Kurdish subject into a problem. In the present article, the likely solutions to this problem are examined and the focus will be placed on the question, given a number of hard power and soft power capabilities and difficulties the Syrian Kurds have, which of the three options of integration, autonomy or independence is available to them? Examination of these scenarios needs proper models and also new data. On this basis, we will use the “ethnic minorities weight measurement model” to test the hypothesis that the soft power and hard power potentials of the Syrian Kurds, along with the security considerations of the powers involved in Syria, have served as an obstacles on the way to independence for Syrian Kurds, diminish the possibility of their autonomy and driven them towards becoming a powerful cluster in the framework of the Syrian Arab Republic”.

**Keywords:** Kurds of Syria, Kurdistan Regional Government, Kurdish National Council, Democratic Union Party, Ethnic Minorities, Prolonging of Crisis

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## **Introduction**

Presence of a Kurdish population in Syria has been an ever-neglected subject. Basically, the Kurds residing in Syria, which comprise ten percent of the whole population, have never been involved in the studies conducted on Syria and Kurds in general. Two factors have contributed to this deficit: first, the difficulty of obtaining data and information about Kurds and second, the low number of their population and their political inaction in the years since 1946 to 1991. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, concerning the developments that occurred at the international level and specially in the Middle East, we have witnessed the rise of a new wave of identity-seeking among the Syrian Kurds in the framework of discussions about defense of the right to self-determination, minority rights and most importantly, protection of the Kurds against the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Syrian Kurds and Arabs had maintained positive relations in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of British and French forces from the country in 1946. However, similar to what happened in other Arab countries, the independent Syria fell under Arab bourgeoisie rule which belonged to a national front with which had its social bases in the land-owning class, soon adopted a pan-Arab ideology and refused to recognize ethnic and religious rights of minorities (Kendal and Others, 1372: 259). The status of the Kurds during the formation of the new Syria was deeply intertwined with application of the Arabization policy. The issue for today however, is that the Syrian Kurds are demanding recognition of their civil rights

after half a century of inaction.

The advent of the internal crisis in Syria in 2011 has created a new situation for Kurdish residents in which they are voicing a request for the right to political and administrative control over the Kurdish areas. The question about the situation of the Syrian Kurds for now and into the future is that given a number of hard power and soft power capabilities and difficulties the Syrian Kurds have, which of the three options of integration, autonomy or independence is available to them? The hypothesis posed in response to this question is that the soft power and hard power potentials of the Syrian Kurds, along with the security considerations of the powers involved in Syria, have served as an obstacles in the way to independence of them, diminish the possibility of their autonomy and drive them towards becoming a powerful cluster in the framework of the Syrian Arab Republic.

There are important contributing factors at stake in determining the contemporary and future status of the Syrian Kurds at the domestic as well as regional and international levels. With the aim to study the sociopolitical weight of the Syrian Kurds, first we conduct an analytical review of the past and the trends of Kurdish ethnic movements in Syria and then study the Kurdish political currents and parties with the aim of understanding their organizational trends. In continuation, the potentials and difficulties of Kurdish movements in Syria and also the defining factors for Kurdish movements in the years to come are studied.

### **I. A Model for Measurement of Minority Weight**

As mentioned above, the hypothesis of the article is that a number of Syrian domestic developments together along with regional and international developments are driving Syrian sociopolitical structure towards transformation. The Syrian Kurds, as a subject of these developments, have had contradicting choices; of them the three most important are integration, autonomy and independence.

Integration is the restoration of the previous centralism in which the Kurds are a part of the unified Syrian Arabic Republic. Autonomy involves the incorporation of federalism into the new Syrian constitution and the conferring of the local autonomy to Syrian Kurds; similar to that of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Independence refers to the total separation of the Syrian Kurds and formation of a new Kurdish state in the northern parts of Syria.

Implementation of each of these scenarios is dependent on the hard power and soft power structure of the Syrian Kurds (as an identity cluster) as well as the will of powers involved in the Syrian issue and actions of Middle Eastern Kurds. To examine the possibility of the implementation of each of these scenarios the “minorities’ weight measurement model” is used. This model was proposed by Ted Robert Gurr (1996) in *People Versus States* and has recently been used by another researcher under the name of “a model for assessment of the weight of religious and ethnic movements” (Nasri, 1390).

In order to understand the real weight of minority movements, we categorize those moves as security, effective and normal according to some hard power and soft power indicator. The moves of a minority are considered as security when they can transform national integrity, social cohesion or political system of an independent country. The effective move is one that brings about changes to the legal system but does not challenge the country’s national integrity. The normal movements are those that are regarded as legal and the way to address them is predicted in a given country legal system.

The hard power elements that can determine the security or non-security weight of a minority are strategic depth and territorial size. Large territorial size can accommodate large numbers of population and facilitate the development and defense against invading forces. According to the model used in this research, large number of population can provide labor force, soldiers and active citizens (political force). A populous group by itself creates three

economic, military and political bases for a political unit. Proximity to supportive groups beyond national boundaries and having a supportive region, to which the group can withdraw, enhances the group's self-expression morale and insulates it against assimilation and annihilation. Vital natural resources provide internal infrastructures and allows a group to survive in hard times. Oil, gas and drinkable water are among the vital resources upon them life and economic prosperity of countries is dependent.

In addition to the mentioned four hard power elements, other factors are also involved in examination of the weight of a minority (here the Kurdish minorities of northern and eastern Syria); the most important of them are:

- **Alignment with the Dominant International Discourse:** in different periods of time, one discourse (like nationalism or human rights) overcomes other discourses and turns into the dominant discourse. If demands of a group or minority are in line with that discourse, a number of international facilities will be normally at their disposal. The opposite can also be the case. Contradiction between demands of a group (like the fundamentalist demands of Iranian Salafis) and the international dominant discourse (like civil rights and freedom of expression) elevates the price of self-expression and few institutions or actors are ready to support such demands.

- **Experience of Collective Combat:** this factor brings about identity and cadre buildings capabilities. During the ups and downs of the fight, the potentials and weaknesses of a group are examined and the group's elites try to improve the vulnerable positions and promote points of strength.

- **Group Awareness:** group awareness is the political literacy of the members and their institutional familiarity with the ways of distribution of the socioeconomic opportunities. This is itself a result of factors such as generational transformations, access to effective media and also the flexibility of the majority's political structure. For instance, the group awareness of the French residing in Quebec

(Canada) is much more than group awareness of the Indian Shias. Despite having a population of forty million, the Indian Shia have not been an effective minority.

- **Rational Leadership:** the rational leadership refers to wise accumulation of resources and clarification of demands. Rational leaders know the logic of power (like economy, militarism or norm-making), do not run non-calculated risks and know when to expose group's demands. To the contrary, emotional leadership embarks on heroic actions, jeopardizes group's interests by insisting on unattainable demands and ties the identity of the group into their own identity by having the group take on their characteristic features. Based on this principle, the Iraqi Kurds have had more successful and rational leaders when compared to the Syrian Kurds.

- **Political Legitimacy and Economic Efficiency of the Center:** formation and expansion of minorities' demands has a strong connection with the internal legitimacy and external acceptability of the ruling majority. A legitimate and efficient majority can increase the costs of the minority's resistance and disobedience dramatically. However, an inefficient majority tempts regional and international powers to take interventionist measures and increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis the ruling majority of that given country through supporting the minority group.

- **Support Granted to the Minority Group by Effective Foreign Powers:** a minority that rises against discrimination and tries to achieve equal rights with the majority can continue its collective activity if it is benefiting from a suitable base; otherwise, it will be compelled to surrender soon. External powers take positions vis-à-vis minority demands on political, identity or economic bases. The full support the soviet union granted to Sayyed Ja'far Pishevari, the leader of the Azarbaijan democrat party or Syria's support to the Lebanon's Hizbollah are only two instances of the backing of a foreign power for a minority groups. The most important consequence of such involvements in minority-majority confrontation is prolonging of the

disputes and internationalization of conflicts.

- **Mobilizing Ideology:** the last soft power element that determines the weight of a minority (including religious or ethnic) is the mobilizing force which serves as a driving force in pursuit of group demands. Group ideology can ease difficulties of the fight and by creating 'Others' through ideology to maintain the group's cohesion. In absence of mobilizing ideology, the ethnic activists are obliged to resort to material elements of mobilization which have limited efficiency compared with the trans-material resources. The role that religion plays for mobilizing the Lebanese Shia or the role of ethnic ties in mobilization of Turkish Kurds is undeniable.

According to the data extracted from the above eleven criteria (four hard power and seven soft power) the minorities can be categorized into three groups of key, important and neutral. Being key means that the group benefits from hard power elements like vast territory, large population, ethnic awareness or mobilizing ideology and therefore can live independently. Important minority has deterrent and destructive capabilities but is unable to live in the form of a nation-state. Finally, the neutral or pariah minority is the one that is deprived of the said eleven criterions and is prone to assimilation.

As will be discussed in the remainder, the Syrian Kurds have very delicate position with regard to the hard power and soft power elements of power and are unable of creating independent structures due to their limited internal, regional and external resources. Despite limited geographical area, scattered population, inadequate vital resources, political inexperience and lack of effective leadership cadre, the Syrian Kurds have managed to gain control over some cities in northern Syria. These achievements, however, are a result of the declining control of Damascus and occurrence of political disorder in the region. All of these grounds are, nevertheless, insufficient to establish an autonomous region or achieve independence. The small population of only two million, undemocratic traditions, Turkey's influence, strategic weaknesses and variations among Syrian political

factions have made the Kurds of Syria to wait for the future war between Damascus and the opposition and the way the United States will react. Their most important demand is the application of the Iraq's model to Syria. The declared U.S. policy is in line with such Kurdish demands. However, Western powers' hesitation to bring about such a scenario has only paved the way for a creative chaos instead of autonomy for the Kurds.

## II. Syrian Kurds in a Historical Perspective

A look at the history of Syria in the twentieth century, demonstrates that the Kurds have been dealt with according to ideological (Arab Bath), geography (proximity to Turkey, Israel and Iraq) as well as energy (rich resources in Kurdish areas) considerations. Witnessing the situation of the Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, Syrian politicians have refrained from recognizing conditions and demands of Kurds as an issue in need of consideration. Instead, they have always addressed Kurds as strangers, immigrants and temporary residents. However, according to the data presented by the Kurds outside Syria, Syrian Kurds account for ten percent of this country's population and if Arabs and Kurds populations grow in an equal pace, their population would be two million at the beginning of the year 2013. According to estimations by the U.S. Department of State, the Syrian population is 18.2 million; from which 9 percent are Kurds who are primarily scattered in the Hasaka province and also Ayn Al-Arab and Afrin in the province of Aleppo. There are some Kurds also living in Damascus, Aleppo, Raqqah, Latakia, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-zor, Tartus and Idlib. While the majority of the Syrian Kurds are Sunni and a minority are Shia (Alevi) and Yazidi (Hasratian, et.al, 87; Yildiz, 2005: 24).

With regards to the social and political status of the Kurds in Syria, it is interesting that they are absent in the official statistics and Syria's constitution has not recognized them ignoring their presence in the country (Hasratian, et.al. 87). The official stance of the ruling

Bath party with respect to the Kurds is that they are non-Arab immigrants similar to Armenians and Assyrians. They also go further and attribute the presence of the Kurds in Syria to an international conspiracy which has driven Kurds to penetrate Syria; therefore Kurds should be sent to their original shelters and the 'Arab Belt plan' should be implemented (Behdaredin, 2003: 119-120).

In line with this, the Arabization Policy was pursued after 1954 coup to 'create and expand a unified Arab culture' stressing on refusal to grant non-Arab citizens freedom and rights with the aim of transforming Syria into an all-Arab country. The Kurds situation experienced another development after 1960; by which time many of Syrian Kurds were named 'foreigners'. From this time onwards, the official statistics applied discriminatory standards against the Kurds. This is best reflected in cases of recognizing some members of one family as citizens and some others as foreigners (Hasratian, et.al; 90-91). In August 23, 1962 the Syrian government issued the Act number 93 for an extraordinary one-day census in the Hasake province in north Syria. According to the results of this census, the Kurds were categorized in three groups: first, those who could demonstrate their Syrian nationality. Second, those whose Syrian nationality were revoked and were regarded as foreigners. Kurds who fell in this group were termed 'aliens'. The third group included those who did not take part in the census and were designated as 'unregistered'; even though they previously had Syrian nationality. By doing this, within one single day 120,000 to 150,000 Kurds lost their Syrian nationality (Yildiz, 2005; 33-34).

In pursuit of the Arabization policy by the central government, the names of many Kurdish cities were changed into Arabic and the practice of providing Kurds with birth certificates was ceased. As a result, today 500,000 Kurds do not have birth certificates. In the meantime, the richest regions underwent the most serious of this Arabization process, on top of them the city of Dayrik which was renamed Al-Malekiya and holds 60 percent of Syria's oil and gas

(Kakal, 2012). Such transformation of Kurdish identity into Arabic one was intensified in 1973 by drawing the Arab belt along the border with Turkey (Yildiz, 2005; 35).

For decades to come the policy of discrimination against the Kurds was sustained; one of the most important cases of the central government's violence against the Kurds is the Haska province incidence. "According to the rules imposed by the governorate of the province in 1986, Kurds residing in this province do not have the right to speak in their mother tongue. The government also banned usage of any languages other than Arabic in festivals, wedding ceremonies and singings in 1988" (HRW, October 1996: 28). In general, during the 1980s and 1990s a wave of socio-political inaction has been dominant over the Syrian Kurds. However, in 2004, a sporting event paved the way for a fundamental change in the Syrian Kurdish issue.

In March 12, 2004, a football match triggered a series of events that has to date involved many Kurds. Tension between fans of two football team rose after encouraging songs turned political. Clashes occurred between the two team fans and led to interference by the security forces. At the end, 7 Kurds were killed and many were injured. The day after, many Kurds participated in the funerals held for the victims. The security forces interfered again and several other Kurds were killed. The protests went on and spilled over to some other cities. This, came to an end after 30 people were killed and 160 were wounded (Yildiz, 2005, 41-42). It can be claimed that the new era of rise in the Kurdish issue in Syria has strong a connection to the March 2004 incidents. For the first time after this incident, the Kurdish issue found its way into political debates. But since such debates were not lead by strong leaders and were not claimed by any meaningful party, the extremely radicalized Kurdish movement (Tejel, 2009: 136) never translated into political gains for the Kurds. As a result, the passive role of the Syrian Kurds continued and except from the limited political activities of the Democratic Union Party, Kurds

became politically stagnant. It is noteworthy that the ideological clashes in the world in general and the Syrian leaders' particular perception of the Kurds contributed to the harsh treatment of the Kurds in Syria. The Syrian government's perception of the Kurds was very negative and attributed settlement of the Kurds in north Syria to some colonialist plans in drawing boundaries with the aim to dissolve the Arabian bloc. When it comes to international factors, it should be considered that during the many years of the twentieth century, concepts such as human rights, freedom of expression and civil equalities were alien to this area. Moreover Syria has been a neighbor of Israel and as a result has always looked through security lenses which leave limited margin for human rights considerations. This situation continued until 2011, when the Arab uprisings opened a new chapter in the life of the Syrian Kurds. By the advent of the internal crisis in the country, the majority of the Kurdish political movements organized themselves into two major wings of 'Syrian Kurds National Council' and 'West Kurdistan National Council'.

### III. Awareness and Mobility of Syrian Kurds

Along with governmental policies one must pay attention to the ethnic awareness and organizational structure of the Syrian Kurds. In the modern Syria, there has been no opportunity for the establishment of stable and powerful Kurdish parties; as a result, political activities of the Kurds have been mainly conducted within weak and transitional parties. The majority of Syrian parties have been shaped around two principal axes: emphasis on Kurdish identity and objection to the Syrian central government. It is also noteworthy that the majority of Syria's Kurdish parties grow from similar roots and have no major ideological or political differences with one another.

Al-Party was the first Syrian Kurdish party formed in 1957. The first derivation from this party took place in 1965 and the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria was formed out of Al-Party. In the following years the derivation intensified and 12 to 14 parties

were born out of Al-Party; though the majority of them lack proper party structure and only hold the name of a party. They are more like belief currents rather than political ones. The most important Kurdish currents and parties in Syria are:

**Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KEDP):**

This party was formed in 1956 and has a left background. The leader of this party is, from the outset until now, Abdulhamid Hadji Dervish who is a prominent Kurdish politician. This party maintains extensive relations with National Union of Kurdistan headed by Jalal Talabani. Another prominent figure of the party is Ali Shemdin who is representative of the party in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq.

**Kurdish Equality Party (KEDP):** This party branched off from the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria after a dispute over leadership in 1992. The leader of KEDP is Aziz Dawe. This current has no ideological connection with its mother party and is now a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**Kurdish Patriotic Party in Syria (KPP):** This party like the previous one branched off from the mother party as a result of dispute over leadership from the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria in 1988. The leader of the Kurdish Patriotic Party is Tahir Sadun and is similar to the other previously explained parties.

**The Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (KFP):** This party is popularly known as Freedom party and is a leftist derivative of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party and is headed by Mustafa Cuma. This party is currently one of the influential member parties of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**The Left Kurdish Party of Syria (KLP):** This party was separated from the National Union current which is bound to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Many observers see Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party behind this separation in an effort to weaken the National Union. Later on this party was itself divided into two independent parties of Central Committee headed by Shelal Geddo

and the Congress Faction headed by Muhammad Musa. Both are now member of Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**The Kurdish Union Party in Syria (KUP):** This party was formed in 1999 and is mostly known under the title of Yekiti. Among the prominent leaders of the party are Ismail Hami and Abdel Baki Yousef. Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, this party has been actively involved in the organization of demonstrations in Kurdish areas. The party is currently a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**The Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (KDUP):** This party has been separated from the Union Party. Its most well-known leader is Muhiyiddin Sheikh Ali and the area under their control is mainly Aleppo, Afrin and Kobani. It is currently a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (SKDP):** This is the first Syrian Kurds party and was established in 1957. It has close relations with the Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party and is mainly known as Al-Party in Syrian political circles. Its leader is Abdul-hakim Bashar who has assumed the role of the Syrian Kurds' National Council as their first leader. This party is known as the mother party among Syrian Kurds and the majority of other parties have been branched off from this original party. As a result of such derivations, today, there are three other parties with exactly the same names (The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria).

**The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party (Jamal Baqi wing):** This current was divided in 1997 from its mother party and has no significant influence over the Kurds today; nonetheless it is a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party (Nasreddin Ibrahim Wing):** This current is also separated from the Syria Kurdish Democratic Party, mainly due to disagreements over leadership and it is now a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**Syria Democratic Kurdish Party (Abdurrahman Aluji**

**Wing):** This is separated from the Syria Democratic Kurdish Party in 2004 and is now a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**The Kurdish Future Movement in Syria (KFM):** This party represents a new movement among Syrian Kurds. It is pursuing strengthening of ties with the Arab majority. The leader and founder of the movement is Meshal Tammo who was assassinated in October 7, 2011. This party is not a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council and has the most differences with the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

**Kurdish Accord (Wifaq) Party in Syria (KAP):** This current was separated from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in 2004. Its ex-leader Kemal Shahin was assassinated by the PKK in northern Iraq. The current leader is Fuat Omar. This party is a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council.

**Democratic Union Party (PYD):** The party was founded by Syrian members of the PKK in 2003. This is a better socially-rooted party comparing to the other Kurdish parties and is headed by Saleh Mohammed Muslim. The party is not a member of the Syrian Kurds' National Council but has formed the People's Council of Western Kurdistan. Since the beginning of the domestic crisis, the party has acted in line with the positions of the central government but acted in dual manners. On the one hand, it meddles in the demonstrations organized by other parties and dissuades people from participation; on the other hand, and at the same time, it tries to introduce itself as protector and supporter of the Kurds' rights (CFMESS, August 2012: 16-25).

In general, the current status of the Syrian Kurdish parties in relation to the two major factions of the Syrian Kurds' National Council and the People's Council of West Kurdistan can be summarized as follows:

**Table1. The Most Important Currents Shaping the Syrian Kurds National Council**

Name	Year of establishment	Leader	Primary ideology
The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (SKDP)	1957	Abdulhakim Bashar	Nationalism
Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KEDP)	1965	Abdulhamid Hadji Dervish	Socialism (Left)
Kurdish Patriotic Party in Syria (KPP)	1988	Tahir Sadun	Nationalism
Kurdish Democratic Equality Party (KEDP)	1992	Aziz Dawe	Socialism (Left)
The Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party (Jamal Baqi wing)	1997	Jamal Baqi	Nationalism
The Left Kurdish Party of Syria (KLP)	1997	Shelal Geddo and Muhammad Musa	Socialism (Left)
Democratic Union Party (PYD)	2003	Saleh Mohammed Muslim	
The Kurdish Union Party in Syria (KUP)	1999	Ismail Hami	Nationalism
Syria Democratic Kurdish Party (Abdurrahman Aluji wing)	2004	Abdurrahman Aluji	Nationalism
Kurdish Accord (Wifaq) Party in Syria	2004	Fuat Omar	Marxism Leninism
The Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (KFP)	2005	Mustafa Cuma	Socialism
The Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (KDUP)	2010	Muhyiddin Sheikh Ali	Nationalism
Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party (Nasreddin Ibrahim wing)	.....	Nasreddin Ibrahim	Nationalism

**Table 2. The Most Important Currents Shaping the West Kurdistan People's Council**

Parties and political currents	Year of establishment	Leader	Main ideology
Democratic Union Party	2003	Saleh Mohammad Muslim	Marxist Leninist
Democratic Society Movement (Tev- Dem)	After 2010	.....	.....

As it is seen, most of the Syrian Kurdish Parties are still in emergence and there is no significant difference among them. Their similarities are mainly a result of the simple and non-complex fabric of the Syrian Kurdish community. They all insist on Kurdish inalienable rights and their dignity but none of them have managed to bring such rights to fruition; this demonstrates that for understanding Syrian Kurds equations, the political sociology approach is unsuccessful. In the meantime, what can affect the fate of the Syrian Kurds is the factor of

foreign forces and their interactions which drives Kurds towards integration, autonomy or independence. As a result, understanding Syrian Kurds potentials and the difficulties they face is better justified from the viewpoint of such actors' positions and considerations.

As discussed in the methodological section, each group can have some soft power and hard power capabilities. For Syrian Kurds such capabilities can be understood in three levels of domestic, Middle East region and the international system. Syria with a population of 24 million , 183 square kilometers of territory, 100 billion dollars gross domestic product and proximity to sensitive countries like Turkey, the occupied territories, Lebanon and Iraq has a great geopolitical and geostrategic significance. All in all, what gives power and strength to Syrian Kurds on a national scales is as follows:

#### **IV. The Impact of Civil war**

With the advent of the civil crisis in Syria, Syrian society was divided into two fundamental parts; on the one side, forces opposed to central government, and on the other side, forces which acted on behalf of the central government. In such an atmosphere, the Syrian central government decided to grant some basic rights to the Kurdish population, from which they were deprived of for years. After that, the Syrian nationalist currents intensified their activities, and at the same time, governmental parties of the Kurdistan Regional Government entered into the scene to strengthen the status of the Kurds.

In the meantime, the Democratic Union party (PYD) benefitted from extensive Syrian government support and was given massive weaponry and military equipment. In other words, after two years of imposing restrictions on the activities of the Democratic Union Party in Kurdish areas, the central government of Syria allowed it to resume its activities. The Syrian army forces were evacuated from some Kurdish cities and responsibility to protect the public institutions of these cities was given to the Democratic Union Party forces.

Although Salih Muslim, the leader of PYD does not acknowledge signing any agreement with the central government, in practice, there is an agreement between them stating that as long as the Kurds do not attack the Syrian Arab Army, they can maintain control of the affairs in the Kurdish areas of Syria (Escobar, September 02, 2012).

In general, weakness of the central government in the country has paved the way for the strengthening of the Kurds. After gaining control over the cities of Afrin, Kobani, Sari Kani and Derik, The Syrian Kurds formed a local administration by which they manage their respective affairs using a special council (Kakal, 20/09/2012). The Syrian Kurds are enjoying some sort of freedom and are waiting for future developments to define their relationship with the central government in the framework of a democratic state.

One of the most important factors which helped strengthening of the political status of the Syrian Kurds after 2011 has been the identity competitions and the emergence of groups who challenged the central government. "Kurds are seemingly among the major winners of the Syrian crisis. This is because after the exit of the central government's military forces from the Kurdish areas since mid-January 2012, the control of these areas is in the hands of the Kurds and the central government has given them a de facto control over these regions. Kurds have established checkpoints in these regions and have waved their own flag and started to practice autonomy" (Associated Press, 20/08/2012). Whatever the result of the civil turbulences in Syria, the Kurds will not be governed by Damascus as had been the case in the past. at minimum, they will play a more important role in administration of their political and social affairs. The mobility of the Syrian Kurds is not confined to internal factors; the developments around Syria have also contributed to Kurdish activism.

The Iraq war of 2003 and its security consequences have had the most serious effects on the Kurds in the region including Syrian Kurds. After Kurdish achievements in Iraq, the Syrian Kurds gained

more self-confidence to redefine their identity and express their demands (Lowe, January 1-2, 2006). In the meantime and using the critical circumstances in Syria, the Kurdistan Regional Government has played major role in creating unity and support for Syrian Kurds. In line with this approach, Nechervan Barzani the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, during his meeting with the Turkish ambassador to Iraq, expressed that “Kurds in Syria are deprived of all their humanitarian needs and have to reach their rights in this country” (KRG, 17 September 2012: 45278). Kurdistan Regional Government politicians have played an important role to support the Syrian Kurds in both mediation among the Kurdish political forces and also military training of the young Syrian Kurds to protect the Kurdish areas.

After domination of Kurds over the areas where the majority of the population are Kurds, serious occurred tensions between the Syrian Kurds’ National Council and the Peoples Council of West Kurdistan. The Syrian Kurd’s National Council was strongly opposed to domination of the Democratic Union Party over regions under control of Kurds. With intensification of disagreements between these two groups, Masoud Barzani the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government started mediating between the two sides, invited them to Irbil and facilitated the signing of an agreement between them. According to this agreement a “high committee” composed of both groups members was formed to preserve the Kurd’s vital interests in Syria (Nazam, 3/9/2012).

The second aspect of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s support is the training offered to some of the young Syrian Kurds. At first, KRG officials preferred to keep silent about allegations of their involvement in training of young Syrian Kurds, but, in an interview held on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012 with the Aljazeera network, Masoud Barzani declared that the KRG granted such trainings and insisted that those trained will remain in KRG territory until the “Syrian Kurds High Council” will need them in critical situations (Kakal,

2/8/2012). According to one of these trained people, the number of trainees has risen to 1000 and each had received 100 Iraqi dinars. There is however other sources stating that the number of trainees has not exceeded 650.

Despite imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan, leader and founder of the PKK by the Turkish security forces, the activities of this party have not ceased. The historical continuation and geographical spillover of PKK has shown that this party and its support base have transcended the threshold of destruction and have gained independent life. High number of militarily trained members, having a vast social base in Turkey, media support and political flexibility, and proximity to Iraq, Iran and Syrian Kurds have all enabled the PKK guerrillas to enter regional dynamics as entities greater than just a guerrilla group. Compared to the past, they have easier access to arms and media, and pursue their demands more easily; therefore, presence of the Democratic Union Party as a Syrian branch of the PKK in the Syrian landscape, assists Syrian Kurds in political-military areas.

The Damascus policy of centralization and assimilation has been supported by some of the regional states. To block the cooperation of PKK members with their counterparts inside Syrian boundaries, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey have made extensive military and diplomatic efforts. Sending 50,000 troops to the Syria borders, starting ground and air strikes to northern Iraq and security cooperation with Iran are among such activities. However, these states have had difficulties in supporting centralism in Syria. Turkey has encountered new challenges with respect to its own uneasy Kurdish population after the rise in Kurdish activism in Turkish-Syrian borders. After the Syrian civil war, Lebanon itself has also been a zone of conflict between supporters and dissidents of Bashar Assad. Islamic Republic of Iran is, for its part, focused on two issues: nuclear dossier and the Syria civil war. Syrian Kurds believe that such crises for these regional actors are golden opportunities for them to advance their self-expression opportunities and find a way out of their political

challenges.

In addition to domestic and regional opportunities, the Syrian Kurds have benefited from international opportunities. The international system is no longer a bipolar one with competing ideologies. With the end of the cold war the question of “with who are we?” is changed to “who are we?” In the bipolar world, the majority of nations belonged to either West or East bloc, and talking about independent identity was often more in the abstract than in reality. However, with the demise of that system, the dominant vocabularies are changed from the likes of ‘ideology, The West, The East and free market union vis a vis common markets, to new ones including, inter alia, ‘inter-subjective identity, actors perception, and social construction of international politics’. Worldwide attraction to concepts like identity, collective rights, freedom of speech of mother tongue, ethnic rights and etc., have been all soft power support for identity expression and materialization of ethnic rights of minorities including Syrian Kurds.

Although easy and inexpensive, access to social media has been effective in formation of the new discourse, but Syrian Kurds have had limited share of such developments. “The media have paid limited attention to the Syrian Kurds and few academic studies have been conducted about them. However, after 1990 and by the increase in importance of human rights related issues on a global level, we have witnessed the emergence of the most important and comprehensive studies about Syrian Kurds” (Tejel, 2009:1). Furthermore, with the start of the internal crisis in Syria, Hillary Clinton, the then Secretary of State of the United States, took a position in favor of Syrian Kurds when addressing the probability of their political-administrative independence and Turkey’s reaction to that, saying “This is a reality and Turkey has to come to terms with that” (Escobar, 2012).

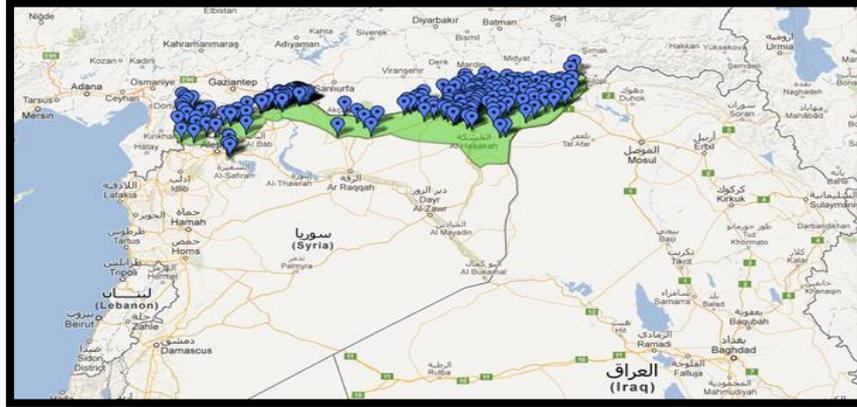
Turkey as a country that has the most number of Kurds is prone to other international pressures which are related to its bid for

accession to the European Union and the regulations that the 'Copenhagen criteria' imposes on it. According to the Copenhagen Standards, Turkey has to facilitate education in the Kurdish language and establish of Kurdish radio and television channels. It is also obliged to recognize free assembly and the right to free dissemination of beliefs by the minorities. Kemalists and the military establishment, who support distancing Turkey from the EU, call for harsher suppression of the Kurds but the Islamists, in contrast, demand giving priority to the EU accession process while maintaining territorial integrity (Zeidan, 2011: 125). When it comes to the Kurdish situation, such Islamist pro-EU stances fares well for granting more rights and easing the pressures applied to Kurds. In other words, for the time being and due to ideological necessities, electoral strategies and international reservations, the previous iron fist policy towards the Kurds is not applied.

#### V. Future Perspective

With regard to the capabilities and equipment the Syrian Kurds are benefiting from, they have pursued a plan of autonomy in form of federalism like the one that is enjoyed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. According to this plan, the Syrian Kurds are after building an independent province with its borders starting from the Ein-Divar village around the city of Derik, draws along the Turkey border towards the west and ends in the İskenderun region. The below figure shows the Kurds geographical area and the way they are scattered in their northern Syria.

The Geographical Area that Syrian Kurds Want to be a Federal State



Despite Kurds’ demand for establishing a Kurdish state in Syria, for the formation of a political entity in an autonomous or independent form, there are a number of territorial, population and authoritative prerequisites. A glance at the eleven factors (soft power and hard power) demonstrates that Syrian Kurds lack such prerequisites. Such a deficit can be seen on domestic, regional and international levels.

It should be considered that the Syrian Kurds are only one force present in the Syria political landscape along with the military, Sunnis, Alawites and Salafis. Furthermore, the Kurds are no match for either of the mentioned rival forces. In the remainder, such deficits are explained.

After developments in Iraq and Syria, two major factions were formed among Syrian Kurdish political forces. One is the People’s Council of West Kurdistan under influence of the Democratic Union and the other the Syrian Kurds’ National Council which is directly influenced by Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The first wing is a serious threat to Turkey due to its close ties with the PKK. The second faction is, however, the one Turkey has an eye for due its links to the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party and also the Turkish government. Currently the disagreements between the two Kurdish factions are not deep, but serious

differences between the Democratic Union Party and Kurds under control and influence of Barzani who, at the same time, maintain close ties with Turkey may occur. Even the possibility of war between the Kurdish factions cannot be ruled out.

Another difficulty facing the Kurds in Syria is their disagreements with the Arab factions of the Syrian opposition. On one hand, like other minorities in Syria, many Kurds are wary of the rise of Islamists to power; therefore there is severe difference of opinions between Kurds and the Islamists (McDonnell, 27 July 2012). On the other hand, after Kurds took control of the Kurdish areas, the military forces acting against the central government reacted against Kurds and stated that they will not allow Syria to be divided based on religion, ethnicity and distinct internal lines (Dehghanpisheh, 18 August 2012). The depth of the disagreements is to a degree that the opposition factions have had scattered clashes with the Democratic Union Party forces. Although there is a delicate truce in place for now, there is a high probability that the clashes between the two sides will resume at some point.

Another important challenge the Kurds have faced is the population and geographical dispersions. “The geographical distribution of the Kurds has made it impossible for them to build a centered cultural society and political force” (Yildiz, 2005: 23). To be more explicit, the areas resided in by the Kurds are separated from each other by Arab areas (Semayel, 2006: 34). This separation of the Kurdish areas has created many difficulties for the Kurds and hindered creation of a unified and homogenous society. In addition to intervention of the Arab areas, presence of small Turkmen, Assyrian and Christian communities within the Kurdish areas have added to the complications Kurds have to tackle before reaching their political aims.

Along with the internal problems, the Kurds of Syria have to cope with a number of regional challenges. The most important of these challenges is the political and military hegemony of Turkey in

the region. The start of civil war in Syria and the subsequent control of Kurds over administrative and security apparatus of the Kurdish areas have alarmed Turkey. Ankara is wary of the control the Democratic Union Party, as a branch of PKK, exercises over Kurdish areas. This is due to the fact that such a situation would enable the PKK forces to take shelter in Syrian Kurdish areas and to open a new front against Turkey. In other words, the presence of the Democratic Union Party in these areas can provide a suitable base for the warring Kurds of Turkey to advance the combat against the government on the one hand and mobilize the public opinion of the Turkish Kurds to their advantage on the other hand. By doing so, they can create situations like those in Syria in favor of Turkish Kurds and make extensive anti-government uprisings possible.

Those possibilities have produced enough reasons for Turkish leaders to take serious positions against Kurdish activism in Northern Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that “if the Syrian Kurdish areas turn into bases for initiating attacks against Turkey, we will send the Turkish army to these areas” (Dehghanpisheh, 18 August 2012). Ahmet Davutoğlu the then-Foreign Minister now Prime Minister of Turkey also said that “Turkey is not against the rights of Syrian Kurds. It is however, rigorously against presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party on the border areas of Turkey and Syria and will use its military force to counter any rebel presence in these areas; this is a point that is explicitly made clear for the heads of the Syrian Kurds’ National Council (NRTTV, 9/8/2012).

Furthermore, under supervision of the Syrian opposition forces, two military divisions of Turkmen soldiers were formed. Hassan Camal Guzal, a Turkish cabinet member said in this regard that Turkey can use the Turkmen card in north Syria in response to military movements of Kurdistan Workers Party and its related branch; this will be a winning card against the Kurds power-seeking measures (E Noor re, 4/08/2012).

In the international arena, formation of a new autonomous region or dismemberment of a country depends on a number of human rights related and also objective conditions. Countries or newly born regions (like Kosovo, Kurdistan Regional Government or South Sudan) have all come into existence subsequent to occurrence of crimes against humanity and also willingness of the effective international powers. The most important issue in this respect is the interests of regional and international powers. Currently only Israel and the Kurdistan Regional Government support dissolution of Syria. The government of the United States has expressed its concerns about control of the Kurdish areas by the forces dependent to Kurdistan Workers Party, has warned the Kurdish groups in Syria about cooperation with this party and revealed its own cooperation with Turkey against transformation of northern Syria into a region for stationing of the PKK terrorist forces (Dehghanpisheh, 18 August 2012). In absence of international willingness and presence of important internal and regional obstacles, it seems that independence is an impossible scenario and autonomy or federalism are very difficult. The most probable scenario is democratic integration and positive discrimination in favor of the Syrian Kurds.

### **Conclusion**

The question of the research is considering the current state of affairs in Syria, which of the following is the option for Syria Kurds: integration in a Syrian democratic structure (like the Lebanon model), autonomy in a federal structure (like the Iraq model) and full territorial independence (like Kosovo model). In order to answer this question, we assumed that change in the Syrian status quo is inevitable. The methodology has been the application of the “model for measurement of the weight of religious and ethnic movements” on the domestic, regional and international levels. According to this method, the answer to the question is as follows:

- Repetition of the Kosovo model (complete independence) for

Syrian Kurds is impossible. The obstacles against materialization of this scenario are: few and scattered population, lack of economic power, organized military force and citizenry (political base for independence), deprivation from natural vital resources, being surrounded by the opposition forces, lack of internal, regional and international determination (except for Israel and Kurdistan Regional Government) and finally, lack of experienced leadership.

- Repetition of the Kurdistan Regional Government model in the Kurdish areas of Syria is unlikely; partly due to reasons similar to those previously mentioned. However, there is a low possibility for a U.S. decision to extend the Iraqi model to Syria with the aim of weakening anti-Israeli countries.

- Application of the Lebanon model to Syrian Kurdish areas is very likely. There are reasons for this article to support such a scenario. Most of those opposed to Bashar Assad are opposed to territorial dissolution of the country and the political-administrative autonomy of the Kurds. Therefore, they will not approve any regional or international initiative in that respect. The serious combat that took place between the Islamists of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Kurds is evidence of that. Second, effective actors like Iran, Turkey, Russia, Iraq, Arab league and even the EU do not support the scenario of Kurdish independence or autonomy. Third, with the strengthening of democratic governance in Damascus, many of the Syrian Kurds' demands will be met. This will naturally weaken the centrifuge tendencies.

## Notes

1. In past decades, no exact statistics have been declared by the Syrian government about the number of Kurdish residents.
2. The original name of this region was Kobanî, but changed into Ayn-al-Arab in the years of the Bath Party's rule over Syria.
3. Kurdistan National Council of Syria (KNC): this council was established under supervision of Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in October 2011. The Syrian Kurds' National Council is composed of 16 Syrian political parties who are opposed to the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The majority of the effective parties in this current are directly sister parties of the Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (International Crisis Group, 22 January 2013: 49).
4. In continuation of the discussion on ethnic awareness and organizational mobility only one resource is used. Therefore the source mentioned at the end of this section is a reference for all discussions.
5. Iraq's Kurdistan Democrat Party and Patriotic Union Party.
6. According to the security agreement between the governments of Turkey and Syria in 2009, the activities of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as a branch of the PKK was banned in Syria and its activities in the border cities of Syria faced major impediments.
7. The high committee is composed of ten members which were equally distributed among the two factions.
8. Zerevani: the protective forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq.
9. During the past months, the peace agreement between the Turkish government and the PKK has been signed to stop the war and bloodshed. Based on this agreement, all of the party's military forces inside Turkish territories would evacuate the country and be stationed within the boundaries of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The government of Turkey commits to some amendments with the aim of recognizing Kurdish identity and granting the Kurds more civil and political rights. It is interesting, however, that the forces of the Kurdistan Workers Party have not left Turkish territory completely and the Turkish government has not seriously pursued meeting the Kurds' demands. Therefore the prospects for a peace between the two sides are dim.
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