

CHAPTER 7

THE EVE OF THE SYRIAN UPRISING: CRISIS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The picture that has been painted of the Kurdish political movement has so far not placed great emphasis on the relations between the parties and popular opinion. The book has provided a view of the realities of the Kurdish political party movement in Syria under Ba'th Party rule, their role in Kurdish society and their position within the Syrian state. Popular opinion about the parties and their roles, however, and more generally popular national consciousness, are crucial to understanding contemporary Kurdish party politics in Syria. The opinion of the Kurdish public about the parties is a critical factor in their ability to mobilise the Kurdish population and it sheds light on inherent problems of the party system. By all accounts the Kurdish parties' movement was in the midst of a crisis on the eve of the Syrian uprising and the parties had lost much of their former support among the Kurdish population in Syria. Yet, at the same time, Syrian Kurdish national consciousness was said to be at its highest ever level.¹ While, on the face of it, the simultaneous appearance of these two trends is puzzling, further analysis suggests a strong connection between the two.

The crisis in Kurdish party politics grew from two main factors. The first was the withdrawal of support by the Kurdish population. Party members, particularly intellectuals, withdrew from party work in large numbers and the parties did not enjoy the respect and popularity that they once did. Second, the parties disengaged from the Kurdish population. The result, whether intentional or not, was that the parties became increasingly distant from the Kurdish people in both their method and their politics. Public criticism of the parties became louder and the parties failed to react positively.

In effect, the Kurdish party movement had hit a wall and had only limited means of surmounting it.

Criticism of the parties concentrated on a number of factors: factionalism, general weakness of policy and ideology, excessive focus by the parties on external organisations and issues, the domination of personal problems within the leadership, alleged relations with the state and inability to achieve any concessions from the state on Syrian Kurdish questions.² All these issues have been introduced in the preceding chapters, particularly in Chapters 3 and 4 which dealt with the development of Kurdish party politics after 1957 and relations between the parties and the state. It is clear from the examination of the history of the Kurdish party movement in Syria and of their policies and methods, that all these factors have been features of the Kurdish political party movement since soon after its inception in 1957. Two questions arise from this: why is it that these features seem to be inherent in the Kurdish political party movement and why is it only in recent years that the party system has been described as being in crisis? This chapter tries to answer these two questions in turn. It also explains how and why this crisis of the parties has arisen and accounts for the apparent contradiction between the growth of both crisis and consciousness within the Kurdish political movement in Syria and explains the connections between them.

The Inherent Deficiencies in the Kurdish Party Movement

It is clearly not one single factor which has led to the factionalism of Kurdish political parties in Syria or to the fact that the parties are so influenced by internal and personal differences. Nor is it a single factor which led party leaders to develop relations with members of the Syrian security services in spite of its repression of the Kurds and their own illegality. A number of explanatory theories present themselves, all of which have contributed in combination to producing the form of party politics that exists among the Kurds of Syria.

We can start with the fact that the parties have shown a chronic inability and unwillingness to mobilise the population and organise effective social or political action. Their failure partly follows from the illegality imposed on them by the Ba'th regime and from the interference of the state authorities in the parties' internal affairs. Illegality might also account for their tendency to seek protection among their political opponents – in this case the agents of oppression of the Kurds themselves. The illegality of the parties and of the political and social actions organised by them, coupled with its potentially severe consequences, limited the parties' willingness and ability to confront the regime. The political parties have been tolerated by the regime so long as they remain within its 'red lines' and did not form a united

political body or mobilise the Kurdish population *en masse*. These unwritten 'red lines' were in constant flux and the development of sustained or regular popular mobilisation, like those which occurred after March 2004, was followed by crack-downs on party leaders, members and other political and cultural activists, redefining what the parties were able to do or achieve without confrontation or arrest. The rise in public expression of dissent from the Kurdish population and from within the party movement in the decade following the end of the Cold War demonstrated clearly that, in order to exist in their illegal state, the parties had to avoid the very things that Kurdish society expected of them.

Additionally, members of Kurdish society themselves became unwilling to engage in endeavours such as demonstrations when they considered them to be ineffective and dangerous. Besides potential concessions from the state there has been little reward for participation in Kurdish political parties or political actions in Syria, whereas, in Iraqi Kurdistan or Turkey, the political parties rewarded *peshmerga* with a salary, and the PKK guerrillas entered a close social network, gaining respect and honour within a well-funded political party. In Syria, party members have been required to donate a portion of their salaries to the party,³ and party leaders generally finance their own full-time work in the party through monies accruing from land ownership and family wealth.⁴ The only obvious benefits of involvement in politics to the individual have been confined to the leadership which gained prestige within the Kurdish communities. The potential repercussions of involvement in illegal party activities, particularly when the parties are factionalised and unable to command mass support, have been very serious. Added to this, the effectiveness of political action by parties with such a limited capacity for participation is questionable and has provided another reason for parties and individuals to avoid it, creating a downward spiral in both political action and participation.

Illegality can also be used to explain factionalism within the party system and the focus of many parties on external political organisations and issues, such as relations with the Kurdish parties of Iraqi Kurdistan or the courting of the Arab opposition in Syria. The lack of avenues for advancement of the party within the state political system or even direct engagement with the state, has led to an inversion of political focus upon internal issues and on the Kurdish community itself and also to externalising solutions to Syrian Kurdish issues. As a consequence, organisational issues and personal differences within the parties have taken on greater significance than they might otherwise have done and caused factions and blocs to form within and between parties. Lack of incentive to stay within a particular party when problems arise has made the formation of an alternative party an attractive option and factionalism of the party system the result. The Kurdish political

parties in other states, the Arab opposition and even international organisations have acted as networks through which the parties have negotiated their illegality and sought solutions to Kurdish issues in Syria while by-passing the state. The domination of the political parties of other areas of Kurdistan over those of Syria, however, has been tacitly encouraged by the government. Despite the state position towards its own Kurdish population, it allowed the PKK, the KDP and the PUK to operate freely from within Syria.⁵ This is said to have facilitated the involvement of the Kurds of Syria in the affairs of Kurdistan of Iraq and Turkey to the neglect of their own political issues and movement.

The continuation of factionalism over the history of the party movement as well as other internal problems can also be explained by the interference of the Syrian security apparatus in the internal affairs of the parties, not simply by the imposition of restrictions upon them. Although there is little actual proof of state intrigue, the belief is widespread that the *mukhabarat* have infiltrated the party ranks, incited dissent within them, and supported the establishment of new parties or factions.⁶ While this may be a valid cause of factionalism, it has not been possible to prove or disprove it, and even if access to *mukhabarat* personnel in Syria had been possible, considering the nature of the state, it is highly unlikely that this sort of information would be disclosed to foreign researchers.

Illegality and state intrigue do not provide sufficient explanation in themselves for the parties' deficiencies. While providing an explanation for most problems within the party movement, these two factors are external to the Kurdish political parties and imposed on them by the state. Illegality has not prevented political organisations in other states from gaining mass support and leading groups of followers in effective social action, resisting factionalism or concentrating on issues important to their constituencies. Even within the Kurdish political sphere, the examples of the KDP or the PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan or the PKK in Turkey are testimony that illegality does not actually prevent banned political organisation from mobilising wide sectors of the population or confronting oppressors. These parties have prioritised their own struggles above those of other areas of Kurdistan and have strong charismatic nationalist leaders with secure support bases, who have prevented the fragmentation of the political movement. But there are important differences between the Kurdish areas in Syria and those in Iraq or Turkey. This leads to the analysis of the second factor, specific to the Syrian Kurdish environment and society, that helps explain why factionalism, in particular, seems to be inherent within the Kurdish party movement in Syria.

So the second set of factors explaining the parties' deficiencies is the geographic and demographic conditions in Syria. These have had an important impact on the development of Kurdish politics in Syria, particularly with

regard to mobilisation and the failure to develop a united Kurdish movement. Although their tactics differed considerably, both the PKK and the KDP developed disciplined and well trained military wings which used the mountain terrain in the Kurdish regions to their advantage. Acts of revolution, uprising and resistance have been identified with particular leaders and have added to the credentials of those leaders. In comparison, conditions in Syria were not favourable for the pursuit of armed struggle against the state. Indeed, over the years, a few small groups advocating the use of arms in Syria were established by Kurds. But the terrain is unfavourable for such tactics and they did not gain the necessary support to sustain such a movement; those involved were arrested soon after launching their activities and with the leaders' arrests, the organisations ceased to operate.⁷ The Kurdish regions in Syria are smaller and are not as mountainous as those in Iraq, Turkey or Iran and do not form a contiguous geographical area. Consequently, in comparison to Iraq or Turkey, mobilisation of the Kurds in Syria has been more exposed to surveillance by and counter measures from the regime. On the whole, Kurds from Syria joined the KDP *peshmerga* or the PKK rather than develop indigenous armed movements.

Geography, demography and history have also led to differences developing between the Kurdish areas in Syria, and these have had a significant effect on politics. Migration into the Jazira from Turkey in the 1920s concentrated Kurdish political and national activists in this region. Its strategic importance to the Syrian economy and state security made the Jazira the focus of state policies aimed at containing the Kurdish 'threat' and, consequently, the centre of Kurdish political organisation in Syria. Before the beginning of the Kurdish party movement, in all Kurdish areas, both political and cultural groups remained largely local and connected to local individuals, groups or social networks. The organisation of the Kurds in a political party in 1957 was intended to bridge social and physical divides between the areas and to represent and attract members and supporters from all Kurdish areas and all social spheres. While it was successful for some time, expanding the influence of Kurdish political organisation across the Kurdish regions has been problematic. Successive divisions within the party ranks have been influenced by regional and social divisions as well as personal alliances and networks. Loyalties and factions within parties commonly follow existing local social and personal networks, so when a faction breaks away from a party forming its own organisation, the party encounters geographic and demographic obstacles.⁸ Without representatives in other areas and as a result of state controls over telephones, transport networks, printing, publication and distribution of printed matter, many parties have faced problems extending their influence across these regional divisions.

Local relations and minor cultural differences, such as differences in dance and traditional clothes, or in local dialect and accent between the Kurdish areas as well as differences in the strength of tribal relations and levels of development have also led to the appearance of social barriers between the areas. This has presented a further obstacle to the effective political organisation of Kurdish society as people generally congregate around political leaders familiar to their local communities. The parties are strongest in the Jazira region where most party leaders come from, and where tribal relations still have some bearing on social and political networks and relations.

A third explanation for the factionalism of the party system arises from the make-up of the leadership and the nature of Syrian Kurdish society. For the duration of the Kurdish political party movement in Syria, Kurdish society in Syria has involved a complex combination of traditional and modern socio-economic relations, networks, and mores. The Kurdish political movement in Syria began with a leadership consisting of an arrangement of representatives of various social groups with different interests and agendas. Between 1957 and 1958 the leadership of *Partiya Demokrat a Kurd li Sûriye* expanded to include intellectuals, Communist Party renegades, teachers, religious leaders and tribal chieftains. In comparison, the two main Kurdish parties of Iraq, the KDP and the PUK, were based on traditional tribal groupings and religious orders connected to specific geographical areas. The PKK in Turkey began life as an explicitly Marxist guerrilla organisation whose leader, Abdullah Öcalan, gained his authority through charisma and personal identification of the party with his character, ideology and the Kurdish identity itself, as well as the effective use of the Marxist-Leninist concept of the 'new man' through which he appealed to the Kurdish masses.⁹ Consequently, all these parties gained popular support, whereas the majority of the leadership of *Partiya Demokrat a Kurd li Sûriye* were arrested only three years after it was established and, under pressure from the Syrian authorities, quickly succumbed to internal differences within the leadership dividing the party and with it the support base. Its president Dr Nur al-Din Zaza resigned from the party in 1962 after his release from prison in 1961¹⁰ and its secretary, Osman Sabri, left Syria in 1970 to pursue political work in Turkey.¹¹ As a result, no one leader gained the support necessary to drive the political movement in Syria and party leadership became an area of competition between suitors for power within the Kurdish communities and a means of extending the life of traditional power relations.

The persistence of semi-tribal social and power relations, particularly within the Jazira region where the majority of party leaders are from, facilitated the formation of blocs based on familial and local networks of supporters within the parties. Consequently, a number of smaller parties exist which are limited in constituency and support and, as a consequence, lacking in ability

to perform social functions or political actions.¹² Nonetheless, they operate as any other larger party does and, the regular creation of blocs of parties, described in Chapter 3, suggests that they are liable to become pawns in power politics between other larger parties. The reformist tendencies of the intellectuals have often come into conflict with the interests of more conservative sectors of Kurdish society and its political leadership. The effect of this is discussed further below and it is enough to say here that the persistence of traditional tribal relations and interests, alongside more modern, nationalist trends embodied by the Kurdish intellectuals, created a tension within the parties and between the parties and the younger generations within Kurdish society.

Thus, illegality, the interference of the state in the internal affairs of the parties, geographic and demographic conditions in Syria and the persistence of semi-tribal relations in Kurdish society, all offer some explanation as to why the Kurdish political party system seems to be inherently fragile, partial to factionalism and unable to obtain any concessions from the state. Yet, these are all factors that have affected Kurdish politics in Syria since the inception of the Kurdish party movement and none of these explanations account for why it is that Kurdish society only began to characterise the party movement as being in crisis in the few years preceding the start of the Syrian uprising.

The Party System in Crisis?

The question of why, at this point, the parties began to be described as being in crisis can only be answered through examining what changed in Kurdish society in Syria, what brought about that change, and what led members and supporters to increase their criticisms of the parties and even disassociate themselves from party activities. Interviews suggest that the seeds of crisis were sown in the late 1980s as a result of increasing internal power struggles and fracturing of the parties.¹³ Since these effects were felt from 1990 onwards, this section uses evidence from the period 1990 until the eve of the Syrian uprising in 2011 to explain the supposed onset of crisis.

One obvious explanation for the withdrawal of support from the parties by both members and non-members is the continued factionalism of the political party movement uncompensated by any major political gains in more than 50 years of activity. The growth of criticism was natural in these circumstances as was a general mood of disenchantment with the system. Other developments have occurred, however, alongside the successive division of the parties. Interviews and academic literature suggest four primary factors have been involved in precipitating the crisis in Kurdish politics in Syria: the withdrawal of intellectuals from the party ranks, the development and availability of information technologies, the growth of generational

differences within Kurdish society and, finally, the rise in popular consciousness amongst the Syrian Kurds.

The withdrawal of Kurdish intellectuals

One of the most important aspects of the party crisis is that the majority of Kurdish intellectuals left the ranks of the parties in favour of pursuing their nationalist and cultural activities independently. This led to a further divide within the Kurdish political and national movement, between the politicians and political parties on the one hand and the intellectuals and independent cultural and nationalist activists and organisations on the other.

Kurdish intellectuals began to leave the party ranks at the beginning of the 1990s, opting to work independently outside the party framework. The majority left party work due to the great number of what they considered to be unjustified divisions within the party ranks. A further reason for their withdrawal was what has been described as the appearance of an incapable or unqualified leadership whose interests departed from their own.¹⁴ Problems began to arise between the intellectuals and the political leadership of the parties when the former found themselves subject to accusations of being unrealistic, unprincipled and of meddling in internal party affairs. It appears that, on the one hand, the critical stance of the intellectuals towards the leadership and the numerous divisions within party ranks threatened the party leadership, and on the other hand, the intellectuals found that they were restricted in their ability to achieve their aims, particularly the nationalistic ones, within the ranks of the political parties.¹⁵

The withdrawal of the intellectuals had a decisive impact on the parties and was one of the factors that pushed them into a crisis. Kurdish intellectuals played an important part in the cultural and social role of the parties and in the processes of defining and developing national identity, aiding its expression and keeping the parties connected to the Kurdish people through cultural and social activities. Since their withdrawal, the parties' abilities to perform social roles, particularly that of cultural framing, has diminished to the extent that it is no longer appropriate to characterise it as a party function. Even the parties' role in facilitating cultural expression and reproduction through social organisations and cultural events, described in Chapter 5, has declined. The importance of the intellectuals to the identity of the parties and of the Kurdish national movement in Syria could hardly be greater. As shown in Chapters 2, 3 and 5, nationalist cultural organisation preceded political organisation in Syria and it was Kurdish intellectuals who were the primary pioneers of the Kurdish nationalist movement and who initiated the first Kurdish party in Syria. With the formation of the party in 1957, culture and the development of Kurdish national identity became central pillars of

Kurdish party politics. The involvement of intellectuals in the rank and file of the parties connected more traditional social elements of Kurdish society with the more nationalist, progressive and modernising ones.¹⁶ Progressive conceptions of nationalism, developed initially by the Bedirkhan brothers and their associates, connected Kurdish nationalism with modernisation and social development and included emancipatory elements such as equal rights for women.¹⁷ Culture and the development of language were key components of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria which the political parties inherited when Kurdish intellectuals co-founded the first Kurdish political party in Syria.

More than 50 years after the establishment of the first Kurdish political party in Syria in 1957, cultural activities and projects to develop Kurdish national identity and promote Kurdish rights in Syria are increasingly pursued outside party ranks and without the parties' direct involvement. Many independent intellectuals criticise the parties for not pursuing cultural and educational activities, such as opening publishing houses to promote Kurdish literature and publication, which one interviewee suggested that they could do by naming the publishing house with an Arab name, as he himself had done.¹⁸ The work of the intellectuals in developing Kurdish nationalism outside the political parties is an area that deserves further attention. The scope of this book has not allowed for in-depth research into the latest endeavours of Kurdish intellectuals to promote the Kurdish issue, to influence the politics of the state and to develop the Kurdish national identity. Many Kurdish intellectuals, however, as well as artists inside and outside Syria, continue to seek to publicise the Kurdish issue in Syria through their work. Through poetry, prose, music, art and photography as well as through the publication of articles, memoirs and histories of the Kurdish national movement and of the Kurdish areas in Syria they seek to preserve their identity and history and to develop their culture.

In the context of the repression of the Kurds and the government's association of Kurdish identity with threats to the security of the state, the work of the Kurdish intellectuals has clear nationalist and political content. State restrictions on expressions of Kurdish culture and language help to identify cultural activities and publications as explicitly political. Consequently, much artistic work remains illegal and criminal despite the artists' disassociation from the political parties; if arrested, they face the same treatment as those directly involved in political parties.¹⁹

Based on the central importance of the intellectuals to the Kurdish political movement from 1957 until today, it is possible to argue that the withdrawal of the intellectuals from Kurdish political parties in Syria has caused a fundamental change in the substance of Kurdish party politics in Syria. Numerous interviews testify that since intellectuals began to withdraw

from the Kurdish political parties, the involvement of the parties in cultural affairs has weakened.²⁰ This has compromised one of the most important purposes of the parties.

Communication technologies

The development of information technologies and their introduction to the Syrian public has had a far-reaching impact on the Kurdish political movement. Information technologies, particularly the internet and mobile phones, have had profound implications for the importance of generational differences to the make-up of Kurdish society. They have widened the gap between traditional Kurdish society and the younger generations who have grown up with the internet and mobile technology and are further removed from traditional socio-economic relations. This has had further consequences for the political parties, examined in this section.

The internet was introduced to the Syrian public in the year 2000 and mobile phone operators in 2001. Until 2010, only two mobile phone operators had been granted contracts in Syria,²¹ although in August 2010 the government agreed to issue one further contract.²² According to figures from Mobile World, mobile phone penetration in Syria was said to be at 44 per cent in March 2010,²³ among the lowest in the region.²⁴ The dissemination of the internet has been limited by the low number of personal computers in Syria, estimated at 800,000 at the end of 2005,²⁵ a penetration of just 4.2 per cent.²⁶ In the same year, internet users were estimated at only 875,000 and subscribers at 233,000.²⁷ In 2008, however, the International Telecommunications Union estimated actual internet use in Syria to be 17 per cent,²⁸ and by June 2011 it was reported to be 19.8 per cent. The Syrian Public Telecommunications Establishment (or Syrian Telecom), which was a public corporation affiliated to the Ministry of Communications and Technology with a monopoly over telecommunications and their governance,²⁹ imposed heavy restrictions on the use of the internet. Consequently, the full potential and impact of the information technologies on the Kurdish political movement in Syria has not yet been felt. But, despite limited access, the younger generation, urban youth and students who study IT in school and university, or frequent internet cafés and computer labs, as well as those able to finance a home connection, received a significantly different education after the year 2000 to that of earlier generations.

The availability of internet and mobile phone technology has been a double-edged sword for the Kurdish parties. On the one hand, mobile phones enabled freer communications within the parties, between members and within the leadership as, with the right know-how, a user is able to avoid phone taps. Also, the option to disseminate information by email and on the

internet has helped some parties to extend their areas of influence, whereas geographic and demographic divisions between the Kurdish regions previously hindered the spread of some parties beyond their local areas. On the other hand, public access to the internet has allowed Kurdish individuals and groups to publish, access and compare information with much greater ease. While the internet is monitored in Syria and many sites are banned, many of the younger generation are technically skilled and are often able to circumvent state restrictions on access. Consequently, Kurds in Syria are able to bypass political parties for information on Kurdish issues within Syria and outside it and to access alternative, neutral or less partisan information than they might have access to within their local communities.

Increasing numbers of Kurdish journalists, activists and intellectuals, both inside Syria and in the diaspora, use the internet to publish articles about the political movement and its internal affairs. Often using pseudonyms to avoid identification, not only by the Syrian authorities but also by the political parties, Kurdish activists have increasingly criticised the parties. This has exposed to the general Kurdish public, the internal workings of the parties and their domination by personal issues. Kurdish intellectuals, disenchanted with the parties, have also been provided with an alternative forum for publishing their research and articles, which had previously been limited to party papers and journals. Independent Kurdish organisations in the diaspora have developed websites dedicated to conveying impartial news coverage of Syrian Kurdish issues and of human rights abuses against the Kurds.³⁰ The internet also became a place of discussion, criticism and responses, particularly among Kurdish intellectuals and independent writers, but also involving members of the party leadership. This growing criticism of the parties has not always been well received. The publication of an article by the independent Kurdish writer Muhammad Juma'a on many Kurdish websites³¹ prompted a harsh response from Abdul Hamid Darwish against him and other writers, calling the political parties to work together against 'malicious misinformation' and untrustworthy writers who were seeking to undermine the leaders of the Kurdish movement.³²

Independent activists and intellectuals have made increased use of the internet to inform the Kurds and international observers of the situation inside Syria, to expose the human rights abuses suffered by Kurds and to promote Kurdish culture and unity. The same cannot be said of the political parties. A brief survey of party websites reveals that they change name and domain frequently, that they cease to operate without warning, that many parties do not have websites at all, that some that do exist are not up to date and that pages are often missing and links broken. It is also difficult to find information about parties since most of them publish their party paper, various articles about Kurdish issues and little else. Most do not

even include their political programmes on their websites, and consequently, copies of them are obtainable only through direct contact with the parties themselves.³³ Most websites are produced and maintained in the diaspora, primarily in Germany, due to the controls on the use of the internet that exist in Syria. The party branches in the diaspora, however, remain subordinate to the party leadership in Syria.

Another important effect on Kurdish national consciousness came from the development of Kurdish satellite television. The introduction of mobile phones and the internet to the Syrian public had an important effect both on national consciousness and on generational differences in Kurdish society, although their dissemination has been limited by financial constraints and state controls over information. In contrast, the development of Kurdish satellite television had a wide impact on all sectors of the Kurdish communities in Syria, not just in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of pride in their nation and its achievements. The Kurdish population was exposed to a constant stream of news about the Kurdish regions, educational films on Kurdish issues, documentaries, chat shows, Kurdish language programmes, political propaganda and music, all of which stimulated the interest of Syrian Kurds in their heritage and history and culture as well as their desire for political results inside Syria.

Unlike internet and mobile phone technology, satellite dishes are prolific and installed in most Kurdish homes. The skylines of Kurdish areas, such as Ashrafiyah in Aleppo, are dominated by the hundreds of circular satellite dishes on apartment buildings. The first Kurdish satellite channels were founded in 1995. Since the year 2000, after Iraqi Kurdistan became self-administering, channels based in Europe and in Iraqi Kurdistan have been broadcasting around the clock. Many channels are connected to Kurdish political parties; Med TV was the first channel, founded in 1995 and connected to the PKK. It was broadcast from England until April 1999, when its licence was revoked by the ITC. It then began broadcasting from Belgium under the name Medya TV. After its licence was again revoked in February 2004, the channel announced that a new channel, Roj TV,³⁴ would begin transmission on 1 March 2004, authorised by the Danish government. The channel in all its manifestations has faced charges of supporting terrorism because of its coverage of PKK festivals and broadcasts 'likely to encourage or incite crime or lead to disorder'.³⁵ Since its founding, Roj TV has faced pressure from the Turkish government to stop broadcasting on the grounds that it supports a terrorist organisation, the PKK, and in 2010 it was facing charges from the Danish government of encouraging the activities of the PKK.³⁶ Channels emanating from Iraqi Kurdistan include KurdSat, which was founded in 2000 and belongs to the PUK and Kurdistan TV which belongs to the KDP. The number of Kurdish satellite channels reached 20 in 2009,³⁷ including

many independent channels such as Kurd 1, which was authorised by the French Higher Audiovisual Council, is owned by the Kurdish singer Shivan Perwer and began broadcasting in April 2009.

Satellite television brought the Kurdish struggle in Turkey and the political, cultural and infrastructural development of Iraqi Kurdistan into the Syrian Kurdish home. Images of toppling of statues of Saddam Hussein, of the Kurdish flag flying in the streets of Iraqi Kurdistan and the election of Jalal Talabani as president of Iraq on 6 April 2005 and that of Masoud Barzani as President of the Kurdistan Region in June 2005 were watched by millions and celebrated as a victory for the Kurdish people. In Syria, the nation ceased to be merely imagined. Rather, Kurdish satellite channels became windows into the other areas of Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan became both a vision of the present and an aspiration for the future.

Generational differences

Although not all Kurdish communities or individuals have access to the internet or an interest in reading about such issues, the fact that it is available, and that the interest of Kurdish youth in Kurdish national politics has heightened considerably in the last decade, means that through personal interest or by word of mouth, new information about the internal dynamic of the political parties in Syria spread and produced further criticism of them. On the eve of the Syrian uprising, this criticism of the parties was heard increasingly from the younger generations within Kurdish society, particularly those aged between 18 and 35 who were thirsty for change and eager to become involved in Kurdish nationalist activities. This gave rise to a new generational divide between the traditional leadership, the existing party leadership and Kurdish youth.

The majority of the Kurdish party leadership are aged from 60 upwards. When they entered into politics many of them were as young as 15 years old.³⁸ When Kurdish party politics began in 1957, the Kurdish political parties were seen as a modernising, progressive element in society, a contrast to the traditional tribal system. The parties prohibited honour killings, sought to resolve land disputes, to end the discriminatory practices against women, such as restrictions on clothing, which were enforced by some of the tribal leaders, and generally to adopt a positive attitude on involving women in the national struggle.³⁹ There was some conflict of interest between the tribes and the parties, and the division of the first party in 1965 and the establishment of *el-Partî* in 1970 reflected these social divisions within Kurdish society.

Many of the existing party leaders are attached to the traditional nobility and former tribal leadership of the Jazira region and grew up experiencing

the final demise of semi-feudal tribal relations, with parents and elders retaining traditional mentalities and understandings of social and political organisation. Through the land reforms of 1958 and the arabisation projects carried out in the Jazira in the 1970s, notable families lost most of their power and land. While some of the sons of tribal leaders and the landed aristocracy came to lead political parties⁴⁰ the distribution of land and wealth through inheritance means that generation after generation are growing more and more detached from traditional social and economic relations and family wealth. The younger generations have developed in a different social, economic and political context from that of the party leaders, and, while they remain highly nationalistic and committed to preserving traditional Kurdish cultural practices and customs, their exposure to and involvement with modern information technologies has had a considerable impact on their mentalities, and their capacity for critical thinking and understanding of the Kurdish issue in Syria.

State, university and even private education in Syria has been controlled by the government and its content dictated by them. Exposure to information technologies and the benefit of years of cultural activity among the Kurds, promoted national identity and the values of freedom, democracy, human rights and justice. The younger generations have thereby been equipped with a new confidence in their national identity and the ability to express it. They have developed new political ideas and an antipathy to the connection of many parties and their leaders to the traditional families and Kurdish nobility in Syria. They have been critical of their preoccupation with internal party politics, the weakness of their ideology and policy and their failure to gain any concessions from the state. These young people are also the future leaders of the Kurdish political movement, and their experience of it is likely to be considerably different from that of the present party leaders. They are unlikely to have the same financial capacity that enables the majority of the current leadership to work full time in the party without a popular support base.

Prior to the start of the Syrian uprising, intellectuals, independent activists and the Kurdish youth had increasingly been seeing the parties as undemocratic institutions that reflected the interests of an elite group detached from Kurdish society and that had not achieved anything for the Kurdish people in Syria in more than 50 years of party work.⁴¹ The younger generation, having witnessed the successes of the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan and equipped with information available from multiple sources, were eager for change and eager to seize opportunities to further their political demands on the Syrian government. No alternative Syrian political organisation, however, had succeeded in challenging the domination of Kurdish politics by the existing political parties. Only two parties, the PYD and *Şepêla Pêşerojê* of Meshaal

Temmo, both independent of the other parties, were considered capable of gaining support among and mobilising sectors of the Syrian Kurdish population. Yet, for many, the association of the PYD with the PKK tarnished its reputation, and the assassination of the charismatic Temmo in October 2011 damaged the party.

The consequences of the spread of information technology among the Kurds was to increase open criticism of the political parties in Syria and the internet more than anything else exposed the internal party problems to the Kurdish public. This resource has highlighted generational differences within Kurdish society and provided intellectuals and independent Kurdish activists with an alternative forum for publishing their work. The majority of parties have, so far, failed to exploit information technologies, particularly the internet, to their advantage. This has accentuated the shift in popular opinion about the parties, converting their original image as modernising, progressive, nationalist organisation, to a new image as elitist organisations, detached from the Kurdish population and from changes in the international, regional and local environments.

The rise of national consciousness

Prior to the start of the Syrian uprising all interviewees agreed that, in general, the Kurdish population in Syria was more nationalistic, more prone to political action and thirsty for change than ever before.⁴² This heightened national consciousness had developed over the preceding decade, and culminated in the spontaneous 'uprising' of the Kurds in Syria in March 2004. After that, levels of awareness, mobilisation and commitment were maintained among the Kurdish population. But at this point in time, these new attitudes had not been exploited by the political parties.

Arguably, the progressive rise in political and national consciousness amongst the Kurds in Syria began after the end of the Cold War, when a series of events and processes would gradually increase Kurdish hopes of finding a solution to their oppression in Syria. This is not to say that national consciousness was not widespread or strong before these events. On the contrary, it is arguable that the Kurds in Syria have been more politically conscious than Arab society in Syria. This is simply due to the Kurds' historical circumstances: their need to create a Kurdish nation-state, the division of Kurdistan, the repression of Kurdish political and cultural activities in Syria and other areas of Kurdistan and the politicisation of ethnic identity, not to mention the various revolutions and uprisings across the Kurdish regions. The political conditions within the Syrian state have stifled the free expression of Kurdish identity and political demands and relegated

them to the private sphere and to underground political and cultural activity. But as a result of developments since the end of the Cold War, and especially since the year 2000, confidence in the expression of national identity and political demands gradually expanded and became more public, external and defiant. Kurdish youth in Syria began actively seeking out information about their nation in a manner that former generations were not able to do.

The events and processes that encouraged the Kurds to increase their visibility in Syria and stimulated national consciousness originated from both outside and inside Syrian territory. The rise of the human rights discourse and examples of international intervention, such as the US Operation Provide Comfort which imposed a no-fly zone over the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq from 1991 to 1996, and in the Kosovo war in 1999, encouraged the belief that international organisations and governments would intervene to protect the rights of minority groups such as the Kurds. The no-fly zone in Iraq effectively allowed Kurdish self-administration and autonomy to develop and this protected status was extended by Operation Northern Watch which ran until May 2003. Further intervention by the USA in Iraq in March 2003, the toppling of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and the capture and execution of Saddam Hussein allowed Kurds in Syria to believe that, although deeply embedded in the Syrian state, the Assad regime was not immune to aggressive intervention and that the Kurds had found support in Western countries. The subsequent recognition of the Kurdish government as legitimate in the Transitional Administrative Law of 8 March 2004 and the recognition that the Kurdish areas constituted a federal unit in the constitution of 2005 were interpreted as victories for the Kurdish nation.

Within Syria a number of other factors worked to encourage the Kurds to increase the visibility of their cultural and political identities and demands. Responding to changes in the international order, the *Yekbûn* Party was formed in 1990, and in 1993⁴³ it embarked on the first acts of organised Kurdish street protest – a poster campaign condemning the state's policy towards the stateless Kurds. As described in Chapter 4, after its division in 1998 and in the wake of the Damascus Spring, the new *Yekîti* party stepped up the visibility of Kurdish protest by organising a demonstration in Damascus marking International Human Rights day, on 10 December 2002. Demonstrations became regular but infrequent events involving not more than a few hundred participants, but their significance for the visibility of Kurdish protest and the effect on Kurdish national consciousness was significant. The new methods and more daring demands of *Yekîti* attracted the more radical among the Kurdish youth, in particular those who sought change and believed the party to be significantly different to other Kurdish parties in Syria.

Between the *Yekîmî* demonstration of 10 December 2002 and the Qamishli uprising of 12 March 2004, several demonstrations were held which increased the visibility of Kurdish protest and national identity in Syria. Kurdish–Arab cooperation was stepped up and in early 2004 Kurdish student groups began to organise protests within the universities.⁴⁴ In March 2004 a series of events culminating in the Qamishli uprising demonstrated to the world that the Kurds in Syria were not disunited, as the state of their political movement suggested. On 8 March, Kurds in Syria took to the streets to celebrate the re-emergence of federalism in Iraqi Kurdistan. On the 10 March, in Damascus, a joint Arab–Kurdish demonstration was held marking the anniversary of the 1963 Baʿth Party coup, while in Qamishli large crowds of Kurds gathered to mark International Women's Day with folklore groups and poetry readings. The peaceful and culturally oriented gathering in Qamishli ended in the arrest of many participants⁴⁵ thus fuelling anger and frustration with the state authorities.

On March 12 the fatal shooting of ten Kurds in the football stadium in Qamishli rapidly led to the eruption of protest across the Kurdish regions and within Kurdish enclaves in Syria's cities. This was the first time in the history of the Kurdish political movement in Syria that mass mobilisation around Kurdish identity and encompassing all Kurdish areas had been directed against state power. Although the 'uprising' was crushed by the Syrian authorities and restrictions on Kurdish activities and controls in the Kurdish areas were increased in its wake, the uprising and its martyrs became important Kurdish national symbols and the scale of the protests added to the confidence of the Kurds in their ability to defend their rights. Mass demonstrations in Qamishli the following year reflected the continued levels of mobilisation among the Syrian Kurds.

The events of March 2004 marked a peak in Kurdish national consciousness and mobilisation. Opportunities to propel the Kurdish political movement into greater engagement with the state in the wake of the Qamishli uprising were, however, rejected by the parties in favour of maintaining the status quo. The Qamishli uprising was an expression of the new degree of national consciousness among the Syrian Kurds, but it is arguable that the Kurdish parties were not prepared for the levels of mobilisation of the Kurdish population demonstrated in March 2004. The events were unprecedented in the history of the Kurdish party movement in Syria and the parties had no plan of how to exploit such an occurrence to their advantage and to that of the Kurdish people in Syria. The state of factionalism and disunity among the parties prevented any agreement among them about how to respond both to the state authorities and to the Kurdish people. The recourse to negotiation with the *mukhabarat* undermined any attempts to exploit the situation early on and the parties appealed for calm in order to avoid further bloodshed.

In the wake of these events, the parties attempted to establish a Kurdish 'authority' that represented the Kurdish movement in Syria. But, as a result of this project, competition between the parties for leadership of the Kurdish political movement intensified, causing new fissures and blocs to emerge within the movement.⁴⁶

As the Kurdish people witnessed these changes in international and regional relations, in Iraqi Kurdistan and in their own national movement, their belief that it was possible to change the situation for the Kurds in Syria grew. The rise of popular national consciousness among the Syrian Kurds led to greater criticism of the political parties, and here we return to the idea put forward at the beginning of this chapter, that the political parties' descent into crisis and the rise in national consciousness are connected. The desire for change among the Kurdish population, particularly the youth, was not met or accommodated by the political parties and their failure to positively respond to the rise in Kurdish national consciousness, particularly during and after the events of March 2004, led to fierce criticism of the parties from various sectors of Kurdish society. Instead of harnessing the rise in national consciousness, exploiting the opportunities presented by the introduction of the internet to Syria or seeking reform in response to criticisms from Kurdish intellectuals within party ranks, the parties opted to maintain the status quo in Syria. As a consequence, their role in Kurdish society weakened and involvement in inter- and intra-party politics deepened. Many parties decided to rally around the Damascus Declaration rather than court their own communities and make the reforms necessary to develop into a progressive political movement capable of re-engaging the Kurdish youth and intellectuals.

The Parties on the Eve of the Uprising

At the beginning of this chapter, two questions were posed: first, why was it that factionalism and other deficiencies of the parties seemed to be inherent to them? And, second, why it was only in recent years that the party system was described as being in crisis? Illegality and state intrigue, Kurdish geographic and demographic conditions in Syria and the duality of traditional and modern socio-economic relations in Kurdish society have all posed seemingly insoluble obstacles to Kurdish political unity and to effective mobilisation of the Kurdish population in Syria. Added to this, political and social developments, which affected Kurdish national consciousness and contributed to increasing criticisms of the parties over the past two decades, pushed the parties into what has been described as a crisis. The withdrawal of Kurdish intellectuals from party ranks, the introduction of the internet to the Syrian public and the rise in national consciousness among the Kurds

all contributed to widening the gap between the population and the parties. These technologies increased the visibility of the parties' internal problems and exposed them to increasing criticism. The parties were castigated for their inability to exploit opportunities for mobilisation due to the factionalism within the movement, the often shifting political alliances and enmities between and within them and their attempts to preserve their existence by observing state limits to political activities and demands.

When drawing conclusions about the parties it is important to remember the particularly difficult circumstances under which the Kurdish parties have operated in Syria and the seemingly insoluble conundrum that they have faced, between existence and resistance. Without the support of the Kurdish public and the primary intellectual agents of Kurdish nationalism in Syria, the character of the parties and their mandate was compromised. The political parties were unable to accommodate criticisms emanating from the Kurdish intellectuals, to employ information technologies to their advantage, to engage the Kurdish youth or to react positively to the rise in Kurdish popular consciousness. These factors pushed the Kurdish political party system into the crisis which characterised Syrian Kurdish politics on the eve of the Syrian uprising. This crisis of confidence in the parties influenced the dynamics of the Syrian uprising in the Kurdish regions and amongst the Kurdish people.

CHAPTER 8

THE KURDISH RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN UPRISING

The Kurdish political party movement entered the Syrian uprising stricken with internal problems and focused on maintaining a precarious balance of relationships – with the Kurdish population, the Arab opposition and the ruling regime – none of which were bearing fruit. The uprising itself provided the context necessary for instituting profound changes within the Kurdish political movement. It destroyed the regime's control over public expression of dissent and its 'red lines' were irreversibly contravened. At the time of writing the uprising is still continuing and the question of whether the parties can overcome their fragmentation, bridge their differences with the youth and intellectuals and re-orientate their politics towards the direct needs of the Kurdish people in Syria still cannot be definitively answered. This chapter offers an analysis of the political manoeuvring of the Kurdish parties during the first 18 months of the uprising, explaining the considerations behind party decisions in positioning the Kurdish population within the Syrian uprising. It examines the national and internal political dynamics that resulted in a large part of the Kurdish areas falling under Kurdish control in June 2012 and provides a tentative analysis of the experience of 'Kurdish self-rule' in Syria and reactions to it beyond the Kurdish regions. The chapter summarises the changes that the uprising has induced in the Kurdish political movement, asking whether the political parties have been able to overcome the crisis that characterised them at the beginning of the uprising.

Political Manoeuvring and Alliance Formation

Initial reactions

The start of the Syrian uprising and the political quagmire that it became led observers and analysts to delve deeper into the Kurdish issue in Syria.