Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria

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Executive Summary

With the Syrian regime and opposition locked in a see-saw battle, Kurdish forces have consolidated control over large portions of the country's north. Their principal players, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), now dominate three large, non-contiguous enclaves of Kurdish-majority territory along the Turkish border, over which the PYD proclaimed in November 2013 the transitional administration of Rojava (Western Kurdistan). Kurdish governance is unprecedented in Syria and for the PYD, an offshoot of the Turkish Kurdish insurgent movement PKK, from which it draws ideological, organisational and military support. But it is unclear whether this is a first step toward stability and the Kurdish aspiration for national recognition, or merely a respite while the civil war focuses elsewhere. The PYD alone will not determine the fate of Syria's north, but it could greatly increase its chances by broadening its popular appeal and cooperating with other local forces.

For all its successes, the PYD's rise is in no small part illusory, attributable less to its own prowess than to its links with other regional forces. Perhaps most important is its de facto alliance with the regime, which handed territories over to it while continuing to give material support to those territories. The party's gains also flow from its backing from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkarane Kurdistan, PKK). The PYD is in practice an ideological, organisational and military part of this leftist group, of which the umbrella organisation is in theory the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Ciwakên Kürdistan, KCK). It benefits ideologically from the prestige of Abdullah Öcalan, the movement's long-time leader; and with the PKK's backing, the YPG has become the immediate region's strongest military force, one whose success in fending off jihadi militants is perhaps the single most important reason for the Kurds' waxing fortunes.

Ironically however, these same factors, crucial to the PYD's success, are also its Achilles heel. First, its PKK heritage has encumbered the party with a rigid culture and vague program that are out of sync with popular expectations. Heavy-handed governance prompts at best grudging acquiescence from a constituency whose younger generation, particularly, appears to aspire to something different.

Secondly, suspected collaboration with the regime has taken a toll on its popularity. The Damascus authorities have maintained a light albeit firm presence in PYD-controlled areas, reportedly acting mostly beneath the surface. Even as they relinquished control over certain state assets (notably administrative and security buildings) to the PYD, they have maintained their hold on, and continue to disseminate, state resources without which the Rojava project would wither.

Thirdly, the PYD's competition for dominance with would-be allies, most importantly the Kurdish Democratic Party of Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, has created popular disenchantment and fatigue; this has left room for regional powers – notably Turkey and Iran – to manipulate the various sides in pursuit of their own interests. Barzani is on good terms with Ankara and Washington, so the PYD has few allies other than Damascus, Iran and, to an extent, the Nouri al-Maliki-led government in Baghdad.

These challenges raise questions about the depth and durability of the Rojava project. For PYD supporters, it is the kernel of future Kurdish self-rule. For detractors, it is an empty shell, a tool of the regime. It is hard to identify a way forward for Rojava. Its dependence on the regime alienates constituents, yet any step toward Kurdish partners and other actors risks jeopardising its dominance on the ground by undermining relations with Damascus.

Kurdish rights – not to mention longer-term local stability – are unlikely to be realised by the PYD forsaking its natural allies for a partnership of convenience with the same regime that long denied them. What all peoples of northern Syria need, Kurdish and non-Kurdish, is a common strategy for dealing with both Damascus and the minority communities in the region. This would require that the PYD:

❑ decrease its heavy reliance on its own military and the regime and instead broaden its support base among both Kurds and non-Kurdish populations, as well as the more pragmatic strands of the Syrian opposition;

❑ prepare, jointly with its support base, a strategy to replace the regime as a service provider and ensure the region's access to resources; and

❑ diversify relations with foreign powers to diminish their ability to exploit communal tensions in their own interests.

Bringing northern Syria together would be no mean task, but the reward could be as great as the mission is difficult: emancipation from a regime that someday is likely to turn brutal attention back to the country's north.

Erbil/Brussels, 8 May 2014

Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria

I. **Introduction**

The origins of the Syrian Kurdish faction known as the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), officially founded in 2003, date to the 1998 decision of then-President Hafez Assad to ban the Turkish insurgent movement PKK and hand over its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to Ankara. In the years that followed, the PYD emerged as a PKK proxy in Syria, with a limited social base. Operating clandestinely, it kept most of its fighters outside the country.[1]

As the 2011 uprising spread and became a civil war, the PKK took advantage of its twin to extend its influence into Syria. Alone among Syrian Kurdish parties, the PYD had a cadre of trained fighters, and its allegiance to Öcalan helped to rally sympathisers and avoid internal splits. By July 2012, as the regime withdrew from Kurdish areas in northern Syria, the coherence of the PYD's institutions enabled it to fill the power vacuum. During ensuing months, it benefited from regime weakening and armed opposition fragmentation. It compromised with the former, while its struggle against the latter's most extreme elements earned it legitimacy among Syrian Kurds.

By November 2013, when Rojava was announced, the PYD's armed wing, the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel), had established itself as the dominant military force in nearly every Kurdish-populated area in Hassakah, Raqqa and Aleppo provinces.[2] The PYD assumed de facto governing authority, running a transitional administration in what it, and Kurds in general, call Rojava (Western Kurdistan), including three non-contiguous enclaves: Afrin, Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) and Cezire (al-Jazeera region in Hassakah province). It oversees security through its military and police forces, runs tribunals and prisons and distributes humanitarian aid.[3]

The PYD is largely alone in the governance endeavour. Most other Kurdish parties dissociated themselves from the transitional administration. The majority of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) – formed as a counterweight to the PYD in 2011 by

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[1] The PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Worker's Party), an insurgent Kurdish nationalist group in Turkey, was co-founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, who remains its leader while serving a life prison sentence in Turkey since 1999. It claims to seek cultural and political rights for Kurds in Turkey, a change from its earlier goal of an independent state. Turkish policies denied Kurds, estimated at 15 to 20 per cent of the country's population, basic language and legal rights, fueling an insurgency that began in 1984. At least 30,000 have died on both sides of the conflict. For background, see Crisis Group Europe Reports N°213, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, 20 September 2011; and N°219, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, 11 September 2012; as well as Middle East Report N°136, *Syria's Kurds: a Struggle Within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013.
[2] For a detailed map of the PYD presence in northern Syria, see Appendix B.
[3] The Middle East's present-day borders stem largely from the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between France and the UK. Deprived of a state of their own, Kurds found themselves living in four different countries, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The term "*rojava*" ("west" in Kurdish) refers to the western area of "Kurdistan"; today in practice it includes non-contiguous Kurdish-populated areas of northern Syria where the PYD proclaimed a transitional administration in November 2013.

Syrian Kurdish factions under the auspices of Iraq's prominent Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani – cried foul, labelling it a "unilateral declaration".[4] This split reflected the broader realities of transnational Kurdish politics. Since the Syrian regime partially withdrew from Kurdish areas in July 2011, the PYD and KNC have competed to represent Kurdish interests in Syria's uncertain future. The PYD has the upper hand. Controlling key Kurdish territories and having consolidated through combat with rebel militias, it is the dominant authority on the ground. Meanwhile, the KNC has failed to organise effectively.

In mid-2012, Barzani countered the PYD's territorial advantage with a political initiative, the "Erbil declaration", that established the Supreme Kurdish Committee, a power-sharing body that included both the KNC and PYD. According to the agreement, the Supreme Committee would assume responsibility for governing Kurdish regions through joint political, security and economic committees with equal numbers of KNC and PYD members; the areas would be jointly protected by the YPG and Syrian Kurdish paramilitary forces (peshmerga), trained by Barzani.[5]

The agreement has remained a dead letter. The KNC's political ambitions quickly ran up against the PYD's sense of entitlement and intent to retain the lead in governance. They clashed over the interpretation of power sharing: the PYD was prepared to go no further than allowing others to participate in its institutions, provided they operated within its ideological framework; the KNC expected the PYD to surrender half its power.[6] Accordingly, the PYD rejected entry of peshmerga fighters into the country under their own leadership – affiliated with Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) – threatening to "fight back if one single fighter steps in". Instead, it proposed to merge KNC fighters into the YPG under the latter's leadership.[7]

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[4] In October 2011, Barzani, president of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), sought to position himself as a power-broker among Syrian Kurds by bringing sixteen Syrian Kurdish parties – all except the PYD, which refused – together in a coalition, the Kurdish National Council (KNC). He said, "in the last few days, the PYD has unilaterally declared its own administration in Western Kurdistan. We reiterate our position that we would only support efforts backed by all sides. We would not deal with any one-sided decisions. If the PYD continues to ignore others, it surely cannot, on its own, face the challenges and dangers ahead, and as a result the fate of the Kurds will be gravely endangered". His website, www.krp.org/english/articledisplay.aspx?id=8qZs3I9JYZI.

[5] The Erbil agreement text is at www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_D027_en_ar.pdf. It sought to establish cooperation in strategic governance areas under a Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC). Among committees envisioned were security, for overseeing formation of a PYD-KNC military force merging YPG fighters and KDP-trained Syrian peshmerga; the special committee (*al-lijna al-takhasusiya*) for intelligence gathering; and the border committee for cross-border regulation and revenue collection between Syria and Iraq's KRG. On the Erbil Declaration, SKC and shared committees, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

[6] A PYD member said, "Barzani has built a state dictatorship that benefits solely his family. Our project is different. For us what matters is society. As individuals, we are not interested in becoming leaders. They [KNC] are most welcome to participate". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 4 November 2013. A pro-Barzani KNC member said, "I don't see much difference between the Baath party and the PYD. Power-sharing means 50-50, but they are taking it all". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, July 2013.

[7] Crisis Group interview, Aldar Khalil, senior PYD member, Erbil, 12 July 2013. He added: "Syrian peshmerga are not going to enter. The door for cooperation [with KDP-trained peshmerga] is open, but we don't want proliferation of party militias". He proposed a unified force, including Syrian peshmerga and any other Kurdish-affiliated force, but under YPG leadership. In June 2013, a Syrian Kurd with close ties to the KDP military leadership estimated there were some 4,000 Syrian pesh-

A battle of narratives ensued: pro-Barzani parties denounced the PYD as authoritarian; the PYD, characterising its rivals as apathetic and inept, justified its control as necessary to maintain governance, security and order.[8] As time passed, the gap between the PYD's assertion of exclusive control and the aspirations of Iraq-based Syrian Kurdish parties widened. The KNC, unable to project influence inside Syria, was further weakened by internal divisions. In an attempt to alter the balance, the KDP gathered its Syrian allies within the Kurdish Democratic Political Union, led by its sister party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê, PDKS). The effort backfired. Seeing cooperation with the PYD as the only way to preserve a power-base in Syria, two KNC parties began cooperating with it.[9] As a result, the majority in the Supreme Kurdish Committee tipped to the PYD. The committee, initially conceived in Erbil to contain the PYD, ended up further legitimising its domination in Syria.[10] Sinam Mohammed, a PYD member of the committee, said:

> All decisions are in the hands of the Supreme Committee. First, they [the KDP] created the Supreme Committee, and we agreed to participate within it. Now they want to change the rules because it's no longer working in their favour. But we don't need others to come and govern us. We are able to do it ourselves, and right now we are proving it.[11]

merga; a PYD-affiliated Syrian Kurd in Qamishli said in December the YPG had 25,000-30,000 fighters. Crisis Group interviews, Erbil, Qamishli.

[8] The border committee, for instance, is co-chaired by Saadoun al-Mulla, of the KDP-affiliated Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (PDSK), and Ilham Ahmed, of PYD. In principle, they are responsible for managing a team of twenty. Tasks include collecting revenues from crossing and maintaining cross-border security between Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish areas by deploying both YPG and Syrian peshmerga on Syria's side of the border. Saadoun al-Mulla said, "we established the border committee and divided responsibilities with the PYD, but only YPG forces control the border. They collected around 15 million Syrian lira [some $110,000] in cross-border revenue. This was supposed to be shared, but they took it for themselves". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 3 July 2013. Abdul Hakim Bashar, a PDKS leader added: "al-Mulla heads the border committee, yet he has to ask PYD permission to cross into Syria". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 3 July 2013. A PYD member reacted: "True, we collected 15 million Syrian lira ... but it also is true that we are governing these areas, and our forces defend the people. The revolution is a day-to-day struggle. KNC members are just sitting in Erbil. Should we also give them a salary?". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 3 July 2013.
[9] In March 2013, with the PYD already dominant, two of five KNC members of the Supreme Committee sided with it: Ahmed Sulayman of the Progressive Party (close to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, founded by Barzani's historical rival, the ailing Jalal Talabani) and Sheikh Ali of the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party. The Progressive Party's strategy was to cooperate with the PYD in Syria while maintaining good relations with the KNC, thus benefiting from the latter's legitimacy and recognition abroad. Crisis Group interview, Abdulhamid Darwish, head, Progressive Party, Suleimaniya, 26 August 2013. The Kurdish Democratic Unity Party, headquartered in PYD-dominated Afrin, sided with the PYD to protect its militants and offices against the non-Kurdish Syrian armed opposition. Crisis Group observation, Afrin, July 2013.
[10] In March 2013, the PYD started to invoke the SKC's legitimacy to justify its decisions and institutions. It described YPG forces as "the SKC official armed branch" and its rejection of KDP-Syrian peshmerga presence in the country as "an SKC decision". Crisis Group interview, Sinam Mohammed, SKC member, Erbil, Massif, 7 July 2013. Abdulhakim Bashar, a leader of the pro-Barzani Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, said his group would not accept the YPG as the SKC's official armed branch even if an SKC majority so voted. Crisis Group interview, KNC member, Erbil, July 2013.
[11] Crisis Group interview, Sinam Mohammed, SKC member, Erbil, Massif, 7 July 2013.

II.   **An Opportunity Grasped**

A.   *The PKK Returns to Syria*

The PYD's rise dramatically changed PKK fortunes in Syria. For much of the two decades following its 1978 founding, the Turkish insurgent movement enjoyed relative safety under Hafez Assad's regime.[12] As relations between Syria and Turkey deteriorated in the 1980s, Damascus allowed the PKK to open offices in the capital and establish training centres in the northern part of the country and the areas it controlled in Lebanon.[13] In 1998, however, facing the threat of Turkish military action, Syria expelled Öcalan, who embarked on a multinational journey that ended with his capture in Kenya by Turkey in February 1999. His fighters were forced to relocate to northern Iraq (first Hakurk and other places closer to the Turkish border, then the mountains of Qandil). As relations between Damascus and Ankara improved in ensuing months, Syria dismantled what remained of the PKK's base in the country, which became little more than a pool for recruits who were trained in Qandil and sent to fight in Turkey.[14]

Soon after the PKK covertly established the PYD as its political branch in Syria in 2003, the latter distinguished itself from its local Kurdish counterparts as the only party wholeheartedly supporting the 2004 Qamishli uprising, an act of opposition that brought brutal regime retaliation.[15] As a result of the continuing repression,[16] the PYD had only a weak presence in Kurdish areas of northern Syria at the outbreak of the much broader uprising in 2011.[17]

Relations with Damascus then shifted, as the PKK seized the opportunity to dramatically expand its role. The sudden return of PYD leader Salih Muslim from years of exile in Qandil raised suspicions among Kurdish rivals that the PYD had struck a deal with Damascus that allowed the party back into Syria in return for taking over Kurdish areas and suppressing anti-regime activity. That theory gained credibility in

[12] For an historical overview of PKK and PYD presence in Syria, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London, 2009), pp. 75-79.

[13] The dispute between Syria and Turkey has its origins in the territorial contest over Hatay province, which Turkey annexed in 1939. Relations deteriorated in the 1980s, when Turkey built a dam on the Euphrates that threatened Syrian water reserves. Damascus reacted by allowing the PKK to operate from Syria, step up recruitment, establish training bases north of the capital and in Lebanon and open bank accounts in Damascus. In ways reminiscent of 2012, in 1994 the regime tolerated de facto PKK control of small portions of Syrian territory in the northern area of Kurd Dagh, near Afrin. Ibid, p. 77.

[14] See Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit., p. 12. A PKK member said over 5,000 Syrian Kurds have been killed in clashes with the Turkish army. Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 1 November 2013; Jordi Tejel estimates 7,000-10,000; their families became a pool of support on which the PYD later relied in establishing its military presence in Syria. Tejel, op. cit. p. 77.

[15] In the wake of the Qamishli uprising, inspired by Kurdish nationalistic feelings and in which Syrian Kurds protested regime repression of their cultural and political rights, the PYD criticised the decision of Syrian Kurdish parties not to celebrate Newroz (the New Year festival that for Kurds has become a symbolic expression of their national struggle) lest it further inflame protests. "The al-Qamishli uprising: The beginning of a new era for Syrian Kurds?", Kurdwatch, report 4.

[16] Among those the regime targeted were PYD activists who had been trained in PKK camps the regime earlier had allowed to operate in Syria and Lebanon. See, for instance, the interrogations of members of the PYD-affiliated women's organisation Yekiti Star, published by Kurdwatch, a Berlin-based NGO reporting on human rights violations against Kurds. "Interrogation Protocols of PKK activists from Political Security Directorate and State Security", March 2011.

[17] Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

July 2012, when the PYD quickly assumed control of Kurdish areas in northern Syria without a regime effort to recapture them. The cooperative PYD-Damascus relationship apparently has since deepened. The party has avoided confrontation with the regime, while steadily expanding its territorial control at the expense of rebel and jihadi armed groups.

As the PYD's growing power has brought its leaders to the forefront of Kurdish politics, they have downplayed their PKK affiliation, but sceptics are unconvinced. The PYD claims the PKK is an ideological inspiration but does not provide material support,[18] while rivals allege political and military links, seemingly with justification. The ideological affiliation is manifest, as the PYD belongs to the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), an umbrella organisation that includes the PKK and its affiliates in Iran, Iraq and Syria. All KCK parties operate under Öcalan's leadership and are committed to his ideological program; the KCK name is in practice often used interchangeably with that of the better-established PKK.

Militarily, the PKK's Qandil leadership exerts authority over the YPG, whose leadership in the early days of the Syrian uprising was dominated by Syrian PKK fighters trained at that base.[19] As the YPG expanded control in northern Syria and increasingly clashed with rebel and jihadi groups, additional PKK members, including non-Syrians, descended from the mountains of Qandil to join the struggle. PKK fighters reportedly commanded YPG battalions, led in making strategic decisions and directed recruits' ideological and military training.[20] A KCK member said:

> Abdullah Öcalan visited Kobane [Ayn al-Arab] in 1997, and from that moment Syrian Kurds began to follow him. 5,000 PKK Syrian Kurds were killed in the fight in the mountains. Therefore, there is a natural link between the PKK and PYD. The PYD currently is conducting the revolution, and it is our [PKK] duty to support their struggle by all means.[21]

Over time, PKK ambitions in Syria evolved. In the early days of the uprising, seeing an opportunity to establish a strategic base in its conflict with Turkey, it focused on the town of Afrin in north-west Syria.[22] As YPG control spread over Kurdish-populated areas along the border with Turkey and throughout much of Hassakah province in the north east, PKK goals expanded. Its strength in northern Syria offered

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[18] Ibid, p. 19. Ilham Mohammed (PYD) said in September 2012, "our movement benefited from Öcalan's ideology, but physically and organisationally we are independent from the PKK", ibid.

[19] PKK upper ranks include Kurds with many citizenships; all received the same Qandil military and ideological training. YPG senior ranks consist of PKK fighters with Syrian nationality who were trained in Qandil, fought in Turkey and in some cases speak Turkish. As the Syria conflict unfolded, they moved back to Syrian Kurdish areas to establish military/ideological training like that in Qandil. Crisis Group Report, *Turkey, the PKK and the Kurdish Settlement*, op. cit.

[20] Crisis Group interview, Qamishli resident with close YPG ties, Qamishli, 4 December 2013. The injection of non-Syrian fighters has been noted by residents of different Syrian Kurdish locations. Interviewees from Tell Tamr, Hassakah, Ras al-Ayn and Rumeilan interviewed a few weeks after their arrival in Iraqi Kurdistan described non-Syrian Kurdish YPG fighters in their cities. Crisis Group interviews, August-November 2013. A YPG deserter lamented the sudden influx: "I was with the YPG since before the revolution. They put me in charge of border control first, but as soon as other people arrived from Turkey and Iran, I had to answer to their orders." Crisis Group interview, Erbil refugee camp, 12 September 2013.

[21] Crisis Group interview, KCK member, Suleimaniya, 8 November 2013.

[22] See Maria Fantappie, "Assassination So Far Fails to Unite Syria's Divided Kurds", *The National*, 16 October 2011.

an historic opportunity to implement its program of "democratic self-administration" – an outgrowth of Öcalan's theory of community-based local governance enabling both Kurdish empowerment and broader social equality.[23] A KCK member asserted that this presently took precedence: "The PYD is now conducting the revolution in Western Kurdistan [Rojava] to build a democratic society. Afterwards will come the time of northern Kurdistan [southern Turkey], and so on".[24]

The PYD's growing influence largely has come at the expense of other Kurdish groups. In particular, it has prevented emergence of new, rival militias while forcing existing ones to cooperate with or join PYD forces on their terms.[25] For Kurds looking for means to defend their communities, cooperation with the YPG often is the sole option.[26] Indeed, as battles proliferated with Salafi armed groups and jihadis,[27]

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[23] The concept of "democratic self-administration" is inspired by Öcalan's theory of "democratic autonomy". Crisis Group has referred to his concept as "the unbearable vagueness of 'democratic autonomy'", explaining that the movement keeps its definition of autonomy imprecise partly because any set formula is likely to be interpreted as "separatist" by the centralised Turkish system. See Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, op. cit., p. 22. Ali Kemal Özcan, a Turkish scholar, explained that the theory is being tested in Syria for the first time: "The PKK has a sufficient military base in Qandil and does not need one in Syria. Syria is important to structure the social existence of ordinary people according to the movement's ideology. In Turkey, the PKK has experience only as a military movement, hidden in the mountains; in Syria it can replace Assad's state with its own and promote its project in cities and villages". Crisis Group telephone interview, Erbil, 7 December 2013.
[24] Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 8 November 2013.
[25] The number of recruits in the military branch of other Kurdish Syrian parties remained limited and tended to decrease as the YPG grew dominant. A member of a rival faction explained: "In Amouda all Syrian Kurdish parties are present. After the regime withdrew last year, there were two small armed forces (*kata'ib*) of nearly 50 members each, one affiliated with [KNC leader] Abdulhakim Bashar and the other with Ismail Hama's Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria. But this year they were dismantled and the YPG assumed control of the whole city". Crisis Group interview, Erbil suburbs, 10 August 2013.
[26] An inhabitant of Ras al-Ayn [a mixed border town adjacent to Turkey, the struggle for which pitted armed opposition groups against Kurdish fighters from late 2012 until mid-2013, when the YPG emerged victorious] who joined an independent Kurdish force to fight the jihadi Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel factions explained: "In November [2012] as attacks began, we [Kurds from Ras al-Ayn (Serêkanî)] organised a local armed unit to protect the city. But during the battle there was no choice but to co-operate … with the YPG. Only they have enough fighters and weaponry to win". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 8 July 2013. In al-Jazeera, a mostly Kurdish region, the YPG has established itself as the sole Kurdish military force. In mixed areas of Raqqa and the Aleppo governorate (Kobane, Tell Abyad and Afrin), YPG forces exist beside the Kurdish Front [Jabhat al-Akrad] that has cooperated with YPG against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) but continues to identify as part of the Free Syrian Army (a term loosely applied to non-jihadi, anti-regime rebels). A Kurdish Front spokesman said, "we have cooperated with the YPG in Tell Abyad and Kobane but are not willing to become part of them". Crisis Group interview, media spokesman, Kurdish Front, Afrin, 20 February 2014.
[27] While rebel groups from across the ideological spectrum have clashed with the PYD, jihadi and Salafi groups have done so most aggressively and consistently. Beginning in late 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra, a powerful jihadi group that has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri, played a leading role in the struggle for control of the Kurdish-populated border city of Ras al-Ayn and in subsequent fighting for Kurdish-populated towns further east in Hassakah province. Since mid-2013, ISIL, a brutal al-Qaeda off-shoot, has sought unilateral control of border areas, putting it in the forefront of battles with the PYD. In fights for territory along the border in Aleppo and Raqqa provinces and near oil facilities in Hassakah province, it was sometimes joined by al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, a leading Salafi group. Since February 2014, however, those two and other rebel factions have waged war against ISIL. Some rebel factions are increasingly cooperating with YPG against

the PYD/YPG role as the sole viable protector of Syria's Kurds was further enhanced.[28] In turn, the movement has invoked its leading position to justify its political project. In mid-2013, Salih Muslim, co-chair and de facto PYD leader, said:

> It is now clear that we are the only force sufficiently organised to administer Syria's Kurdish areas and the only one that can fight against the Salafis. It is now time to move forward and establish an interim administration to govern Rojava.[29]

B.   *An Unspoken Alliance?*

The PYD's relationship with the regime has proved crucial to its territorial gains, instrumental in ensuring services in the territory under its control and key in defining relations with other opposition elements. Anti-regime activists, armed factions and politicians tend to describe the movement as a regime stooge, but the reality is more complex. PYD officials acknowledge they have made a strategic decision not to confront Damascus, yet reject charges of collusion, describing themselves as a "third current" between an oppressive regime and hardline rebel militants. As proof of their independence from central authorities, they point to limited instances of clashes with regime elements.[30] The party is a member of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), a left-leaning opposition grouping tolerated by Damascus. Salih Muslim has taken the position that, while any resolution to the conflict must include Bashar Assad, he should not remain the country's ruler.[31]

Still, there is little doubt that the PYD is engaging the regime in a conciliatory rather than confrontational manner and has pursued a modus vivendi that serves both, at least for the short term. Its initially rapid advance was dependent on Damascus's June 2012 withdrawal from Kurdish areas; this was mutually beneficial, as it freed

ISIL. Much of this cooperation appears indirect, through Jabhat al-Akrad, an independent Kurdish rebel faction that coordinates with non-Kurdish rebels and has fought beside PYD against ISIL. On warming PYD ties with rebels, see Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Kurds, Rebels Find a Common Enemy in ISIL", Al-Monitor, 27 March 2014. On the end of cooperation between ISIL and rebel factions in Kurdish areas, see " داعش تهاجم مقرات للنصرة و أحرار الشام في الحسكة.. و بيان للنصرة يعلن على الحرب على تنظيم البغدادي، استحياء " ["ISIL attacks al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham bases in Hassakah, and a statement from al-Nusra 'timidly' declares war on al-Baghdadi's organisation"], www.aksalser. com/?page=view_articles&id=8ef393381e61cbeeb8f1bcd5d0a0b396.

[28] Intensified Islamist attacks in Kurdish areas shifted Kurdish public opinion toward the PYD. A resident of Tell Tamr, a partly Kurdish town targeted by armed Islamist groups, said, "in the aftermath of the battle of Ras al-Ayn, Islamists entered Tell Tamr. They began kidnapping and killing Kurds. I am not a YPG supporter, and I will never be. But if it weren't for the YPG, not a single Kurd would be left in the [al-] Jazeera region". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, July 2013. A journalist working for a pro-KDP channel commented: "I was the most critical person against the PYD. But at the moment, I have to admit that they are saving the people from the worst". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 July 2013.

[29] Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 12 August 2013.

[30] Crisis Group interview, PYD official, Suleimaniya, November 2013. Clashes between YPG and regime forces have been rare; the most prominent have occurred in the Aleppo neighbourhood of Sheikh Maqsoud that is controlled by the YPG but abuts neighbourhoods held by regime forces. See KurdWatch reporting, 31 May 2012, at kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid= 2542&z=en&cure=245; and GlobalPost, 26 April 2013.

[31] See "Syria Kurdish Leader: Solution Must Include Assad", Al-Monitor, 29 October 2013; also "Kurds in Syria: 'We don't want to draw new borders', says Democratic Union Party", *International Journal of Socialist Review*, 29 January 2014.

regime forces to concentrate elsewhere in the north, while the PYD denied Kurdish areas to the armed opposition.

Anti-PYD sentiment, the norm in the opposition ranks, has contributed to the violence that has pitted Kurds against the Arab opposition since late 2012. These clashes – which have expanded shared PYD-Damascus interests – have been fuelled by mistrust; competition for scarce resources (land along the Turkish border; oil and gas in Hassakah); and the rising influence of jihadi groups fighting alongside mainstream opposition factions.[32] The opposition, in addition to viewing the seizure of Kurdish areas in July 2012 as, in effect, a gift from Damascus, also alleges the PYD acts duplicitously by breaking ceasefires, in some cases allegedly at regime behest.[33]

The PYD has its own grievances. As jihadi factions, most notably Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have played an increasingly central role in the overall war, they have taken the lead in clashes with the PYD.[34] Relentless in battle and embracing ideological views deeply at odds with the prevailing culture in Kurdish areas, they have strengthened in consequence both the PYD's image as guardian of its people and its narrative, which portrays Salafi militants as the common foe of Kurds and regime.[35]

In some cases, the regime apparently has provided material support to the PYD in its fight against opposition armed groups. After Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel factions drove regime forces from the mixed Arab-Kurdish city of Ras al-Ayn on the Turkish border in November 2012, the regime reportedly offered weapons to YPG forces that fought to wrest the area from them. A local resident who fought in Ras al-Ayn said:

> The YPG had a stronghold in Ras al-Ayn, but we were surrounded from all sides [after rebels expelled regime forces]. The YPG then received up to twelve DShk [heavy machine guns] and tanks from the regime. Without them I am not sure we could have won the battle.[36]

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[32] Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit.

[33] Asked to explain his opposition to the PYD, a member of Liwa al-Towhid (among the most powerful armed opposition groups in the north) said, "several times they betrayed us after reaching agreements or ceasefires. For instance, at Menagh they came and attacked from behind while we had the regime surrounded. They are fighting on behalf of the regime". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013. A Syrian Arab from Afrin who runs a medical facility serving rebel fighters on the Turkish border said, "Afrin is quiet today because the PYD is in control. PYD control means regime control, because the two have been coordinating. I was running a cultural centre in July 2012 [when the PYD took the town]; the order came from regime elements to hand the keys to the PYD". Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013.

[34] Clashes between non-jihadi groups and the PYD have declined markedly since late 2013; a truce reached in Afrin encouraged mainstream armed opposition groups west of Aleppo city to focus against the regime. Crisis Group interview, Liwa al-Towhid member, Gaziantep, November 2013. East of Aleppo, ISIL and al-Nusra emerged as the most powerful rebel forces, battling the PYD for control along the Turkish border and over oil and gas facilities in Hassakah. See Nicholas Heras, "the Battle for Syria's al-Hasakah province", CTC Sentinel, 24 October 2013.

[35] Salih Muslim said, "Salafists attack Kurds; they also oppose the regime and Shiites in general. We [the PYD and regime] both are fighting against them, albeit for different reasons". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 8 August 2013.

[36] Crisis Group interview, Ras al-Ayn fighter, Erbil, 4 July 2013. A Kurdish Syrian party leader, some of whose fighters were deployed alongside the YPG, likewise claimed that the regime supplied both the YPG and its own forces in the area with heavy machine guns and tanks. Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 10 November 2013.

The regime remained an important source of supply for the PYD in the months that followed, as the party's hostile relationship with Turkey, coupled with the closure of the border separating Hassakah province from the Kurdish region of Iraq, deprived the Kurdish movement of access to its hinterlands.[37] In October 2013, the PYD took a major step toward addressing its supply problems when it seized the Yaroubiyeh border crossing, located on a key road linking Kurdish areas in Syria with Iraqi territory under Baghdad's control.[38] In wresting the crossing from ISIL, its forces reportedly benefited from the support of both Syria's air force and the Iraqi army's artillery.[39]

As the PYD expanded its control in Kurdish populated areas, regime forces have maintained a presence in the largest enclaves nominally under the party's control, most notably Qamishli and Hassakah.[40] Damascus pulled back most of its security personnel but kept government services under its charge; for example, it continues to pay salaries to state employees and run administrative offices.[41] Far from leaving these functions to the PYD, it has centralised them, giving it an important edge in relations. A Qamishli resident and teacher on the state payroll, said all residents in the surrounding areas now can collect their salaries in two cities only:

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[37] The regime delivered key weapons, cash and diesel (mazout) from Damascus and Latakiya to Kurdish areas via Qamishli airport. A former PYD member who deserted YPG ranks said, "I was in charge of overseeing security over the stretch of Syrian-Turkish border that extends from al-Malikiyah to Darbassiyeh. Beginning in early 2013, we received new cars from the regime to help our work". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 20 September 2013. A former employee at Qamishli airport said it "was under the regime's and YPG's shared control. Since the events in Ras al-Ayn, something changed. I began seeing airplanes coming in from Damascus, reaching Qamishli first and then Ras al-Ayn. In March, deliveries further increased, and regime security forces came to interrogate me and ask for my cooperation. Soon thereafter I escaped from Qamishli". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 July 2013.

[38] PYD members say Yaroubiyeh is a critical transit point for electricity, gasoline, food and humanitarian aid. The opening of the border crossing will enable the party to establish trade between Syria's Hassakah province and Iraq's Ninewa province. A PYD representative has been posted in Baghdad. Crisis Group interview, PYD member, Suleimaniya, 1 November 2013.

[39] On the Syrian air force role, see www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2955&z=en&cure =1009. PYD officials deny receiving help from either the Iraqi army or the Syrian regime. See pydrojava. net/eng/index.php/news/54-a-statement-of-ypg-about-the-beginning-of-liberating-town-of-til-kochar-al-yarubiya. Abdallah al-Shammari, a leader of a tribe straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border around Yaroubiyeh, said the 39th Iraqi army battalion, from Rabieh (on the Iraqi side of the border), made a rapid incursion into Syria on behalf of the PYD on 26 October.

[40] For an illustrative map, see Appendix B. In the Jazeera region, regime security forces remain outside Qamishli, on the road from Hassakah to Deir-ez-Zor. Regime-affiliated personnel also are at Qamishli airport and Rumeilan's oil field. Crisis Group observation, Qamishli, December 2013. Kurdish critics of the PYD are quick to denounce this de facto cooperation. A Kurdish resident of Qamishli said, "Damascus still pays the salaries of state employees. A Syrian army division is still present outside Qamishli and another in Hassakah. The regime uses Qamishli airport and controls Rumeilan's oil-field [in Hasakah]. How can the PYD claim it has established a Kurdish administration?". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 3 December 2013.

[41] The state apparatus is unchanged since the foundation of the Rojava administration. In al-Jazeera region, for instance, as YPG forces took over, Damascus continued paying the salaries of school teachers and civil servants. When the PYD moved to pay state employees dismissed due to their anti-regime stand, Damascus eventually reinstated them in their positions and put them back on the payroll, to preserve state functions as its exclusive prerogative. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, February 2014. School studies remain the same, according to a Qamishli teacher: "High school students still study curriculums approved by the Baath party, as they were doing four years ago". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 4 April 2014.

Now we collect our salaries in Qamishli and Hassakah, where the regime is still present.[42] If the regime takes back these cities [militarily] and cuts the salaries [of state employees] for the rest of the Kurdish populated areas, I don't see how the PYD project could continue in Syria.[43]

C. *Brothers and Rivals*

As the PYD has grown more dominant, relations with pro-Barzani Kurdish Syrian parties have deteriorated. A stalemate of sorts has set in: the PYD prevents competitors from operating independently in areas it controls, while pro-Barzani Syrian parties do their best to keep it geographically and politically isolated.[44]

The border between Syria's and Iraq's Kurdish areas became an arena for this intra-Kurdish competition. Fearing that the PYD would bolster its role by assuming control of aid distribution, the KDP would intermittently close crossings on its side of the border, barring entry of supplies.[45] As a result, living conditions deteriorated rapidly in Syria's Kurdish areas. By mid-2013, residents faced dire shortages of electricity, water, food and gas, prompting a stream of departures for Iraqi Kurdistan.[46] 200,000 had already fled by early August 2013, when the KRG closed the border.[47]

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[42] Before the uprising and the PYD administration, state employees were paid in their individual administrative districts. Crisis Group observation, Qamishli, March 2014.

[43] Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 3 April 2014. Kheder Khaddour, an analyst specialising in the regime, described this as an explicit strategy in the entire country, "In Kurdish areas as all across Syria, the regime prioritised keeping control of the largest cities that function as principal administrative centres even if their hinterlands fall out of state control. This … has allowed Damascus to keep administrative offices and other governmental structures running, maintaining a link between the regime and the population and signalling the regime is still able to run the state and provide people with what they need". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 5 April 2014.

[44] In November 2013, soon after the PYD announced its interim administration, Mustafa Juma, a pro-Barzani KNC member, said, "after more than a year of stalemate, little hope for cooperation with the PYD is left. I can openly affirm that the Erbil agreement is dead". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 November 2013.

[45] Between November 2012 and July 2013, KDP officials only irregularly opened the border, and they barred NGOs from sending humanitarian aid into Syria. Crisis Group observations. Aldar Khalil, a senior PYD official, said, "they [the KRG] are not letting food in. Electricity generators we need are still stuck in Zakho [Iraqi Kurdistan] on the border with Syria". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 17 December 2013. When Crisis Group analysts visited Iraqi Kurdistan's official border post with Syria, Faysh Khabour, in July 2013, the border was closed. KDP-peshmerga in charge on the Iraqi side searched them, forbade them to interview Syrian Kurds waiting at the border and forced them to leave. Majeed Dawee, a Syrian Kurd with a humanitarian relief organisation, said, "It has become very difficult to send aid from Iraqi Kurdistan to Syria … either you don't get KDP approval to cross, or as soon as the aid reaches Syria, the PYD takes it and redistributes it in its own name". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 15 July 2013.

[46] A resident of Hassakah province described living conditions in Rumeilan: "In August 2013, we had only three to four hours of electricity daily, nearly no water, and the price of a gas cylinder increased from $4 to $60. A kilo of tomatoes cost $2, ten times what it cost before the war". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 3 November 2013.

[47] Hugh Tekin, "Syria: Which Way To Kurdistan?", *The New York Review of Books*, 28 August 2013. A Syrian Kurd interviewed at the Faysh Khabour border said, "I have been waiting in the sun more than five days. It should be easy to cross: Families are divided between Syria and Iraq. They [Kurdish parties] close the borders because of their own problems, but simple people pay the price". Crisis Group interview, July 2013. Many Syrian Kurds opted to cross at Samalka, further north. On the refugee flow via Samalka, May-August 2013, see data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/highlights.php?Page=2&Country=103&Region=0&Settlement= 0.

The KDP and PYD blamed each other for the closure. The former accused the PYD of violating the Erbil agreement; the latter denounced the KDP for besieging Syria's Kurds.[48] On 15 August, the KDP reversed course and opened the border, only to shut it again three days later. In the interval, over 70,000 Kurds fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.[49] Many Kurds and others charge this was a cynical ploy aimed at leaving the PYD in charge of a largely de-populated area and limiting its recruitment pool.[50] Relations deteriorated further, as the KDP barred PYD members from entering Erbil governorate; in response, the PYD prevented pro-Barzani leaders from crossing into Syria. A KDP official in charge of the Syrian file said, "PYD members are Kurds and are our brothers. But brothers are not friends: you don't choose them".[51]

Since then the political and physical barriers separating Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have increased.[52] In December, Turkish-Kurdish lawmakers Leyla Zana and Osman Baydemir tried to mediate.[53] A week's session in Erbil produced an agreement, Erbil II, with mutual promises to refrain from manipulating the border for political ends. It was not implemented, and tensions escalated further: KDP officials refused to open Faysh Khabour for trade and humanitarian aid. In April, the KDP began to dig a trench on its border with Syria to prevent the passage of people and goods,[54] thus leaving the PYD reliant on Yaroubiyeh. Relative isolation has worsened PYD governance challenges, increasing temptation to deepen reliance on PKK military muscle and transform behind-the-scenes coexistence with the regime into more open cooperation.

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[48] In July, as the sides sought a solution to the problem, a KDP official said, "we tried to negotiate the opening of the border but on the condition that the PYD respect the Erbil declaration. But they don't want to listen. If the border remains closed, it is their fault". Crisis Group interview, 7 July 2013. Aldar Khalil, a PYD member, countered: "The gate between Iraq and Syria should not be a matter of politics. By closing the border, they are trying to pressure people inside and shift the blame to us". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 14 July 2013.

[49] See data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/highlights, op. cit.

[50] A Syrian Kurd critical of the KDP said, "for months the KDP kept the border closed. From one day to the next, its media announced the borders were open, presenting Iraqi Kurdistan as the land of dreams. The YPG is now complaining, as many of their recruits deserted and migrated to Iraq in hope of a better life". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 26 September 2013. An official with the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) said, "we did not expect a refugee crisis of this dimension. We were informed of the border opening only a day earlier. At least 70,000 arrived between 15-18 August, and we had to set up camps within days. I cannot tell if this was an intended strategy to weaken the PYD. If it was, it didn't work. These refugees became a burden for the KRG". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 16 November 2013.

[51] Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 October 2013.

[52] On 7 November, after the KDP barred Salih Muslim from Erbil, PYD officials called upon the Supreme Kurdish Council's border committee to leave their posts, in effect closing official crossings on the Syrian side. See kurdwatch.org/index.php? aid=2956&z=en&cure=1009.

[53] See Kurdnet, 12 December 2013. KDP officials taking part described the meeting as a "formality", accusing PYD of "having no intention to solve the issue of Faysh Khabour, because they are more interested in Yaroubiyeh anyway". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 15 February 2014. PYD officials blamed KDP intransigence. Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Racho, PYD representative in Baghdad, Baghdad, 14 February 2014.

[54] The trench is three metres wide and two metres deep, will extend seventeen kilometres along the KRG frontier with Syria, and will be heavily guarded by KDP-affiliated peshmerga. While KDP officials justified it as a security measure intended to prevent jihadis from crossing into Iraqi Kurdistan, PYD members and supporters denounced an embargo against PYD-ruled Rojava. See Fehim Tastekin, "KRG Trench Divides Syrian, Iraqi Kurds", Al-Monitor, 21 April 2014.

III. **From Fighters to Rulers**

A. *The Rojava Project*

The PYD's attempt to implement a version of the PKK's political vision across a wide swathe of Syria is unprecedented. A clandestine movement since its foundation, it has never before been able to govern. Its vision, however, tends to be vague, and the challenge of shifting from theory to practice has been messy. It describes its mission as reforming society as a whole and promoting individual and collective freedoms, including of expression, gender equality and respect for ethnic and religious identities.[55] It calls for "democratic autonomy" or "self-administration" (*al-idara al-dhatiya al-demoqratiya*) and says the local autonomy and social equality it aims for are "the sole basis of a genuinely democratic society".[56]

Rojava, in its incipient phase, has demonstrated the plasticity one might expect of a grand project undertaken in wartime, under chaotic conditions, and which is still more theory than practice, though the PYD is eager to change that. It set up the Rojava Democratic Society Movement (known by its Kurdish acronym, TEV DEM) as an umbrella. Officially, the PYD is considered a sub-entity, in charge of political affairs, within TEV DEM; other sub-entities tasked with organising aspects of social life include the YPG (defence), a youth movement (*harakat al-shabiba)* and a women's movement (*yekiti star* or *harakat al-mara*).[57]

PYD members assert that this project differs from secession or the establishment of a Kurdish federal region within Syria.[58] Like the PKK but in contrast to the KDP, the PYD opposes the idea of a central authority ruling over an ethnically defined territory. A member explained:

> The traditional idea of federalism would exclude large portions of Kurds living outside the boundaries of a predominantly Kurdish area, in Aleppo or Damascus for instance. The model set by the Iraqi Kurdistan region is not inclusive: it leaves many Kurds in contested areas. Plus, we believe that the territorial, centralised state is failing everywhere. Öcalan foresaw this twenty years ago. At that time, everybody laughed at him.[59]

 The PYD advocates empowering self-governance structures at the local level, unified only by a common vision of societal reform rather than by the rule of a centralised government. Alan Semo, the PYD official in charge of foreign relations, described the administration project which the PYD announced in November 2013, in the following terms: "What we propose is a social confederation between representatives of

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[55] For an overview of the PYD's initial steps toward democratic self-administration, see Crisis Group Middle East Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit, p. 12. For how democratic autonomy looks in Turkey, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°222, *Turkey's Kurdish Impasse: The View from Diyarbakır*, 30 November 2012, pp. 8-9; and Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, op. cit., p. 22.
[56] Described on the PYD website pydinfo.com/our-vision. Critics denounce the project as deliberately vague: "through confusing terminology [it] can easily lead to the establishment of a one-party system". Crisis Group interview, Turkish Kurdish analyst, Beirut, 28 October 2013.
[57] Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit., p. 14.
[58] Crisis Group interview, PYD member, Qamishli, 5 December 2013. Immediately after announcement of an interim administration, the PYD denied it would lead to secession. See Timur Goksel, "Syria's Kurdish Leader: Solution Must Include Assad", Al-Monitor, 2 October 2013.
[59] Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 3 November 2013.

Kurdish-populated areas of Afrin, Kobane and al-Jazeera, through which local communities can express their rights".[60]

In seeking to cement its authority while navigating a complex political environment, the PYD is pragmatically adjusting its theory.[61] Despite rhetorical opposition to federalism, officials are careful not to rule it out;[62] its governance bodies have coalesced around three federated local governments, in Efrin (Afrin), Kobani (Kobane) and Cezire (al-Jazeera). Moreover, and despite public emphasis on pluralism, it has sought to induce or compel cooperation with it rather than with representatives of other Kurdish parties or communities. Members and leaders of the people's councils *(buyut al-shaab – mala gel* in Kurdish), theoretically responsible for local governance and including representatives of all Kurdish political parties as well as non-Kurdish communities in mixed areas, are appointed by the PYD.[63] Likewise, the movement maintains overall decision-making authority, consigning the councils other than for distribution of gas and humanitarian aid to a largely symbolic role.[64]

The PYD has applied a similar principle in expanding and institutionalising its military forces. It has opened the door to recruits of various backgrounds, while ensuring they remain under its command. YPG forces are akin to an army, operating outside the cities across Rojava territory under the direction of a high military council based in Malikiyah. The YPG opened military academies (*buyut al-askar*) that offer recruits

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[60] Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 1 December 2013. Another PYD official explained that the project would extend throughout Syrian society: "Our goal is to build a democratic society. It is not limited to the Kurdish areas of Syria but rather applies to any community. People in [Arab populated] Deir-ez-Zor could implement this project as well". Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Rasho, PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan, Suleimaniya, 4 November 2013.

[61] The PYD, vague about its various bodies' functions and responsibilities or using ambiguous terminology, has several times modified the interim government's structure. The September 2013 transitional administration agreement did not include three federated areas, first mentioned on 12 November, when the PYD officially established the transitional administration. For the September draft, see pydinfo.com/field-reports/225-on-the-ground-activities-in-western-kurdistan; for the declaration, see *Rudaw*, 13 November 2013.

[62] PYD officials have changed their positions on federalism. Foreign relations chief Alan Semo first openly rejected the federalism concept, then amended his views: "It is up to the Syrian people to decide whether or not they want federalism". He also mentioned a possible referendum on the issue in Syria's Kurdish areas. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 1 December 2013. Federalism is not mentioned in the "social contract of Rojava", published in March 2014 and meant as Rojava's constitutional chart. It specifies that Rojava "is composed of the three cantons of Afrin, al-Jazeera and Kobane, forming an integral part of the Syrian territory" (Art. 3) and that this is a model for a future decentralised system of federal governance in Syria (Art. 12). Text of the social contract at www.kongrakurdistan.net/site/the-social-contract-of-rojava.

[63] The YPG entered Tell Tamr to set up people's councils before seizing control of roads on the outskirts. Crisis Group interview, Tell Tamr resident, Erbil, July 2013. A Qamishli resident said, "creation of local councils is the PYD absolute priority. PYD would start to create councils even before recruiting fighters". A Qamishli resident who witnessed formation of its council said the PYD selects five to twenty people from a neighbourhood; appoints a leader; and puts the council in charge of distributing gas and humanitarian aid. Crisis Group interviews, 3 December 2013.

[64] Crisis Group interview, Qamishli resident, Qamishli, 4 December 2013. He added: "People's councils are for everybody, not only Kurds. In Qamishli, Christians have their own council leader responsible for gas distribution who is selected by the PYD". The number of councils depends on the size of the territory. Qamishli has eight committees, each responsible for a part of the city. Members and leaders are selected by the PYD and report to the PYD-controlled police (*asaysh*). A PYD member called them "assemblies for improving social cooperation in mixed populated areas". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 4 November 2013.

three months of training, including ideology.[65] Early on, YPG attempted to integrate non-Kurds (eg, Arabs, Syriacs and Assyrians) within its ranks and under its leadership. It eventually agreed to participation of non-Kurdish fighters in the Rojava security system as independent brigades (*kata'ib mustaqilla*) that keep their own leaders but operate under YPG command.[66] The PYD prevents other Kurdish militias from operating in areas it controls or crossing into Syria from Iraqi Kurdistan unless they accept a similar arrangement – a condition Barzani-linked parties refuse.[67]

The PYD also set up the People's Tribunals (*mahakim shaabiya*) and a police force, the *asaysh*, to enforce law and order. The latter, which operates exclusively in cities, is in charge of maintaining civil order and, like the YPG, received training and monthly salaries.[68] The tribunals, composed of PYD-selected personnel, administer justice across the Rojava, conducting investigations and issuing arrest warrants under a hybrid penal code.[69] They have been heavily criticised by rival Kurdish factions, activists and human rights organisations; the PYD itself is often accused of human rights violations, targeting political foes and arresting as well as imprisoning civilians without evidence of wrongdoing.[70]

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[65] Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 4 December 2013. He added: "Each recruit is supposed to receive military training and attend political classes (*muhadara siyasiya*) on Öcalan's ecological and philosophical views. They are taught by YPG fighters from Qandil". According to a Qamishli resident with close PYD ties, in the last six months the YPG has gone from giving fifteen days of training and no salary to three months of training and a monthly salary of $150 to 25,000-30,000 fighters at nine military academies (two in Afrin, three in Kobane, four in al-Jazeera).

[66] In the al-Jazeera region, YPG coordinates with the National Defence Army (Jaysh al-Difaa al-Watani), a pro-regime formation of Arab tribesmen from Qamishli and Hassakah. Qamishli residents say it is headed by the local tribal leader, Mohammed al-Faris, and has 500 members from the al-Sharabiyin and al-Taie tribes. YPG also cooperates with the pro-regime Syriac military wing, Suturo (*al-suturo*) in Qamishli, Malikiyah, Hassakeh and Qataniyah. Crisis Group observation, Qamishli, March 2014.

[67] Asked about pro-KDP Kurdish parties' resentment at PYD refusal to form joint leadership with KDP-trained fighters or allow them to operate in Syria, a PYD member said, "this is why the YPG exists – it should be the joint leadership. Our opponents reject this. They say we created the YPG, and so at a minimum we should change its name, but they really want to end the unified military leadership and allow everyone to have their own force. If we did this, we would be as disorganised as the rebels. We are fine with individual military units maintaining their specific political loyalty, but they must come under the YPG umbrella. That's the condition". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 4 November 2013.

[68] According to a Qamishli resident with close YPG ties, *asaysh* training is shorter than YPG training, less than 40 days and without ideology classes. Police, who number 20,000-25,000 receive a monthly $150 salary. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 4 December 2013.

[69] A Qamishli resident said, "especially at the very beginning, when they established the tribunal, anyone could be arrested for any reason, and there was no law but YPG military law. That said, the law was more or less applied equally to everyone. Even *asaysh* have been sent to prison". Crisis Group interview, 4 December 2013. Alan Semo, in charge of PYD foreign relations, responded: "… there is no clear penal code yet, but now that we have an interim administration, we are planning to set up tribunals and recruit specialised lawyers who will work to international and universal legal standards". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 1 December 2013.

[70] Kurdwatch website has widely reported on alleged YPG human rights abuse targeting activists or rival Kurdish political party members. www.kurdwatch.com/?aid=3019&z=en& cure=1016. After visiting al-Jazeera region detention facilities, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said prisoners interviewed "had not suffer[ed] abuse, and prison conditions were generally good. However, there is total chaos on what law is applied to process prisoners", Crisis Group phone conversation, HRW special adviser, Berlin, 2 April 2014. See also, *Rudaw*, 2 March 2014.

In parallel, the PYD announced establishment of administrative and governmental structures. With its affiliates in September 2013, it set up an "interim committee" in Qamishli tasked with preparing an administration plan. In November, it announced the creation of a "joint-interim administration", including local and legislative assemblies and governments in Efrin (Afrin), Kobani (Kobane) and Cezire (al-Jazeera), and a general assembly including Kurdish, Arab, Syriac and Assyrian representatives from all three cantons. In early 2014, it went further, forming the first local governments in Cezire and Kobani in January[71] and in March issuing the "social contract of Rojava", intended as a provisional constitutional charter for the region.[72] It was no coincidence that these developments occurred as the PYD's local rival, the KNC, gained more international legitimacy, visibility and gravitas by joining the opposition's foremost political body, the Syrian National Coalition and was invited to represent Syria's Kurds at the high profile, if fruitless, peace talks in Geneva.

The PYD faces an uphill struggle in gaining recognition for its administrative bodies. A majority of KNC parties denounced them and expelled from their midst the few who embraced them.[73] For all practical purposes, they are dominated by PYD-affiliated organisations, with an assortment of Kurdish, Syriac and Assyrian personalities who had little to lose from joining the project.[74]

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[71] In September, PYD announced administrative, executive, and legislative bodies and detailed their composition and tasks. It subsequently replaced them with more complex administrative structures. On 10 September, it declared creation of an interim committee, with representatives of all parties and minorities in western Kurdistan, empowered to draft an interim constitution and prepare a law on elections to a legislative assembly. pydinfo.com/field-reports/225-on-the-ground-activities-in-western-kurdistan. On 13 November, PYD announced the interim committee would be replaced by an interim assembly bringing together 61 Kurdish, Arab, Syriac and Assyrian members, representing 35 political factions and civil society organisations from the three cantons. Beside drafting a constitution and writing an electoral law, it was tasked to facilitate formation of legislative assemblies in the three cantons. *Rudaw*, 13 November 2013. In late January, PYD announced that the Cezire and Kobani legislative assemblies had set up their own governments, each appointing a president and 22 ministers (with portfolios such as defence, foreign policy, justice, education and youth affairs). *Firat News*, 27 January 2014.

[72] Rojava's social contract has nearly 100 articles, defining executive, legislative and judiciary powers; structure and function of affiliated bodies; an electoral commission; and founding principles, rights and liberties. www.kongrakurdistan.net/site/the-social-contract-of-rojava.

[73] A representative of the Yekiti Party in Syria, part of the KNC but open to negotiations with the PYD, said, "I was part of the preparatory committee that in September discussed establishing a joint administration to bring together some KNC parties with the PYD. As soon as we [KNC] joined the Syrian National Coalition, the PYD turned its back on us and started reaching out to other personalities. They created committees with new people we had not agreed on. Soon after, they moved unilaterally". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, 4 December 2013. Nasreddin Ibrahim's Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Party and two sister factions of the Kurdish Leftist Party in Syria, led respectively by Mohammed Musa and Salih Geddo, joined the PYD effort.

[74] Rojava's founding organisations include mostly PYD-affiliated civil society organisations (eg, Young Woman Revolutionary Committee, Revolutionary Youth Movement); PYD-affiliated institutions (eg, People's Council of Western Kurdistan, Star Union); entities close to the Syrian regime such as the Syriac Union Party (SUP, Hezb al-Ittihad al-Ashuryani fi Surya); and representatives of minority groups. www.pydrojava.com/eng/index.php/pyd-statements/116-a-statement-by-the-executive-committee-of-the-democratic-union-party. A member of the Yezidi community, a Kurdish religious minority group in al-Jazeera, said, "we know the PYD has its own agenda, but they are the ones who have the weapons to protect us. The other parties are working solely for the personal interests of their leaders and carry no weight on the ground. As Yazidis in Darbassiyeh, we are directly affected by intra-Kurdish divisions, which leaves us no choice [but to go with the strongest]". Crisis Group interview, Darbassiyeh, 3 December 2013.

B.   *In Need of Protection*

Reception of PYD rule by Syria's Kurds has been mixed. Suspicion toward all political parties has deepened since the 2011 uprising, especially among the younger generation, frustrated with the divisions and what they see as manifestly self-serving policies of Syrian Kurdish parties.[75] Among those who live in areas under its control, there is widespread appreciation for the YPG's ability to provide protection, particularly as attacks by jihadis grow in number and intensity.[76] Still, the movement – which had scant support prior to the uprising – has won few converts.[77] Many who rallied to the PYD-administration or joined YPG forces did so chiefly for lack of a viable alternative. A Kurdish resident from Tell Tamr said: "If it weren't for the YPG, there would be no Kurds left in al-Jazeera. But, to tell you the truth, no one understands the *Apuciin* [followers of Apo, an Öcalan nickname]. Many join YPG forces to ensure their own self-defence, to defend their families and land".[78]

Attitudes toward the PYD are shaped by several factors: its presumed cooperation with the Syrian regime; the PKK's outsized influence; and the perception of aspiration to hegemonic rule. Concerns include the fear that the apparent alliance with Damascus will poison future relations between the Kurds and other Syrians[79] and that the regime is pursuing a divide-and-rule strategy, backing the PYD to create disunity among the Kurds. A KNC member from Qamishli said: "The regime splits each community, then chooses proxies among Kurds, Arabs and Christians.[80] Among Kurds it chose the PYD, pitting Kurds against Kurds. This [PYD] administration is nothing but an administration of regime allies."[81]

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[75] Ibrahim Shappal, a leading youth activist, said, "the youth movement does not want to be with Erbil [seat of Barzani's KDP] any more than Qandil [PKK headquarters]. We are against the PYD ruling the region with an iron fist, and we oppose other parties that are … neither helping Kurds inside Syria nor assisting refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 1 November 2013. A young Syrian Kurd who had emigrated from Qamishli to Iraqi Kurdistan said, "[Kurdish] political parties are drinking the blood of Syrian Kurds. My brother was killed by the YPG in Qamishli. Then I travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan to support my family. Here, Barzani treats Syrians as second-class citizens; they don't give us anything, not even a residency permit". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 17 October 2013.

[76] Such attacks, and Arab tribes' cooperation with those carrying them out, have undoubtedly bolstered PYD status, in effect destroying whatever solidarity existed between Kurdish and Arab tribes and pushing the former to seek PYD/YPG protection. A Kurdish tribal leader said, "Arab tribes say they are with us in the day, and at night they go back to the opposition. We no longer can trust them". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli 4 December 2013.

[77] A Rumeilan Kurd said: "I am against all parties but will tell you a story. The YPG captured an Islamist at a checkpoint about to explode himself in Rumeilan central market. How many people would have been killed if not for them?". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 November 2013.

[78] Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 4 July 2013.

[79] A Kurdish anti-regime activist from Amuda contrasted the pan-Syrian unity of the 2011 uprising's early stages – when Kurdish flags were raised during anti-regime protests in non-Kurdish neighbourhoods of Damascus and Homs – to current tension between opposition militants and Kurds in the north. He blamed the PYD for threatening the Kurdish community's relations with non-Kurdish Syrians. Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 5 November 2013.

[80] In 2013, the regime began to back formation of a National Defence Army (Jaysh al-Difaa al-Watani) in al-Jazeera, of Arab tribesmen from Qamishli and Hassakah, against the Arab armed opposition. Christians are also split. The regime supported the Syriac Union Party (SUP), as well as its military wing, Sutoro, against the Association of Assyrian Democratic Organisation (al-Munadhama al-Athuria al-Demoqratiya). These organisations are represented in Rojava's administration. Crisis Group interview, Syriac Union Party member, Qamishli, 1 April 2014.

[81] Crisis Group interview, KNC member, Qamishli, 7 December 2013.

There is also suspicion surrounding the PKK's role. Gratitude for support in protecting civilians notwithstanding, some – including even those within the PYD and YPG – are uncomfortable with its direct involvement in Syrian affairs. Some Syrian Kurds see it as an intruder, pursuing a Turkish Kurd agenda and pushing them into an increasingly dangerous alliance with the regime.[82] A Syrian Kurd who left the YPG claimed:

> I was in the YPG since before the uprising, but I have left. Since last year, at least 400 new PKK military personnel came from Turkey and Iran. They are not Syrians, and they want to control everything. They don't care about Syrians. They make deals with the regime and [Iraqi PM] Maliki. This is why I left.[83]

Particularly among the youth activists who began the uprising, Syrian Kurds fear that the PYD's heavy-handedness bespeaks an aspiration for single-party rule. Human rights abuses by YPG fighters and the *asaysh*; prioritising law-and-order; and arbitrary arrest, abduction and imprisonment of non-PYD activists are all too reminiscent of the Baathist regime.[84] A young activist from Amouda said: "I have received several threats from the PYD, which cut off my family's electricity because of our participation in protests. The PYD imposes its rule with weapons. If we want to organise a demonstration or a meeting, we need to ask for its permission. What kind of liberation is that?"[85] Even allowing for potential exaggeration, such complaints indicate a wider unease with the PYD's approach.

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[82] A Syrian resident of Tell Tamr expressed discomfort with the presence of foreign fighters: "The YPG defending us from Islamists is a good thing, but who can ensure that those who came from Turkey will go back to their homes once the regime falls? Who will ensure that people will not say that we were regime allies?". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 14 September 2013.

[83] Crisis Group interview, YPG deserter, Erbil refugee camp, 12 September 2013.

[84] On 27 June, for instance, PYD opponents criticised the YPG for firing on demonstrators in Amouda, killing six; the PYD described the incident as a KDP-organised plot to tarnish its image. Crisis Group interviews, PYD and anti-PYD activists, Erbil, 29 June 2013. According to an Amouda resident who witnessed the event, KNC-affiliated demonstrators taunted a YPG convoy with slogans and stones, and fighters overreacted, shooting into the crowd. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, August 2013. See also kurdwatch.org/?aid=2873&z=en&cure=1009.

[85] Crisis Group interview, Syrian Kurdish activist, Suleimaniya, 5 November 2013. This was nuanced by another Syrian Kurd: "I am not a PYD member, but I respect what they are doing. I agree they are not democratic in their practices, but can you be democratic when a fight is ongoing? Can you think about freedom of speech when you are about to be attacked? I think we should think through our priorities, and the priority at this time is to defend Syria's Kurds". Crisis group interview, Suleimaniya, 5 November 2013.

IV. **Messy Geopolitics**

A.   *Turkey and Iran Step In*

Divisions among Kurds have provided an opening for external powers. Ankara and Tehran, in particular, have taken advantage of the KDP-PKK rivalry to advance their own interests: Turkey to retain influence over the Kurdish issue, inside and outside its borders; Iran to keep the PKK on the side of its allies in the Syrian conflict. An Iranian Kurdish analyst said, "Turkey and Iran have the same approach in pursuit of different interests. Both wish to keep Kurds divided and competing with one another, the former by using its leverage with the KDP, the latter by exploiting its influence over the PKK".[86]

When the uprising erupted in 2011, Turkey tried to prevent – and when that failed, to contain – any PKK advance in Syria that could reach its border. It relied on a special relationship with Erbil to rein in the PYD's political rise and military success, treating the pro-Barzani KNC as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian Kurds and refusing to deal bilaterally with the PYD.[87] At the same time, Ankara turned a blind eye to the Islamist fighters crossing from Turkey into Syria, viewing them – in addition to helping bring down the Assad regime – as potential counterweights to the PYD.[88] The strategy backfired; the PYD not only gained territory, but also bolstered its appeal among Kurds as their only protector from jihadis. In September 2013, a Turkish official acknowledged: "We made the PYD stronger by trying to undermine it".[89]

When Ankara initiated peace talks with the PKK in late 2012, it also shifted to an ambivalent PYD policy.[90] The failures of Barzani's political strategy, and of rebel groups' efforts to contain the PYD, led to its de facto recognition of and relations with the PYD.[91] In a delicate diplomatic manoeuvre, Turkey reached out to PYD members through its intelligence agencies, even as it continued to recognise the KNC as the Syrian Kurds' sole legitimate representative. While it began building a 7km barrier near the border between the Kurdish-majority city of Nusaybin in Turkey

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[86] Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 October 2013.

[87] See Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit, pp. 22-30.

[88] See Crisis Group Europe Report N°225, *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, 30 April 2013.

[89] Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 3 October 2013.

[90] On the armed PKK struggle and the recent government initiative, see Crisis Group Reports, *Ending the PKK Insurgency* and *The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, both op. cit.; Hugh Pope, "Turkey and its Rebel Kurds Might Want Peace This Time", *Bloomberg*, 16 January 2013.

[91] In the words of Cengiz Candar, a Turkish columnist, "we tried to talk to Barzani but it did not work. He did not deliver Rojava to Turkey, and we thought it was better talking to Öcalan". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 2 October 2013. Turkey began dealing with Syrian Kurds through its domestic channels. In particular, the BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, Peace and Democracy Party), Turkey's pro-Kurdish party, helped establish a connection between the intelligence services and the PYD. A Turkish political analyst said, "we can keep our relations with the KDP but balance them with relations to other Kurdish parties. We can reach out to the PYD through our own Kurdish party in Turkey [BDP] and deal with Syria's Kurdish issue as if it were a Turkish domestic issue. Syria's Kurds are in a way an extension of Turkey's Kurds, considering their history and culture". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 1 October 2013.

and its Syrian twin, Qamishli,[92] Ankara permitted the PYD to move humanitarian aid through the Darbassiyeh border crossing.[93]

Although PYD members describe Ankara's moves as a "natural step towards the international and diplomatic recognition of their party",[94] Turkish officials remain cautious. One said, "we deal with all Kurdish sides, PYD included. But we were clear with them that they have to cut their relationship with the regime if they want us to deal with them through our foreign ministry. It is in our best interest to pull them away from the regime and drag them to our side".[95]

Turkey did not pull the PYD away from the regime; nor did it comply with the PYD request to stop the flow of jihadis across its borders to Kurdish areas. That said, by opening a channel to the PYD without cutting KNC ties, Ankara gained leverage to play the rival Kurdish powers against one another to prevent both the emergence of a Kurdish semi-autonomous region in Syria (as in Iraq) under Barzani's influence and the consolidation of a PKK-led entity on its southern border.[96] Given Ankara's strong relations with the Syrian National Coalition, the KNC joined the opposition bloc in order to preserve the good-will of its Turkish benefactor and dropped its insistence that the coalition first endorse federalism for Syria's Kurds, which Turkey refuses.[97] The PYD's exclusion from the January 2014 Geneva II talks highlighted its diplomatic isolation.[98]

Kurdish divisions arguably have most benefited Iran. In the conflict's early stages, Tehran came to believe that the Syrian regime's survival partly depended on quiet in the country's north, distancing Kurds from the Turkey-based Syrian opposition

[92] Turkish Kurds demonstrated in Nusaybin decrying the yet to be completed wall. See "Turkey's Wall of Shame", Al-Monitor, 6 November 2013; and Daren Butler, "Kurds Protest Against Wall Along Turkey's Border With Syria", Reuters, 7 November 2013.
[93] During negotiations with Turkey, the PYD demanded opening the Turkish side of the border to allow humanitarian aid into Darbassiyeh, Qamishli and Afrin. Turkey went part way by intermittently opening the border gate into Darbassiyeh and allowing the pro-PYD Kurdish Red Crescent to send humanitarian aid. A Turkish official said, "Turkey wants to weaken the PYD-regime alliance without empowering the movement or recognising it diplomatically; with provincial elections [coming in March], the government needs to be careful about [all] its moves toward the PKK and its affiliated branches". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 7 December, 2013.
[94] Salih Muslim called the meetings a success, "proof" the international community had no option but to accept PYD legitimacy: "We began talking to Turkish officials in March 2013. Everybody is changing their policy towards the PYD and recognising its rule in Syria, including Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 8 August 2013. Mohammed Racho, PYD representative in Iraqi Kurdistan, was more cautious on Turkey's policy shift: "Turkey always has pursued a policy of marginalisation [toward PKK-affiliated organisations]. In August 2012, they came to Erbil and [Foreign Minister] Davutoglu did not want to sit with us. Now, they meet with us but only through their intelligence services". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 1 November 2013.
[95] Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish foreign affairs official, Istanbul, 2 October 2013.
[96] On 9 October 2013, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu received a KNC delegation that included pro-Barzani Syrian Kurds. During the same days, Turkish intelligence officers met with the PYD's co-chair, Salih Muslim. Upon his return, Abdul Hakim Bashar, a delegation member, said, "Turkey is dividing the Kurds. Turkish officials are dealing with us, but in parallel their intelligence agency is negotiating with the PYD". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 October 2013.
[97] For background on KNC relations with Syria's non-Kurdish opposition, see Crisis Group Report, *A Struggle Within a Struggle*, op. cit., pp. 38-39; and Middle East Report N°146, *Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition*, 17 October 2013.
[98] Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Kurds Feel Left Out From Geneva II", Al-Monitor, 18 January 2014.

and tying them to a pro-regime axis.[99] This entailed nurturing a Kurdish partner both willing to coordinate with the regime and able to counterbalance the Turkey-KDP-Barzani alliance. A member of Komala, a KRG-based Iranian Kurdish party, said, "Iran uses the Kurds as a regional card. Domestically, it continues to execute them. KDP-PKK competition was a golden opportunity for Iran to bring Kurds to the Syrian regime's side, thereby boosting Damascus's position and augmenting Tehran's power in the region".[100]

Iran approached the PKK at a time when the group was sandwiched between Turkey and Barzani's KDP. As a first step, in September 2011, Tehran announced a ceasefire with the PKK's Iranian wing, the PJAK;[101] it also hinted at a rapprochement with the Qandil-based PKK leadership and at eventually facilitating the movement's return to northern Syria.[102] In late 2012, Turkey launched a peace process with the PKK, partly in the hope of prying it away from Iran, but the lack of progress soon left the PKK with no alternative to Iranian support.[103] In parallel, the movement's increasing influence in Syria deepened divisions in the country between its supporters and Barzani's, isolating the PYD while making it more dependent on Tehran.

As a result of Iran's strategy, divisions among Iraqi Kurds about how to deal with Syria grew during this period as well. Iran took advantage of rifts within Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), weakened by its leader's poor health and, after the KRG's 2013 parliamentary elections, by its poor performance, to empower the party's more pro-Iranian – and pro-PKK – branch. This was at the expense of the branch closer to Turkey and Barzani's KDP, led by the prominent PUK leader Barham Salih.[104] The shift affected Syria's Kurds, because it caused the PUK's Syrian sister,

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[99] Initially the regime sought to manage the uprising in Kurdish areas less violently and more politically than elsewhere. It saw Iran's leverage over the PKK as an element of this strategy. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°108, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011.

[100] Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 5 December 2013. See "Iran Must Halt the Execution of Kurds", Amnesty International, 20 September 2013.

[101] PJAK, founded in 2004, follows PKK leadership and ideology but defines its priority as fighting the Iranian regime.

[102] Already in August 2011, then PKK leader Murat Karayilan said the movement withdrew PJAK fighters from Iran's borders in the Qandil Mountains and called on Tehran to end hostilities. The Iran-PKK rapprochement did not produce improvement in Iran-PJAK relations. The ceasefire was breached several times, and in October 2013, Iran executed a senior PJAK member, Habibollah Golpapipour. "PJAK Warns Iran of Retribution for Leader's Execution", *Rudaw*, 27 October 2013. Some viewed the August 2013 change of PKK leadership from Murat Karayilan to the more militant Cemil Bayık as strengthening the movement's radical current, ready to compromise on advancing the Kurdish cause in Iran for the sake of consolidating the PKK in Rojava. Crisis Group interview, Kurdish Iranian analyst, Beirut, 30 October 2013.

[103] A PKK member, describing the relationship with Iran as tactical, said: "We are with those who do us no harm. Turkey is harming us, Iran less so. As the peace process in Turkey is on hold, we need to be creative in finding new ways to resist and carry on our project. This is why we are allied with Iran". Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 2 November 2013.

[104] In January 2014, Iran launched a mediation effort, in cooperation with top PUK officials, to help form a KRG government, an initiative perceived as evidence of its growing influence over the PUK. A KDP official commented: "Iran has two feet inside Iraq; one is within the government in Baghdad, the other inside the PUK in Suleimaniya". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 15 February 2014. Ibrahim Zeyouni, secretary general of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, elaborated: "The situation within the PUK has a critical impact on the Kurdish regional balance of power in general. Its pro-Iranian branch, led by Mulla Bakhtiar, is strong enough to paralyse the party and undermine the

Abdulhamid Darwish's Progressive Party, to shift its support from Barzani toward the PYD.[105]

The result of all these regional developments is that the fortunes of Syria's strongest Kurdish force, the PYD, have been tied to the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus axis. Dependent on its cooperation with the Syrian regime and on Iraq for access, the PYD has had little choice but to adjust to the regime's resilience and shun participation in Syria's main opposition body.[106]

B.   *Seeking a Seat at the Table*

The PYD's lack of international legitimacy – a by-product of its association with the PKK, deemed a terrorist organisation by the U.S. and most European countries – is its Achilles heel.[107] The decision to join with pro-Barzani parties in the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), together with the PKK's peace talks with Turkey, seemed to open the way to legitimacy.[108] But the chance did not last long. In 2013, the SKC ceased to function as a framework for intra-Kurdish cooperation and, partly due to PYD dominance, never established itself as the representative of Syria's Kurds to the non-Kurdish opposition or the international community. Progress in the PKK-Ankara talks has been limited; Turkey still designates the movement as terrorist, and Western governments follow its lead.

Since the uprising began, the PYD has worked to improve its international image, investing heavily in public relations, renewing its website in English, Arabic and Kurdish[109] and broadcasting three TV channels focusing on Rojava activities and achievements.[110] Denied Washington access, it sought to break its isolation through a Brussels lobby.[111] A Kurdish activist there with PYD ties, said:

> The international community does not accept the PYD's role in the struggle in Syria. Many do not understand our goals and objectives. Now that we are in Brussels, we want to explain them. People are used to talking with Barzani's KDP, but they need to understand the KDP is strong in Iraq and not in Syria. The international community needs to change its policy and accept the PYD.[112]

second current, which, led by Barham Salih, is keen to retain a strategic relationship with the KDP". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 October 2013.

[105] In November, Abdulhamid Darwish's Progressive Party confirmed it had sent forces to fight beside YPG in Ras al-Ayn. It also backed PYD's decision to bar KDP-trained peshmerga from Syria, even as it kept its KNC seat. Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 3 November 2013.

[106] The PYD has toned down its criticism of the regime, defined Islamist armed groups as the greatest threat and denounced the Syrian opposition's reluctance to recognise Kurdish rights. See "Syria Kurdish Leader: Solution Must Include Assad", Al-Monitor, 29 October 2013.

[107] At Turkey's urging, the U.S. added the PKK to its foreign terrorist organisation list in 1997; the EU added it to its own list in 2002. www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm.

[108] See David Philips, "Remove the PKK from the Terror List", Huffington Post, 5 May 2013.

[109] See PYD official website explaining the party's vision and providing updates on its activities in "western Kurdistan" at pydinfo.com/about-the-pyd.

[110] The channels are Ronahi, Newroz and Gksat TV.

[111] The PYD often relied on the Brussels-based Kurdish Institute – a centre promoting Kurdish culture and providing informal political education – to arrange conferences attended by European officials. On 22 November, the institute organised a conference at the European Parliament to discuss the future of Kurdish Syria; it was attended by PYD co-chair Salih Muslim, a Belgian senator and the French former minister, Bernard Kouchner. kurdishinstitute.be.

[112] Crisis Group telephone interview, Brussels-based Kurdish activist, 18 October 2013.

Nevertheless, the PYD's apparent alignment with the regime has done much to tarnish its reputation and has cost it significant credibility in the eyes of both the non-Kurdish opposition and international community.

The KNC's participation in the National Coalition as the official Kurdish opposition further isolated the PYD and challenged its overall aspirations. In doing so, the KNC highlighted the distinction between itself, which it portrayed as the true opposition body representing Syrian Kurds in the Geneva II talks, and the PYD.[113] Unsurprisingly, the PYD dismissed the KNC-National Coalition agreement as rushed and inconvenient for Kurds. Mohammed Rasho, a PYD member, said:

> They accuse us of talking to the regime. That's right, but they are going to attend Geneva II and negotiate with the regime. So, what is the difference? Who isn't negotiating with the regime? Who is fighting the regime directly? Why should we talk to the National Coalition if they do not recognise Kurdish rights?[114]

In the run-up to the Geneva II talks, the KNC and PYD met in Erbil to discuss either attending separately, the former as a member of the Syrian National Coalition, the latter as part of the Damascus-based opposition's National Coordination Body, or forging a united Kurdish body. But unity would have entailed difficult steps: for the PYD, distancing itself from the regime; for the KNC, rescinding its rapprochement with the National Coalition. Perhaps more important, it would have required a degree of mutual trust that is sorely lacking.

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[113] Faleh Mustafa, a KDP member in charge of KRG foreign relations, said, "we [KDP] opened the doors of the international community to them, preparing their trips in the region and abroad. We thought we could work together, but we cannot continue to be on their side. They are ruining the Kurdish cause and sowing division. Because of them, Syrian Kurds risk going down in history as regime allies". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 31 October 2013.
[114] Crisis Group interview, Suleimaniya, 4 November 2013. A KDP official commented: "Masoud Barzani told the PKK that if they want to deal with the regime, we don't have anything against it, as long as the Kurdish cause benefits. We sat with Saddam in the 90s. But they [PYD/PKK] are not benefiting from the regime; only the regime is benefiting from them". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 15 February 2014.

V.   **Conclusion**

"Rojava exists. It is clear as the sun", said a PYD official just days after the Cezire government was proclaimed.[115] Many Kurds would like to see it as a gathering reality: for Syrian Kurds the incipient fulfilment of their longstanding desire to secure recognition of political, national and cultural rights, for the PKK the realisation of Öcalan's ideology. The PYD encourages and invests in such emotional conceptions of its project.

But the project is suspended between chimera and hope. It emerged out of the regime's retreat from Kurdish areas and pragmatic choices the PYD has made and is making with Damascus. After the regime's retreat, the proliferation of jihadi groups among the opposition ranks sparked a need among locals for safety, organisation and services. The PYD responded, filling the security void with its forces, proclaiming an administration and relying on government services Damascus still provides to keep it functioning. The PYD did not liberate Kurdish areas of Syria: it moved in where the regime receded; most often, it took over the latter's governance structures and simply relabelled them, rather than generating its own unique model as it claims. Fringe Arab, Syriac and Assyrian leaders are participating, even if they do not adhere to its ideology, as a way to ensure security and access to services for their communities.

Rojava is thus more shell than rising sun, an instrument that enables the regime to control Kurdish areas. Established in isolation from the society it means to govern, it is overburdened by an ideological foundation with which most Syrian Kurds and non-Kurds scarcely identify. Its political architecture enjoys only narrow buy-in beyond the PYD affiliates and co-opted personalities, and international recognition is not on the horizon. More than three years after the Syrian uprising erupted, the movement's popular legitimacy still seems largely a function of the threat that gave rise to it. Regime presence in the north east seems to be growing at least as fast as Rojava's. A resident from Qamishli said:

> Since the announcement of the Cezire government, we have not seen many changes in Qamishli. This announcement was made for the media. Instead, over the past month, the regime has become more and more conspicuous, in some areas controlling checkpoints and even managing traffic.[116]

The regime aims to compel people to take refuge in their sectarian and communitarian identities; to split each community into competing branches, dividing those who support it from those who oppose it; and to empower its supporters by charging them with providing government services from areas in which it remains present. If Syria's Kurdish areas want to challenge this strategy, they need a project, whether called Rojava or something else, that can unite the region's varied elements. This would require the PYD, other Kurdish parties and representatives of minorities living alongside the Kurds to change their political approaches radically. For the PYD, it would mean moving away from sole reliance on the regime and shaping, together

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[115] Crisis Group interview, PYD member, Erbil, 14 February 2014.
[116] Crisis Group interview, 21 February 2014. A Qamishli teacher recounted an anecdote pointing in the same direction: "The regime has the last word in decision making in Rojava. A year ago, the PYD wished to introduce Kurdish in the school curriculum and send Kurdish teachers in. Damascus's education directorate opposed the idea, threatened to block salaries of all teachers and eventually imposed its will: Kurdish was not included .... Last month, the directorate came to check the program we teach". Crisis Group interview, 3 April 2014.

with all peoples of northern Syria, a common strategy toward Damascus as well as the minority communities, including adherence to certain principles:

❑ refraining from using military might to impose PKK ideology and institutional structures on Syrian Kurds and non-Kurds;

❑ broadening its support base by appealing to realistic expectations, not simply fears of jihadis and old-fashioned, Kurdish national dreams;

❑ seeking normalisation with its non-Kurdish environment by reaching out to minority factions not allied with Damascus and to the more pragmatic strands of the Syrian opposition, without which the PYD will remain hostage to a repressive regime that at some point likely will turn on it;

❑ moving away from exclusive reliance on the regime by reaching out also to other Kurdish as well as non-Kurdish factions to diversify access to resources (eg, by finding ways to open borders to humanitarian aid, services and cash);

❑ drafting, together with other Kurdish and non-Kurdish factions, a strategy to replace the regime as service provider, including decentralising service provision from Qamishli and Hassakah to hinterland areas where regime security agencies are not present; and

❑ seeking, as intra-Kurdish tensions are reduced and ties with other communities are reinforced at local level, a more balanced relationship with competing foreign powers to diminish their ability to take advantage of communal tensions to push their own agenda.

These steps would also require that other Kurdish parties, Syrian opposition factions and Turkey reverse their non-engagement policy with the PYD and work constructively with it to find practical solutions.

There probably will come a day when Kurds, like others in Syria, will need to make hard compromises with a successor power structure to define and enshrine a new political order. But that day is far off. Today, the tasks before Syria's Kurds are more basic: overcoming internal divisions, clarifying political demands and consolidating local governance. These might be less inspiring, but they are, if anything, no less vital.

Erbil/Brussels, 8 May 2014

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Appendix A: Map of Syria

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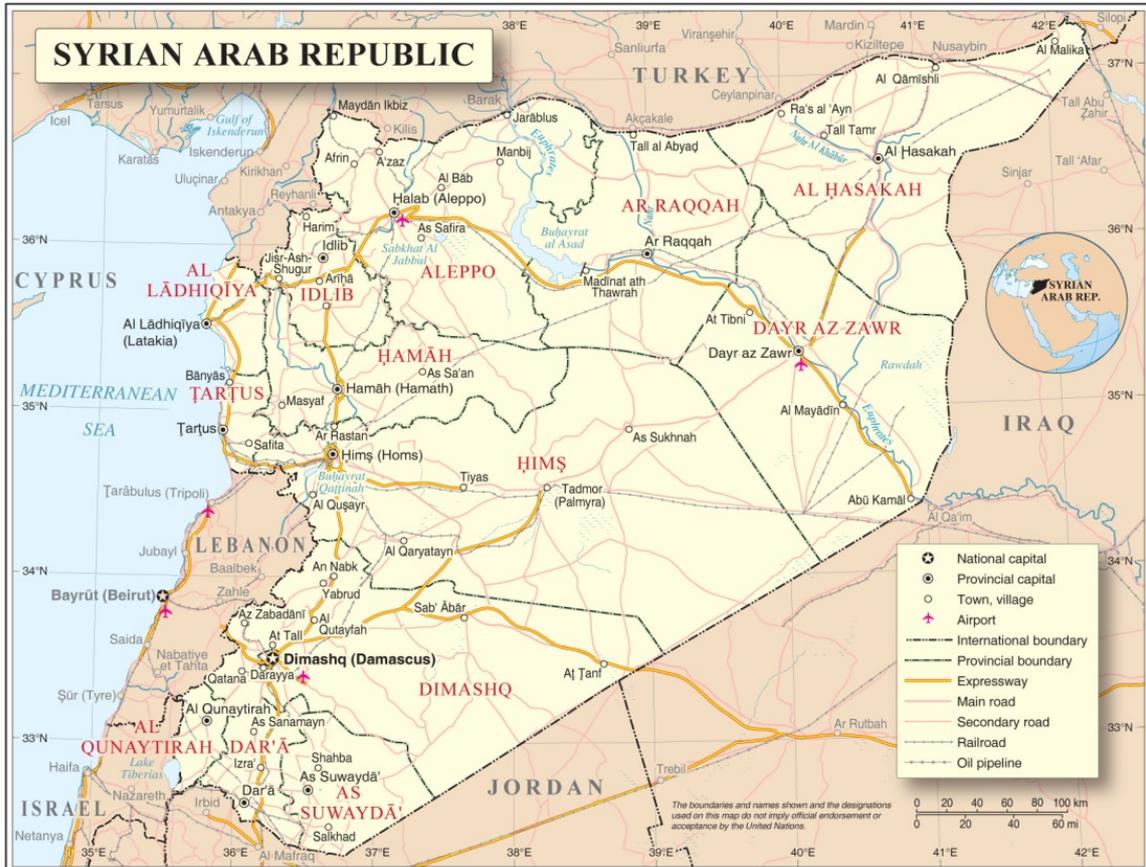
Appendix B: Map of PYD Presence in Syria

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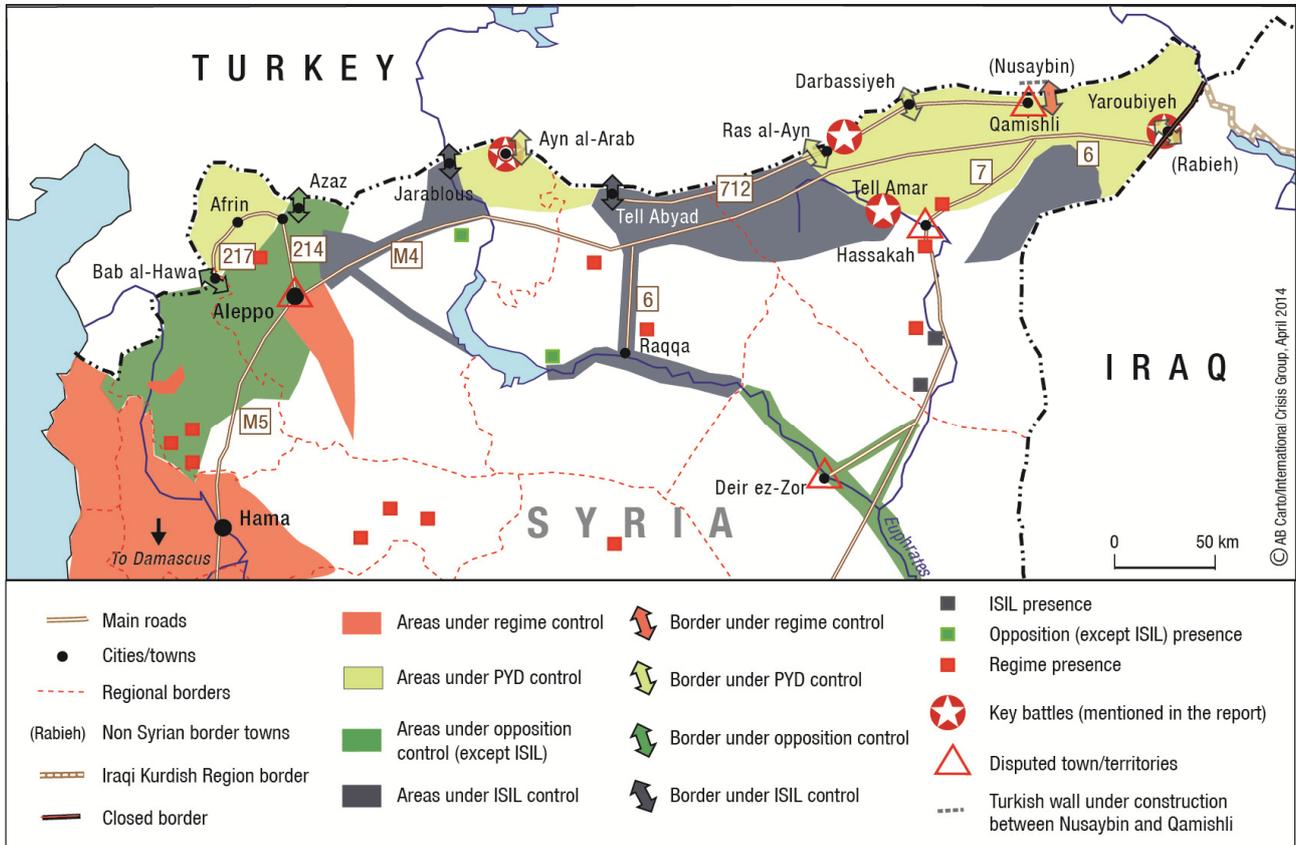
Appendix C: Glossary

BDP – Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (Peace and Democracy Party): a Kurdish political party in Turkey represented in parliament.

ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

KCK – Koma Ciwakên Kürdistan (Union of Communities in Kurdistan): an umbrella organisation created by the PKK in 2005-2007 for its affiliates in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the diaspora. The PYD is formally a member.

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan): one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, founded in 1946 and headed by Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdish region.

KDSP – Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party: Iraqi affiliate of the PKK.

KNC – Kurdistan National Council: founded in Erbil in October 2011 under the patronage of Masoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdish region, it comprises sixteen Syrian Kurdish political factions not aligned with the PYD. The most influential parties are direct sister parties of Talabani's PUK and Barzani's KDP in Iraq.

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government (Hikû-metî Herêmî Kurdistan): the official governing body of the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq. Its president is Masoud Barzani; its two largest parties – the KDP and PUK – have ruled since the KRG's inception in May 1992.

NCB – National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, a left-leaning opposition grouping tolerated by Damascus.

PDSK – Partiya Demokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria): Syrian sister party of Masoud Barzani's KDP in Iraq, headed by Abdulhakim Bashar.

PJAK – Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Party of Free Life for Kurdistan): PKK/KCK sister party founded in 2004 and focused on Iran.

PKK – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party): Kurdish party in Turkey co-founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan. It started an armed insurgency there in 1984 and current-ly maintains around 3,500-5,000 insurgents based in the Qandil mountain range of northern Iraq, as well as in Turkey. The PKK is consid-ered a terrorist and drug-smuggling organisation by Turkey, the EU, the U.S. and a number of other countries.

PUK – Yeketî Niştîmanî Kurdistan (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan): founded in 1975, one of the main Kurdish parties in Iraq, headed by Jalal Talabani, the president of Iraq since 2005.

PYD – Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party): the Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK/KCK, founded in 2003.

SKC – Supreme Kurdish Committee: transition-al governing body comprising the PYD and KNC, based on the power-sharing "Erbil Decla-ration" signed by the two parties under the tute-lage of Masoud Barzani on 11 July 2012.

SUP – Syriac Union Party (Hezb al-Ittihad al-Ashuryani fi Surya).

TEV DEM – Rojava Democratic Society Move-ment.

YPG – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defence Corps): the PYD's armed wing in Syria, established in 2012 and deriving from the PKK. It is the dominant armed Kurdish force in Syria.

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Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Mark Malloch-Brown, and former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices or representation in 26 locations: Baghdad/Suleimaniya, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Bishkek, Bogotá, Brussels, Cairo, Dakar, Dubai, Gaza City, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, London, Mexico City, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Seoul, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, Washington DC. Crisis Group currently covers some 70 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Strait, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, North Caucasus, Serbia and Turkey; in the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Western Sahara and Yemen; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela.

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Appendix E: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2011

Israel/Palestine

Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?, Middle East Briefing N°30, 24 March 2011 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).

Radical Islam in Gaza, Middle East/North Africa Report N°104, 29 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change …, Middle East Report N°110, 20 July 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Curb Your Enthusiasm: Israel and Palestine after the UN, Middle East Report N°112, 12 September 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Middle East Report N°119, 14 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process, Middle East Report N°122, 7 May 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East, Middle East Report N°133, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Extreme Makeover? (I): Israel's Politics of Land and Faith in East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°134, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Extreme Makeover? (II): The Withering of Arab Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°135, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Buying Time? Money, Guns and Politics in the West Bank, Middle East Report N°142, 29 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Leap of Faith: Israel's National Religious and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Middle East Report N°147, 21 November 2013 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

The Next Round in Gaza, Middle East Report N°149, 25 March 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Egypt/Syria/Lebanon

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?, Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, 24 February 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics, Middle East Briefing N°31, 24 November 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution, Middle East Report N°108, 6 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide, Middle East Report N°109, 13 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

Syria's Phase of Radicalisation, Middle East Briefing N°33, 10 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Syria's Mutating Conflict, Middle East Report N°128, 1 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, Middle East Report N°131, 12 October 2012 (also available in Arabic).

A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict, Middle East Report N°132, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle, Middle East Report N°136, 22 January 2013 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon, Middle East Report N°141, 13 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Syria's Metastasising Conflicts, Middle East Report N°143, 27 June 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Marching in Circles: Egypt's Dangerous Second Transition, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°35, 7 August 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition, Middle East Report N°146, 17 October 2013 (also available in Arabic).

North Africa

Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way, Middle East/North Africa Report N°106, 28 April 2011 (also available in French).

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya, Middle East/North Africa Report N°107, 6 June 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges after Qadhafi, Middle East/North Africa Report

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N°115, 14 December 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Tunisia: Combatting Impunity, Restoring Security, Middle East/North Africa Report N°123, 9 May 2012 (only available in French).

Tunisia: Confronting Social and Economic Challenges, Middle East/North Africa Report N°124, 6 June 2012 (only available in French).

Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts, Middle East/North Africa Report N°130, 14 September 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge, Middle East/North Africa Report N°137, 13 February 2013 (also available in French and Arabic).

Trial by Error: Justice in Post-Qadhafi Libya, Middle East/North Africa Report N°140, 17 April 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Tunisia's Borders: Jihadism and Contraband, Middle East/North Africa Report N°148, 28 November 2013 (also available in Arabic and French).

Iraq/Iran/Gulf

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen between Reform and Revolution, Middle East Report N°102, 10 March 2011(also available in Arabic).

Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears, Middle East Report N°103, 28 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt, Middle East Report N°105, 4 April 2011(also available in Arabic).

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII): Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform, Middle East Report N°111, 28 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Failing Oversight: Iraq's Unchecked Government, Middle East Report N°113, 26 September 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question, Middle East Report N°114, 20 October 2011 (also available in Arabic).

In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey, Middle East Report N°116, 23 February 2012 (also available in Arabic and Turkish).

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IX): Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan, Middle East Report N°118, 12 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit, Middle East Report N°120, 19 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

The P5+1, Iran and the Perils of Nuclear Brinkmanship, Middle East Briefing N°34, 15 June 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition, Middle East Report N°125, 3 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Déjà Vu All Over Again: Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis, Middle East Report N°126, 30 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of Al-Iraqiya, Middle East Report N°127, 31 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions, Middle East Report N°138, 25 February 2013 (also available in Farsi).

Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?, Middle East Report N°139, 4 April 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Great Expectations: Iran's New President and the Nuclear Talks, Middle East Briefing N°36, 13 August 2013 (also available in Farsi).

Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State, Middle East Report N°144, 14 August 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown, Middle East Report N°145, 25 September 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain, Middle East Report N°150, 28 April 2014.

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Appendix F: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

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