



## Syria Paper

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### **Political Geography of the Kurdish Issue and Its Relationship with the Syrian National Revolution**

**Baker Sidqi<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Introduction: A crisis of confidence**

The Syrian revolution that erupted in March 2011 revealed a major crisis of confidence among different social elements in Syria: between Christians and Muslims; between Sunni Muslims and other sects, primarily the Alawite and Druze communities, and between Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen. However, while we purposefully omitted to mention Chechens and Ismailis, since their crisis of confidence was not fully revealed by the revolution, we counted the Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian and Armenian communities as part of the Christian community, in general. These distinctions fall outside the scope of this paper. They are mentioned here only to set the wider national context in which the Arab-Kurdish crisis of confidence evolves.

Since the formation of the Syrian opposition coalition in fall 2011, there have been regular meetings between the coalition and representatives of the Kurds. On three or four different occasions, the Kurdish delegation withdrew from the talks. The meetings were convened for the express purpose of unifying various opposition groups under one umbrella and forming a national framework to represent the revolution as a counterpoint to the regime. Why did this happen, and who bears the responsibility for these withdrawals? Is it a matter of poor organisation, a struggle over representation quotas in the above frameworks, or are there other reasons whose roots extend deep in Syrian society and history? A recent study entitled “The Issue of Syria’s Kurds” was written by a group of researchers and published by the Qatar-based Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). Most surprising in this study is the authors’ efforts to arrive at a certain conclusion, namely that Syria’s Kurds are not actually from Syria, but hail originally from Turkey. This has been a widespread notion within the Syrian regime, among a considerable section of the opposition and in Arab public opinion, at least until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, with further developments thereafter.

The main danger behind this notion is that it reinforces the lack of trust between Syria’s Arab and Kurdish elements. We have witnessed how many Kurds can become very angry when they hear ideas that deny their Syrian national identity, and provide a theoretical justification for the crime that was the extraordinary census of 1962. This census led to thousands of Kurds in al-Jazira

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<sup>1</sup> Syrian writer



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Governorate (encompassing much of today's al-Hasakah Governorate) being stripped of their Syrian nationality, a unique case in the annals of world history and a time bomb that was ready to explode at any moment. It is indeed strange to deny the Kurds their Syrian identity then ask them to curb their separatist tendencies. However, what remains unsaid is even more ominous. It suggests that Kurds are only guests in the land and should behave accordingly! The ultimate aim seems to be to separate the land from its inhabitants, creating an Arab land while Kurds are encouraged to go build their state elsewhere.

With these hidden meanings in mind, there can be neither talk about national partnership, nor surprise at the growing separatist tendency among the Kurds.

Yet we see the publication of this ACRPS study, at this particular time, as a reflection of rising fears of the collapse and disintegration of the Syrian state, as a result of the war that the regime is waging against its people, especially since the international community has abandoned the Syrian people to their fate. Just as the study reflects a lack of trust among the Kurds of their Arab partners, it reveals an Arab lack of trust in their Kurdish partners, who are displaying increasing separatist tendencies. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to spring 2004, i.e., to the outbreak of the only Kurdish intifada in Syria's modern history. Before then, the Kurds were, to a certain extent, resigned to their marginalised status within Syria, with their representative political movement atrophied in the shape of ineffective political parties. In the meantime, the Arab side (including the regime, opposition and society) was pursuing a policy of ignoring their Kurdish partners, and thus knew nothing about them, their sensitivities, aspirations or dreams.

It is sad to see Bashar al-Assad's regime, which is on the verge of collapse, show more sensitivity and skill towards the Kurdish issue than the Syrian opposition. The regime took the decision, in March 2011, to restore Syrian nationality to thousands of Kurds who had been stripped of it. Although this did not help neutralise the Kurds or keep them away from the popular revolution, it succeeded in sowing the seeds of division among the Kurds themselves, divisions that are likely to paralyse the Kurds' effective participation in the national revolution.

### Attempts to define the Kurdish issue in Syria

The historic sense of injustice felt by the Kurds in general, including those in Syria, dates back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. At that time, various ethnic groups that were once part of the empire had managed to establish their own states, whether in the Balkans or the Arab region, save for the Kurds whose area had become part of four different countries: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. This injustice may be compared with a similar and equally profound "Arab injustice" with an ideological dimension: the Sykes-Picot Agreement that divided the Arab region into British and French spheres of influence after World War I. Arab nationalist ideology is based on a deep-seated sense of injustice, at the root of which lies the belief that colonialism prevented the establishment of a unified Arab state, and had instead divided the Arab region into several states according to colonial interests.



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However, Kurdish nationalist thought is no less ideological than its Arab counterpart. While there is an acceptable level of socio-cultural contacts between the Kurds of Syria and Iraq and those of Turkey, such contacts are virtually non-existent between the Kurds of Iran and those of Syria. This is due to the physical distance between them and the absence of family and tribal links among Syria and Iran's Kurds. The impact of this disconnection is compounded by weak nationalist sentiments among the majority of Kurds, due to the fact that they have no state or homeland, and therefore no a central hub where socio-cultural interaction could take place among all Kurds. In addition to the major populations of Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, there is also a Kurdish minority in the Republic of Armenia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. This is an understandable situation since there are no Kurdish states (like the Arab states), the mere presence of which would have helped ignite such nationalist sentiments. Statehood, however, is the expression of a political will, rather than a "natural" or spontaneous process.

In the period following the Ottoman Empire's collapse, new elements were added to this "original" historic injustice that deepened the Syrian national divide even further. Chief among these were the above-mentioned extraordinary census and the racist Arab 'security belt' that aimed at establishing an Arab demographic barrier between regions in northern Syria with large Kurdish populations, and the opposing side of the joint borders with Turkey.

The ideas behind these actions were developed in a 1963 booklet by a Syrian intelligence officer, Mohamad Taleb Hilal, outlining a list of recommendations to the authorities regarding what he calls the "danger of Kurdish separatism." The author's recommendations were based on a racist Arabist ideology that sees ethno-cultural diversity as a threat to the Arab character of the state. His proposals had two main objectives: the first was to reduce the size of the growing Kurdish population by classifying a large number of those living in al Jazira Governorate as originally Turkish and denying them Syrian nationality. This is a short sighted policy that does not take into account how the country would get rid of these immigrants, if they are so classified. Sending them back to Turkey, their supposed homeland, requires prior agreement with that country, which is unlikely to happen. It ultimately means that those who were denied their nationality (and their equally denied progeny) will become a burden on the state and a political time bomb, which actually exploded in 2004.

The second objective was to establish an Arab demographic barrier on the border between Syria and Turkey, to put an end to the separatist demands that use geographic and demographic cross-border contiguity as a basis. To this end, Arab tribes whose lands were submerged by the waters of the Euphrates River were transported to Kurdish-inhabited areas along the border between 1973 and 1976. Not only did this move create areas of friction that augured badly for the future, they went well beyond the movement of habitations and encroached on agricultural lands. Thus, because most of al-Jazira's land was common property benefitting the governorate's population as a whole, without the need for land deeds, transporting the "Ghamr Arabs" to the area meant that ownership of some of these lands shifted to the new inhabitants. The Kurds felt cheated because they considered these commonly-owned lands to be their own, which were taken away from them and given to the Arabs based on pure ethnic discrimination. In post-Assad Syria, a legal solution



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will need to be found for such land issues, based on a consensus agreement between the ruling authority and Kurdish representatives in parliament and the government.

The situation of the Kurds in Syria is different from that of their brethren in other countries, both in terms of geography and national integration, including their national self-awareness, which changes in tandem with unfolding events. Thus, despite the above-mentioned denial of nationality and the Arab demographic barrier project, the Kurdish presence in Syria was never the object of systematic denial, as it was in Ataturk's republic. Neither did the central authority launch large-scale military campaigns against them, like those launched against their brethren in northern Iraq. There always was a significant degree of national integration, throughout Syria's modern history, embodied by the involvement of Damascus, Hama and Aleppo's Kurds in the social and economic lives of their cities. Some Kurds even managed to reach important positions of political authority during the period of coup d'états (i.e., under Husni al-Za'eem in 1949 and Adeeb al-Shishakli in 1951). Some Kurds living in traditionally Kurdish areas believe that the Kurds in the big cities had become too Arabised during this period, particularly those who live in big cities like Damascus, Hama and Aleppo, some of whom have indeed become highly Arabised. This is why the traditional Kurdish political movement, particularly the one based in al-Jazira, barely recognises the Kurdish credentials of Damascus and Hama Kurds. The Arabisation of the Kurds in these cities is an outcome of the inclusive and all-embracing policies that aimed at involving these groups of Kurds in the country's political, social, economic and cultural life. Had this policy been applied in all the country's Kurdish areas, it would have helped the Kurdish population become firmly and nationally integrated. However, the policies of alienation and doubt pursued by successive central governments have had the opposite result; i.e. they promoted the Kurdish identity at the expense of the Syrian national one.

However, the discussion above should not lead us to the conclusion that the Kurds have to relinquish their language and culture as a precondition to being integrated nationally. We could presuppose the contrary, at least under the present circumstances: the more the Kurds' particular socio-cultural characteristics are recognised (their language included), the more their national integration becomes possible, provided the national emphasis is not on the Arab identity of Syria, but on recognising the country's religious, ethnic and sectarian diversity.

The rise of the Arab nationalist current in Syria, embodied by the Baath Party since the 1950s, was mirrored by the parallel rise of a Kurdish nationalist tendency. The first Kurdish political party was founded in 1957, one year after the tripartite attack of Britain, France and Israel on Egypt, which was a watershed event in the spread of Nasserism throughout the Arab world. In the early 1960s, the arrival of the Baath Party to power in Syria and Iraq, two countries with large Kurdish populations, put an end to the short romantic era of the Kurds' relative integration and participation, an era reminiscent of the short romantic history of Syria's liberal period. However, ever since Syria's union with Egypt in 1958, and especially after the Baathist coup d'état of 1963, the Kurds have felt alienated, as it appeared that their country was not their own but belonged to others, namely the Arabs. To a large extent, this is akin to the widespread sentiments among Syria's Christians under the Assad regime, who feel that as "people of the book" they are rather like



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guests in a country that is not their own. The Christians' position vis-à-vis the regime (including Armenian Christians) is based on a simple equation. On the one hand, because they have feared the rise of Islamist fundamentalism since the late 1970s, they saw the ruling minority regime as the lesser of two evils and dictatorship as the right antidote to keep fundamentalism at bay. On the other hand, because the Christians are a fast dwindling minority and therefore cannot aspire to be in power, they abandoned all political ambition in favour of an active role in the economy. They are similar in this to the Sunni bourgeoisie of Damascus and Aleppo who reached an understanding with the regime on a formula, according to which they would give up politics in favour of a partnership with the regime's security, military and civilian centres of power.

These feelings of alienation among Syria's Kurds will likely compel them to reach out to their fellow Kurds in Turkey and Iraq for support, compensating for their relatively small size in Syria. This will raise their self-awareness as a separate nation that has its own dreams and aspirations, for which the national Syrian identity has no room. In fact, the Baath regime never made an effort to develop a Syrian nationalism, and may have destroyed the little that actually existed. The Baath ideology looked upon Syria's "artificial" national borders with contempt since its ultimate aim was an "Arab nationalism" whose territory stretches from the Arabian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean. National integration deteriorated even further under the Assad regime, which did not abandon the Baath Party and its nationalist discourse, but used it as a tool to perpetuate its rule; the regime's other objective was to deepen divisions in society and obliterate any trust among different elements. What is noteworthy is that under the Assad regime, the Kurds felt comfortable living in a dictatorship's shadow because it was "less chauvinistic" towards them than the Nasserite and Baathist eras. In fact, Hafez al-Assad governed from an Orientalist-colonial perspective, whereby he saw unity among his subjects as a threat to his rule. He did his best to destroy the seeds of national unity (divide and rule) and replace it with loyalty to his regime and his person as the only criterion for loyalty to the nation, making any political opposition to his rule tantamount to high treason.

The March 2004 intifada: a seminal moment for Kurdish national awareness

We cannot separate what happened in Syria in 2004 from the major regional event embodied by the American occupation of Iraq that brought down Saddam Hussein and his regime. The atmosphere among the Arabs and Kurds was tense enough to fan the flames of destructive ethnic sedition. Reactions to the unfolding events in Iraq were formed from two opposing perspectives, no less intensely than the current polemic between Bashar al-Assad's supporters and those who rebelled against him.

Arab public opinion was very much against the American invasion and against toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, while Syria's Kurds were happy to see the end of a regime responsible for an ethnic cleansing campaign against Iraqi Kurds, known as "al-Anfal," and for bombing the town of Halabja with chemical weapons. In the eastern region of Syria in particular, where Arabs and Kurds intermingle, there was a strong Baathist current loyal to Saddam Hussein and his regime that



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saw Iraqi Kurdish leaders Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani (and by extension all the Kurds) as traitors, responsible from bringing the American occupation to the region.

This is why the flames of sedition were easily fanned when the supporters of Deir Ezzor's Futuwa football team held up pictures of Saddam Hussein in al-Hasaka's football stadium in March 2004 and shouted slogans accusing the two Iraqi Kurdish leaders of treason. However, when the Kurds in the stadium responded, they were met with a hail of stones. However, instead of dousing the flames of sedition, the regime's local representatives fanned them even further; they instigated a number of Arab tribes against al-Jazira's Kurds and sent security contingents from al-Hasaka to incite the tribes against the Kurds and distribute weapons among them. In al-Hasaka city, Arab tribe members attacked Kurdish-owned shops and crafts centres, destroyed them and stole their contents in full view of the security services, and under their protection.

At the time, the regime opposed the American occupation of Iraq and the local authorities, who had taken the regime's demographic discourse to heart, committed what could be called a serious "translation error" by carrying this discourse to its extreme. The regime's response was to intervene at the highest possible level; Maher al-Assad, the president's brother, decided to manage the crises personally by using two different approaches. While the first was to teach the Kurds a brutal lesson for defying the regime's symbols, burning the dictator's pictures and destroying his father's statues, the second was to mitigate their sense of grievance by implementing a number of superficial measures. These included transferring al-Hasaka's Governor to Tartous and having his brother Bashar give an interview to Al-Jazeera Television in which he highlighted the Kurds' long affiliation with Syria and promised to address the issue of Kurds who had no nationality.

The March intifada brought to light three very important factors; the first was the accumulated tensions among the Kurds that eventually culminated in all-out revolution; the second was the strong sense of Kurdish nationalism that united all Kurds in Syria, from al-Jazira to Aleppo and Damascus; the third factor was the significant impact that events in Iraq have had on the Kurds, especially the creation of a semi-autonomous Kurdish entity in the north, by reviving the old dream of Kurdish nationhood. These factors together laid the ground for a new tendency towards independence among Syria's Kurds, stoked by an Arab lack of interest in the way the intifada was suppressed. The deep impact of this disinterest would become evident in the Kurds' attitude towards the Syrian revolution in 2011.

The Arab opposition groups that emerged in the course of what became known as the Arab Spring (2010-2011) were weak, disjointed and bore old ossified ideas after being repressed for years and left to wallow in prison. This is why they failed to understand the significance of the Kurdish intifada. This elitist opposition, which for years had focussed solely on the political authority, was ignorant of the intricacies of Syrian society and the deep changes taking place within it, especially all that relates to the Kurdish issue. This naturally made it fail the first serious test that came its way, by reacting with suspicion and apprehension to the Kurds' "separatist tendencies." This, coupled with other factors, only helped reinforce this separatist tendency and the feeling among Kurds that "the Arab opposition is more chauvinistic towards the Kurds than Bashar al-Assad is."



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This tendency became the more acute after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution due to the narrow mindedness of most Syrian opposition members who failed to take into account Kurdish sensitivities as various opposition frameworks were being created. This was not the opposition's only failure. Today, two years after the outbreak of the revolution, there is continued failure to respond to the requirements of the national revolution, which is a repeat of its failure to understand the significance of the Kurdish intifada in 2004.

### Kurds expectations of the Syrian revolution

The first Kurdish demonstrations to take place, in the context of the national revolution, happened around ten days after the outbreak of the revolution in Damascus and Dera'a. Hundreds of Kurds took to the streets in the city of Qamishli raising banners in support of the people of Dera'a, Homs and Banias, whose demonstrations had been brutally put down by the regime, leaving several dead and wounded. When the regime announced its intention to reinstate the nationality of those stripped of it by the 1962 census, the youth of 'Amouda went out in a demonstration the following day carrying banners that read, "We do not want nationality, but we want freedom." On the other hand, the youths of 'Amouda, Qamishli and other cities in al-Jazira, as well as the youths Kobani (Ein al-Arab) in the Aleppo countryside, continued to hold demonstrations every Friday.

The political dimension soon gained relevance; in May 2011, a number of Kurdish parties held a meeting in Qamishli, at the end of which they issued a statement delineating their position towards the revolution and the regime. They called for a dialogue between the regime and opposition aimed at reaching an agreement on a series of democratic changes, including the Kurds' aspirations to be recognised in the constitution and granted their cultural rights, as well as redressing the historic injustices done to them. This centrist position was interpreted on the ground by some parties as an attempt to curb the youth demonstrations and prevent their wider participation in the revolution's activities. Their main aim was to prevent these youths from carrying banners calling for the regime's downfall, like protesters in other cities had previously done.

The regime tried from the very beginning to keep the Kurds neutral and away from the revolution; thus, for the first time ever, Syrian television broadcast live celebrations marking the Kurdish festival of Nowruz on March 21, 2011. However, though one could say that the regime had relative success in using the crisis of confidence between the Kurds and Arabs to its advantage, the fact that Kurdish youth participation in protests never waned prompted it to use a more flexible policy, which involved curbing Kurdish demonstrations without using violence. It is at this point that the Democratic Union Party entered the fray (the Kurdish branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK) and its members began to carry weapons openly in the Kurdish areas. At the same time, the more traditional Kurdish parties were preparing for a Kurdish national conference in Syria with the aim of forging a unified position on the national revolution, and a similar position on Kurdish demands within the Syrian national context.

However, several developments unfolded in parallel in summer 2011, and delineated the subsequent course events in the Syrian revolution.



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1. The regime brutally suppressed the demonstrations that reached their peak in Hama, Deir Ezzor and elsewhere. The Free Syrian Army was formed by the first officers and soldiers to secede from the Syrian Army, and initial reactions were heard from the Gulf, the United States, a number of European countries and Turkey, the latter having declared the end of the regime's legitimacy and called on Assad to resign.
2. In early autumn, the long preparations were finally ready for the creation of a "Syrian National Council" intended to represent the main opposition framework for actively working to bring down the regime.
3. The National Kurdish Conference was held almost a month after the establishment of the Syrian National Council, and decided to turn itself into the "Kurdish National Council" and link any cooperation with the national opposition to the latter's response to Kurdish demands.
4. The Democratic Union Party, which had refused to join the Kurdish National Council, elected what it called the "West Kurdistan People's Council" as a rival to the Kurdish National Council. At the same time, the Party's president, Saleh Musallam, retained his position as vice-president of the "National Coordination Committee for the Opposition Forces," under the leadership of President Hassan Abdul-Azim.

In the following months, supporters of Abdallah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, entrenched their power in Kurdish areas of Syria and suppressed any political activities against the regime, to such an extent that some call them the Kurdish shabbiha (pro-regime militias). Many clashes also took place between armed individuals from the "Popular Protection Units" of the Democratic Union Party and Kurdish parties under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council.

In summer 2012, the regime pulled out of northern areas with majority Kurdish population after it lost control of over half of Aleppo, most of Idlib, the countryside of Deir Ezzor and most of its border posts with Turkey, leaving the Kurdish areas under the armed control of the Democratic Union Party. Subsequent events on the ground indicate that a deal had been struck between the regime and the Kurdistan Workers Party PKK, since spring 2011, and there was talk about high-ranking security officials from the Syrian regime visiting the headquarters of the PKK in Jabal Qandil, in northern Iraq, expressly for that purpose. It is also possible that Iran's leaders are also part of the deal, since the Iranian branch of the PKK had ceased its military operations (which were few anyway) against Iranian forces just as the Turkish branch was escalating its own against Turkish forces.

### The Kurdish factor in regional equilibriums

When the rebels took up arms and influential regional forces became involved in the struggle, the Syrian revolution provided the Kurds with open-ended opportunities that they had never dreamt about in the entire history of the Syrian state. The Kurds are divided among three neighbouring countries which all closely connected to the events in Syria. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government in Turkey turned from being a strong friend of the Syrian regime to being a major supporter of the opposition. At the opposite end, the PKK and its Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party, threw



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its support behind the Assad regime. This came after thirteen years of enmity which had begun with the Syrian regime's 1998 expulsion of Öcalan upon a warning from Turkey. Moreover, the influence of Turkey's Islamist government on the Muslim Brotherhood, who managed to impose its control over the Syrian National Council, played a major role in thwarting the Council's efforts to bring Kurdish political groups under its wing.

Gradually, two regional axes to the Syrian conflict have emerged: the first comprises Iran, the Assad regime, Iraq (the Maliki Government and Shia forces) and the Lebanese Hezbollah; the second comprises the Syrian revolution, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Lebanese March 14 Alliance. On the international level, Russia and China stood behind the first axis and supported the regime, while the United States, France and Britain supported the opposition.

Syria's Kurds were divided between two different axes: the Democratic Union Party that supports the regime, and the Kurdish National Council close to the opposition. This division is a reflection of the one that exists between the two Kurdish leaders, Masoud Barzani in Iraq and Abdallah Öcalan in Turkey.

A major rapprochement took place between the leadership of the Kurdistan region and the Turkish government, just when the PKK was escalating its operations against the Turkish army in an attempt to confound Turkey's support for the Syrian revolution. In March 2013, Öcalan and Erdoğan embarked on an ambitious peace process aimed at bringing to an end a bloody conflict that has killed more than forty thousand people over three decades. If it succeeds, the process would deal a severe blow to the Damascus-Tehran axis. The start of this process also explains the chemical attack on the Sheikh Maksoud quarter in Aleppo, which is under the control of the Democratic Union Party. The attack took place soon after Öcalan announced his party's plan to give up its weapons in favour of getting involved in Turkey's political life.

In Iraq, tensions grew between the pro-Iranian government of Nuri al-Maliki on the one hand, and Iraqi Sunni forces and the Kurdistan Regional Government of northern Iraq, on the other, coinciding with a rapprochement between the Kurds and Sunnis of Iraq and Turkey.

Broadly speaking, therefore, the Kurdish factor (in Iraq, Turkey and Syria) could turn all equilibriums linked to Syria's internal conflict on their head, as well as all regional and international equilibriums that either revolve around Syria or are unfolding on its soil.

It is clear that the ceiling of Kurdish general demands has been raised significantly as a result of the Syrian revolution and the ensuing regional conflict. In Turkey, the government was recently forced to hold direct talks with the PKK, and with its imprisoned leader in person, and the Kurds made a number of significant gains on several issues under discussion by the two parties. In Iraq, the Maliki government's subservient attitude to Iranian policies, especially in Syria, gave Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani the opportunity to further strengthen Kurdish regional authority and put it on a path that might lead to its total separation from Baghdad. In Syria, the Kurdish National Council raised the ceiling of its traditional demands to include a federal arrangement, at a time when the Democratic Union Party is behaving as a *fait-accompli* authority in Kurdish areas, and exercising governmental responsibilities independently from Damascus.



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In July 2013, a number of Kurdish websites posted the draft of a constitution for what the Democratic Union Party calls “West Kurdistan” that foresees the establishment of a self-governing authority. A list containing the names of the provisional government’s ministers was leaked, in which the Democratic Union takes for itself the positions of prime minister, deputy prime minister, and the security and interior ministries, while the other ministries are distributed among the leaders of other Kurdish parties and representatives of the Arab and Syriac communities. After a new constitution is adopted, elections would be held and a legitimate regional government formed depending on their outcome. Just before these leaks came to light, it was rumoured that Bashar al-Assad had sent a delegation to meet with the Kurdish parties on his behalf, and relay to them the promise to find “a solution to the Kurdish issue.” This signifies that this entire operation has been instigated by Bashar’s regime, which could mean that he has already shifted to plan B in his confrontation with the Syrian National Revolution. Plan B involves dividing Syria and establishing an Alawite state based on a fait accompli imposed by the Kurdish and Salafist jihadist forces.

A recent announcement by the “Islamist State of Iraq and Greater Syria,” a group linked to al-Qaeda, stated their intention to establish an Islamist state in certain areas of northern Syria. It is within this complex context that the recent battle of Ras el-‘Ein should be analyzed. This battle took place in mid July 2013 between the forces of the Democratic Union Party and armed members of al-Nusra Front and Islamist State of Iraq. The aim of the regime and its regional allies in encouraging the creation of separate Kurdish and Islamist states is to thwart any potential American-Russian agreement on a political solution, thus guaranteeing the regime’s survival while it introduces a few amendments to the regime in partnership with some elements of the opposition. In this case, the Assad regime would have won a major trump card to use as pressure, saying: the Kurds and Islamist have each their own states and the Alawite community is in danger; either Syria is divided down to its basic elements, or you charge me again with unifying the country under my rule.

### Recommendations

We may have already reached the stage, both at the national and Kurdish levels, at which recommendations have become somewhat redundant. History teaches us that at a certain moment in time, society’s responsibilities are overtaken by time if they are not implemented, and that problems that could have been solved in an instant could become intractable the very next instant.

However, if the objective is to preserve Syria’s territorial and demographic unity in the face this serious threat of division, the following recommendations would be in order:

- Arab elements in the Syrian opposition should make a sincere effort to forge a rapprochement with both branches of the Kurdish political movement, even if this requires an initial agreement on a form of self-government in the Kurdish areas. Winning the Kurdish political movement to its side would give the anti-regime revolution added impetus and cut short the Syrian people’s suffering by hastening the regime’s downfall.



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- The Kurdish National Council should put all-embracing national considerations above Kurdish factional ones, and become active in the anti-regime revolution to the fullest extent possible. Only taking an active part in the revolution will ensure that Kurds' demands will be met in the post-Assad period. The Kurds should not wager on presumed international scenarios aimed at dividing Syria; these will create enmities that would be difficult to overcome among people who belong to the same nation.
- The Democratic Union Party should stop behaving as a fait accompli authority and as a dictatorship over the Kurdish people. It should also stop creating conflicts with the Free Syrian Army.