

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.

For the first year of the uprising, much of the media and the Arab opposition portrayed the Kurds as holding back from participation in the revolution; in some sense they blamed them for the continuing deterioration of the situation in Syria. Concessions made to the Kurds by Assad early on prompted the idea that Kurdish parties would continue to work to maintain the status quo. The Kurds, known for their history of resistance to oppressors and persistent in their struggle for rights in Syria and beyond, were looked upon negatively because of the relative calm in the Kurdish areas of Syria. Thinly veiled threats emanated from members of the Arab opposition, suggesting that if the Kurds continued this stance, they would not be guaranteed rights in a post-Assad Syria. In August 2011 Samir Nashar, who became a member of the Executive Committee of the Syrian National Council (SNC), was even more explicit, saying 'we accuse the Kurdish parties of not effectively participating in the Syrian revolution... It seems that these parties continue to bet on a dialogue with the regime. This stance will certainly have consequences after the fall of the regime.'¹

The situation on the ground was different. Concentration of the limited field coverage by the media on hotspots such as Hama, Homs and Deraa and on the Sunni Arab opposition, as well as the historic neglect of Kurdish issues in Syria, left the Kurdish areas and the Kurdish political actors on the sidelines of media attention. At the same time, the concentration of international and regional powers on the Syrian Arab opposition, left the Kurds out of the spotlight and unsure of what support they could muster at this historic moment. In most Kurdish areas organised groups of Kurdish youths held regular demonstrations, reclaiming public space from the regime, protesting alongside Syrian Arabs and establishing themselves as the primary actors on the streets. They adopted the slogans of the unified Friday protests, and repeated the chant, 'the Syrian people are one...one, one, one', and called for the overthrow of the regime. Friday 20 May 2011 was dubbed 'Azadî Friday', meaning 'Freedom' in Kurdish and reflected the growth of coordination between the organisers of Arab and Kurdish protests. In this period it was youth organisations that came to the fore.² Youth groups spearheaded the protests of the Kurdish street, rallied support and articulated Kurdish demands including support for the uprising and for the fall of the regime. Participation in the protests was continuous and increased over the first year of the uprising.

As well as biased media coverage and misinformation, the idea that the Kurds did not participate also arose from the more calculated reaction of the political parties to events in Syria. For the first five months of the uprising, the majority of Kurdish political parties did not officially call their members, supporters and the Kurdish people to the streets and did not explicitly call for the fall of the regime. This said, the majority of the parties called for

change in the system and refused dialogue with the regime, insisting on the need for fundamental changes to the organisation of Syrian politics and to authoritarian rule. They prioritised removing systemic factors involved in the oppression of the Kurds in Syria recognising that Kurdish problems in Syria were not simply a matter of leadership. The reactions of the Kurdish parties were not uniform and some of them, such as the more radical parties, *Şepêla Pêşerojê*, *Azadî* and *Yekîti*, supported the protests more actively from the early days of the uprising. Members of their leadership participated in demonstrations and actively supported youth organisations.³ On Azadî Friday (20 May 2011) leaders of *Azadî* and *Yekîti* gave speeches at demonstrations in Serê Kanîyê declaring support for the Kurdish youth and demanding a halt to the violent response of the government, the lifting of the siege on Syrian cities and the release of all political prisoners.⁴ *Şepêla Pêşerojê* also explicitly called for the fall of the regime. Yet it was the youth that led and maintained the protests.

The apparent restraint of the majority of the parties must be understood in the context of their political history. At the beginning of the revolution the political parties, like all other opposition groups in Syria, were not adapted to revolutionary struggle. They had always worked against the regime, at least in a coded manner, and sought to maintain their political agenda within the context of the uprising, but they were divided amongst themselves and constrained by their efforts to exist and to dispel accusations of separatism. Dominated by the older generations and their political experience in Syria, the Kurdish parties feared that if they rushed to the streets or called for the fall of the regime the implicit understanding with the regime forces that allowed them to exist would be broken, setting in motion a protracted government campaign against the Kurdish political parties and Kurdish regions. The Kurdish uprising of March 2004 involved the largest and most protracted acts of public and mass dissent that Syria had experienced since the state crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982. The regime's suppression of the Kurdish uprising by force and the lack of support or reaction from the Arab opposition in Syria led to fears that if the regime turned again against the Kurdish areas, support from the Arab opposition might once again be absent.⁵

The Kurdish parties, meanwhile, had been negotiating to obtain Kurdish rights from the regime for more than 50 years and the eruption of demonstrations in Arab cities, far from the Kurdish hinterland, was viewed with caution. The initial protests began in response to a local event in Deraa, spreading to other Syrian cities which came out in support. The spread of the demonstrations took place in the context of the wider 'Arab spring'. The example of the protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and the possibility of change encouraged an attempt to reclaim the Syrian streets. Amongst the Kurdish parties and much of the Kurdish people, there was a sense that this

movement had to begin from the Arab streets and had to be sustained by the Syrian Arab opposition and youth groups. Kurdish parties had, for more than a decade, been taking their protests and politics to the street, and now it was time for the Arab opposition and public to make their mark. Additionally, the fragility of Syria's social make-up has always been used as a justification by the regime to rule with a heavy hand. The full involvement of Kurdish political parties early on could have facilitated the regime's attempts to label the uprising as sectarian and divisive and contributed to its failure.

Since 2005 the Kurdish parties had been negotiating with the Arab opposition very seriously within the framework of the Damascus Declaration. The Declaration, however, did not go far enough towards satisfying Kurdish demands in the event of potential regime change in Syria. The domination by Islamists and Arab nationalists in the opposition groupings emerging at the start of the uprising raised fears of what alternative to the Assad regime might materialise and generated a wariness of cooperation without its basis being made explicit.

Turkey's hosting of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood meetings and its support of the establishment of the Syrian National Council increased these new fears about their political agenda in relation to the Kurds and about what would follow the fall of Assad's regime. Turkey's continued attempts to control its own Kurdish issue and population meant that the Turkish government would be unlikely to support Kurdish demands in Syria. It was feared that any funding to and hosting of opposition meetings and activities would have Turkey's political agenda behind it.

For the Kurds and the Kurdish political parties these apprehensions about the Arab opposition proved to be realistic early on in the uprising. Fears of the domination of the Muslim Brotherhood and Arab nationalists over the Turkish backed Syrian National Council were given additional potency by comments, derogatory to the Kurds, made by leading SNC figures. As with previous attempts to unite Kurdish and Arab opposition groups, Kurdish demands for constitutional national recognition in Syria, decentralisation of political power and for the name of the state to be non-discriminatory in terms of national identity were met with repeated opposition by Arabists and Islamists within the organisation.

Instead of falling in behind the emerging opposition alliances, the reaction of the Kurdish political parties was to form a political union to represent the Kurds to the rest of the Syrian opposition and on 16 May 2011, in Qamishli, the parties formed a new alliance under the name of the Syrian Kurdish National Movement. The alliance united the then 12 parties within the Kurdish Political Council (formed in December 2009) with those of the Kurdish Democratic Alliance (the four parties of *al-Tabaluf*) and the PYD. The position of the alliance leant towards the right wing of the Kurdish

party movement, calling for the recognition of Kurds as a 'significant component of the Syrian people' and for 'cultural rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria' to be protected and guaranteed.⁶ Despite this clear retreat of many of the parties from Kurdish demands for 'self-administration' and constitutional recognition of the Kurds as a nation in Syria, only two parties were not included within the alliance and their exclusion was due to rifts between them and the parties of which they were splinter groups.⁷ This position was explained by party representatives as a tactical move to enable the organisations to engage with the Syrian opposition, and dispel stereotypes of the Kurds as separatist.

This initial alliance did not last. According to Dr Alan Semo, foreign affairs representative of the PYD, disagreements arose about the methods of electing a congress.⁸ The PYD suggested elections should be by the Kurdish people, whereas the rest of the political parties favoured elections from within the political party membership. The collapse of the union, however, brought with it new efforts to bring the various parties together on a common platform.

Meanwhile, the government itself had taken a number of steps to woo the Kurds in efforts to prevent their entering into the uprising *en masse*. The stateless Kurds, Kurdish Newroz celebrations, the repeal of Decree 49 of 2008 were all questions on which the government attempted to appease the Kurds. In this context, in June, several leaders of Kurdish political parties were invited to meet with members of the government. This was the first time in the history of the Kurdish political party movement that its members had been invited to meet Syrian officials as representatives of Kurdish political parties. The move was viewed as a further effort to neutralise the Kurdish opposition and prevent this group from further involvement in anti-regime protests. The Kurdish parties, however, as a united group, refused this invitation, stating that they would not enter into any dialogue with the regime while it continued to use force against protestors.⁹

The Kurds continued to negotiate with other opposition groups and numerous attempts were made by Kurdish political parties, individually and in alliance with others, to form part of the groups that emerged in the first few months of the uprising, notably the Syrian National Council and the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB). The Kurdish political organisations sought both participation and representation in the uprising and its representative bodies as Syrian citizens and as Kurds struggling for a new Syria. Successive meetings of the Syrian opposition and SNC, however, resulted in Kurdish walk-outs and boycotts as the leadership insisted that Syria was an Arab state and part of the Arab nation. The PYD, *Yekîtiyê Partîya Çep* (of Muhammad Musa), Nusradin Ibrahim's *Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê*, and *el-Sûrî* were amongst the founders of the NCB but all

the Kurdish parties except the PYD were to leave the organisation due to its limited commitment to Kurdish rights. Due to the inclusion in its ranks of a number of ex-regime officials and Syrian opposition figures believed to be tolerated by the regime, other opposition groups accused the NCB of being an extension of the regime or infiltrated by it.¹⁰

In July 2011, the National Salvation Conference was held in Istanbul. Kurdish representatives attended the conference only to walk out in protest against the absence of any seats for Kurdish representatives in the Preparatory Committee of the Conference and against the use of the name Syrian Arab Republic which denied the existence of other national groups in Syria. Successive meetings leading to the announcement of the formation of the Syrian National Council on 23 August 2011 met with similar reactions from Kurdish parties and activists. The sole Kurdish party to remain a member of the SNC and its executive committee was *Şepêla Pêşerojê* of Meshaal Temmo.¹¹ Temmo was assassinated by masked gunmen on 7 October 2011, not long after his declaration of support for the SNC. His murder was seen as a consequence of his outspoken support for the fall of the regime, for the Kurdish youth movements and the SNC and even for his criticism of other Kurdish political parties.

Attempts by the SNC to establish itself as the representative opposition body of the Syrian uprising were thwarted in the months that followed by successive comments by leading members of the Syrian opposition that had the effect of alienating the Kurds. Refusals to consider relinquishing the inclusion of the word 'Arab' in the name and identity of the state left Kurdish political organisations frustrated and excluded, as Kurds, from participation in efforts to form a united representative opposition body. On 26 October Burhan Ghalioun, a leader of the SNC, said in an interview that:

Of course, Syria is an Arab state...there is no discussion about this...there is no debate that Syria is an Arab country because the majority of the population are Arabs... The discussion is not about the identity for Syria. Kurds...you cannot tell the Syrian Arabs that you are not Arabs...is that OK? Here is the wall.¹²

Pre-existing tensions and fault-lines affecting relations and cooperation between the Kurdish and Arab opposition in Syria were renewed and reaffirmed, adding to Kurdish fears about the future of Syria. The SNC was viewed as being opposed to Kurdish demands for national recognition and decentralisation in Syria and potentially even worse than the Ba'th Party.¹³ Some went as far as saying that the SNC and the Ba'th Party were two sides of the same coin and that any Kurd remaining within the SNC would be considered a traitor. Abdulbaset Sieda, who in June 2012 became president of the SNC, rejected these claims. He noted that the Muslim Brotherhood had

changed significantly and accepted civil and democratic rights in Syria. Of course there were Arab nationalists who found it difficult to accept the SNC national project aimed at pluralism and tolerance but they were committed to work with the SNC.¹⁴ Despite protracted discussions between Kurdish politicians and the SNC, they failed to reach a common ground acceptable to the Kurdish bloc. The decision of the Kurdish parties not to join either of the two main opposition groups of that time led to questions and speculations about Kurdish political affiliations in the new environment ushered in by the start of the Syrian uprising.

The KNC

In an unprecedented move, on 26 October in Qamishli, the majority of Kurdish political parties put aside internal differences in a conference including ten Kurdish parties,¹⁵ independents, Kurdish youth organisations, Kurdish women's organisations, human rights activists and professionals. The outcome of the conference was the establishment of the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The aim was to unite the Kurdish opposition in one bloc and establish a united and representative Kurdish voice in Syria, particularly in the context of Kurdish concerns about the agenda of several actors within the SNC, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. The rationale behind the move was to position the Kurds as a bloc which would be able to represent Kurdish interests and enter relations with other Syrian opposition groupings. The Council replaced all former Kurdish party blocs such as *Hevbendi (al-Tabaluf)* or the *Eniya (al-Jabha)*, which were dissolved, and membership of all Kurds involved in the SNC and the NCB was withdrawn. Initially seven, of what were then seventeen Kurdish political parties, remained outside the KNC.

Against the background of the historically fractured Kurdish political movement in Syria, the establishment of the KNC was momentous. The conference unified the Kurdish voice on a number of issues. It held the Syrian regime wholly responsible for the crisis in Syria and recognised it as a revolution. It called for complete change of the infrastructures of government and for the building of a secular, democratic, parliamentary, pluralist and decentralised country, free of racism. It described the Kurdish people as indigenous to their historic land and demanded their constitutional recognition as a nation and a key component of the Syrian population. It called for a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria and for the right to self-determination of the Kurds. It extended its support to the Kurdish youth organisations and rejected dialogue with the regime.

Four main assertions can be made on the significance of the establishment of the KNC to the Kurdish movement in general and its place within the ever intensifying tensions within the opposition movement in Syria. The

first is that amongst the political parties a fundamental shift of the Kurdish political spectrum occurred in the new approach to the Kurdish issue and Kurdish rights in Syria. The shift occurred in particular in the right wing of the Kurdish parties, which altered their agendas to become closer to the aims of the more radical parties. The parties moved away from minimal demands for minority and cultural rights in Syria and from limiting political activity to the private sphere that had enabled right wing parties to engage with the regime. Parties such as that of Abdul Hamid Darwish's began to talk of regime change and even of Kurdish self-determination in Syria.

The second significant result of the establishment of the KNC was that it marked a very decisive step towards uniting the Kurdish political movement and Kurdish political demands in Syria. It brought the parties together with independents and youth organisations which had been spearheading Kurdish demonstrations during the revolution, thus going some way towards unifying the Kurdish voice in Syria. The shift in political agenda of many parties was an attempt to reflect the voice of the Kurdish street in Syria. The political parties also displayed a willingness to concede a degree of political power and responsibility for the Kurdish political position in Syria to the youth organisations. This attempt to work together began to address the widening generation gap in Kurdish political representation and the division that had developed between Kurdish intellectuals, activists and politicians.

A further advance was that it confirmed explicitly the Kurdish interest in and commitment to the uprising, and to working alongside the rest of the Syrian opposition, but in distinction from it, with a particular agenda defined by Kurdish political demands (for a secular, democratic, pluralistic state in which the Kurds are granted the right of self-determination). This shift in favour of change, rather than management of the status quo, necessitated the coordination of the parties' demands that have taken place.

In sum, the establishment of the KNC marked a new era in Kurdish politics in Syria. Whether the motive for its formation was a response to the need to unify the Kurdish voice in the face of the regime and the Syrian Arab opposition, an attempt to counter the steadily increasing political power of the PYD in the Kurdish regions in Syria, or a combination of these factors, is secondary to its effect. The establishment of the KNC in October 2011 was a decisive move by the political parties towards addressing the fractures within the political arena as well as the alienation of the Kurdish youth and Kurdish intellectuals. Within the KNC, Kurdish political parties had an opportunity to begin a new period in Kurdish politics in Syria appropriate to the new circumstances. Additional Kurdish parties joined the protests under the banner of the KNC, echoing the pan-Syrian slogans and the call for the fall of the regime, as well as adopting their own slogans, reflecting specifically Kurdish demands.

Of the 257 participants in the founding meeting of the KNC, 100 were political party members, 25 representatives of youth groups and 132 were prominent independents chosen by the political parties. The KNC is led by an executive committee in which each constituent political party holds two seats, and a further 25 seats are allocated to independent activists, NGOs, youth and women's organisations. In the initial meeting of 26–27 October a 45-person executive committee was elected including 20 party representatives and six representatives of Kurdish youth organisations. The second meeting of the KNC, held in Erbil on 28–29 January 2012, brought Kurdish intellectuals and activists in exile together with the political parties to establish a common agenda. The executive committee was expanded to 47 to include representatives of an additional Kurdish party. Then, in February the committee was expanded again to accommodate two further political parties. In July 2012 there were said to be 16 Kurdish political parties within the KNC, bringing the number of party representatives in the executive committee to 32.

In many ways the establishment of the KNC addressed several features of the crisis of legitimacy that the parties were facing on the eve of the Syrian uprising. As well as uniting the majority of the parties within a single organisation and coordinating their political objectives, it incorporated youth movements, intellectuals and independent activists. It signalled that the parties were attempting to pool resources from within the Kurdish communities and to reform the political movement in response to the Kurdish street and their new political environment. Pre-existing fault lines, however, were not addressed adequately and continued to negatively affect the overall representativeness of the KNC.

Within the KNC, each political party was given equal representation, and decision-making capacity. The division of power within the KNC did not reflect the strength of particular parties in comparison to smaller ones. This was an obvious area of contention within the KNC. The question of the extent to which the KNC should develop relations with the Syrian opposition, and the continuation of unilateral actions of parties bound by it, were further sources of tension between the parties involved. The representation and decision making power of the independent activists and youth organisations was relatively minor compared with that of the political parties. Realising the importance of the youth groups, as the voice of the Syrian Kurdish street, the parties took steps to harness them within the KNC. In doing so, many of the youth groups became associated with particular political parties, forfeiting their independence, and limiting their activities. Those that remained independent of the parties but which joined the KNC, likewise became subject to the domination of the KNC by the parties. As a consequence of the political partisanship that developed within the youth movement, a

fragmentation of this movement occurred, reflecting the parties' factionalism and the divisions between the parties and Kurdish society. The involvement of the parties in the youth movement contributed to rendering the youth groups less effective and less active as the uprising has progressed.¹⁶

Alternatives and opposition to the KNC

Although most of the Kurdish political parties were included under the umbrella of the KNC, some opposition to this organisation remained within the Kurdish political arena. The seven parties that remained outside the KNC were *Azadî*, *Yekîti Kurdîstani*, *Şepêla Pêşerojê*, *Rêkeftin*, *Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê* of Abdul Rahman Aluji,¹⁷ *Partîya Hevgirtina Gelê Kurd li Sûriyê* and the PYD; their decision not to join the KNC reflecting pre-existing divisions within the Kurdish political movement. Members of the more radical left (represented by *Şepêla Pêşerojê* and *Yekîti Kurdîstani*) had previously formed an alternative alliance called the Union of Kurdish Democratic Forces in Syria along with *Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê*, *Partîya Hevgirtina Gelê Kurd li Sûriyê* and *Rêkeftin*. Although they participated in the initial meetings on setting up the KNC, for a number of reasons they abstained from joining the new alliance. The Chairman of the *Şepêla Pêşerojê*'s office of general communications raised four points of objection to the KNC: i) the failure of the KNC to commit to the overthrow of the regime, ii) that it should adopt a stronger position of support for the youth, iii) demands for the Kurds should be more concrete and not influenced by external interests, and iv) that independent activists should have a stronger representation in the council.¹⁸ *Şepêla Pêşerojê*'s position on the Kurdish issue differed in a number of ways, including its demand that the Kurds be recognised as a 'main' nation in Syria rather than a 'second' nation, and that the Kurdish issue was not a regional one, thus emphasising the idea of the Kurds as equal partners in the Syrian state with a stake and representation in the political organisation and processes of all other areas of Syria.¹⁹ With the inclusion of *Yekîti Kurdîstani*, *Partîya Dêmkokrat a Kurdî li Sûriyê* and *Rêkeftin* into the KNC early in 2012, the Union of Kurdish Democratic Forces in Syria came to be almost reduced to a single party (*Şepêla Pêşerojê*) rather than remaining an umbrella organisation.

As for the PYD, according to parties within the KNC the party was invited to the meetings forming the KNC. It opted out of the organisation, however, preferring to work alone on its own agenda. Soon after the establishment of the KNC, reports began to emerge about the growth of tensions between the PYD and the KNC. In November 2011 the party began erecting checkpoints in the Kurdish area of Efrîn, and reports surfaced accusing the PYD of kidnapping political activists, imposing its authority over Kurdish areas

and of fights between PYD and KNC supporters.²⁰ Accusations against the PYD connected them to the regime and their actions were seen as an attempt to curb Kurdish political activity and create divisions within the Kurdish population. The probability that Assad was using the Kurdish card against Turkey by supporting the PKK reflected on the PYD, which had itself been associated with the PKK. Also, the PYD's inclusion in the NCB, an opposition group that was accused of being close to the regime, and which until September 2012 supported dialogue with the regime, seemed to add weight to these claims. The PYD's gradual assertion of control over Kurdish areas from November 2011 was viewed as an aggressive move by many supporters of the KNC as well as by independent activists and youth organisations.

On 16 December 2011 the PYD formed a coalition named the Peoples Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK). As well as the PYD, the PCWK included five organisations: *Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk a Rojava* (*Tev-Dem*, the Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement), *Yekitiya Star* women's organisation, the Union of Families of Martyrs, the Education and Language Institution and the Revolutionary Youth Movement of Western Kurdistan.²¹ All organisations within the PCWK were connected to the PYD, making the PCWK an umbrella organisation for PYD affiliated groups rather than one consisting of different political parties and agendas bound together. The resolution of the founding conference of the PCWK included the following resolution: to support the peaceful, democratic popular movement aimed at making a radical change in the infrastructure and institutions of the political system, to reject foreign intervention, to unify the position of the Kurdish political parties, as well as the youth organisations and to establish local councils through free elections. The document did not call for the fall of the regime nor specifically for Kurdish rights, other than the renaming of Kurdish towns, villages with their Kurdish names, the right of self-defence of the Kurdish people and a commitment to building democratic social institutions, including those for 'disseminating the mother tongue, namely, Kurdish'.²² Other than these, most points in the declaration were general to Syria, and reflect a commitment to the development of a democratic and pluralistic tolerant state and society and support of the peaceful popular movement. While the organisation's armed units allowed the PCWK and, through it the PYD to assert power and authority over Kurdish areas, the political manifesto of the PCWK neglected many of the Syrian Kurdish political aspirations.

One Year In

A year into the uprising, the Kurdish position in Syria began to shift in response to the increasing militarisation of the conflict and to the Arab

opposition's rejection of Kurdish calls for self-determination and political decentralisation. Further comments about the Kurds by SNC leader Barhan Ghalioun,²³ NCB leader Hassan Abdul Aziz, and the Muslim Brotherhood were taken as confirmation that the Kurdish demands would again be sacrificed to Arab nationalist and Islamist political programmes. The Kurds retreated further into a Kurd-specific political agenda and concentrated on the protection of Kurdish people from the worst effects of the uprising. In the Kurdish regions, alongside the pan-Syrian slogans, placards displaying uniquely Kurdish messages appeared. The 30 March became the Friday of Kurdish Rights. In response to Ghalioun's denial of a Kurdistan in Syria, on 20 April youth groups and parties alike held banners reading 'Here is Kurdistan'.²⁴ Friday 6 April became the 'Friday of putting Kurdish rights above any council'. The 11 May was dubbed 'Victory from God' in the national protests. In most Kurdish areas, however, it was referred to as the 'Friday of celebrating Kurds in Aleppo', in response to regime attacks on the majority Kurdish area of Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo a few days before.

Although not adopted by all groups, this public focus on Kurdish issues was a significant separation of Kurdish interests and symbols of the uprising from the rest of the Syrian opposition and from protests in other areas of Syria. At the same time, Kurdish groups, especially the PYD were entrenching themselves in the Kurdish regions of Efrîn and Kobanî particularly, establishing checkpoints and local councils, which they claimed were to support the local Kurdish communities, maintain order and protect civilians. The moves were also described as preparation for the fall of the regime, when Kurdish groups would need to be ready to take control and govern Kurdish areas effectively.²⁵ In the absence of any such preparation by the parties of the KNC, the PYD actions were looked upon with concern but also as a necessary development in the Kurdish regions given the increasing militarisation of the Syrian uprising.

The regimes increasingly violent responses to the Syrian opposition and the taking up of arms by rebel groups had a very significant effect on the Kurdish position in Syria. Syrian troops were concentrated in cities bearing the brunt of Assad's repression of the uprising and re-deployed away from Kurdish areas, where clashes with regime authorities were limited and more isolated occurrences. In the power vacuum that was left and in an attempt to shield the Kurdish areas from the increasingly brutal retaliations of the regime, armed Kurdish groups belonging to the PYD, secured borders around Kurdish towns and regions and moved into government buildings establishing a Kurdish administration.

Amid the militarisation of the conflict in Syria, the SNC made an attempt to reach out to the Kurdish communities through its National Charter on the Kurdish issue. At the same time tensions between the PYD and the KNC

intensified. Alongside these alterations in the Kurdish position within the uprising, on 21 April 2012, the KNC drafted a new interim political agenda. This programme omitted the call for self-determination included in earlier political programmes. This decision reflected divisions within the organisation over joining the SNC, and was interpreted by many as a significant political move away from specifically Kurdish political demands towards an accommodation of the SNC interests. Critics of the parties considered it a retreat, or at least a more accurate reflection of party demands. They argued that the earlier championing of self-determination reflected a calculated desire on the part of the Kurdish leaders to gain popularity and legitimacy in the context of the Syrian uprising.²⁶ The change in the KNC agenda was interpreted by many as a submission to pressures from the Arab opposition and a compromise of Kurdish demands in Syria. Even if understood, however, as an attempt to build relations with the wider Syrian opposition, which the Kurdish parties had initially prioritised, KNC-PYD relations arguably had an important effect on the decision. The decision of the KNC to alter its manifesto took place as PYD-KNC relations deteriorated. The PYD's moves to assert control over the Kurdish areas and politics threatened the KNC. In this context the development of relations with the SNC, and even with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), took on a new meaning: it held out the possibility of countering the advancement of the PYD politically and militarily. Despite having adopted a new National Charter on the Kurdish issue in Syria, public opinion about the SNC continued to nurture fears of its domination by Arab nationalists and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Representatives of the KNC explained this change in its programme as a step towards uniting the Syrian opposition on a Syrian national agenda and removing obstacles to achieving the hopes of the Syrian people.²⁷ It was described as a tactical move that would allow them to engage with the Syrian opposition and help to refute claims that the Kurds were separatist. Reportedly, the foreign affairs committee of the KNC had encountered problems in dealing with the SNC because the right of self-determination was interpreted by many within it as a sign of Kurdish separatism.²⁸ The term itself was replaced with the demand for recognition of the national rights of the Kurdish people in Syria in accordance with international conventions and agreements.²⁹ The new phrase was said to imply the right to self-determination, through recourse to international laws such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN Charter. Party leaders continued to talk openly of self-determination for the Kurds of Syria and, in particular, of federalism for Kurdish areas in Syria. Nevertheless, the unity and outreach into the Kurdish community that the KNC provided through its more radical and rigid political agenda appeared to be weakened after this. Again, the

KNC was criticised for compromising Kurdish demands, not responding to the Kurdish street and failing to take practical measures to support Kurdish protestors and youth movements.

The PYD's Power Play

The power vacuum in the Kurdish regions of Syria provided the PYD with an opportunity to put into practice Öcalan's theories of democratic autonomy and confederation and to apply a form of bottom-up self-management, distinct from that of state systems. Beginning with social organisation within Kurdish areas establishing institutions (from schools to prisons) to address social problems, the PYD and the PCWK moved their focus to protection of the regions through 'civil defence'.³⁰ PYD co-chair, Asya Abdullah, described the democratic autonomy project as both a new form of self-government and a philosophy of life, transferred to the population through educational academies.³¹

With increased control by the PYD in Kurdish areas of Syria and its emergence as the most powerful Kurdish party outside the KNC, questions about the party's connections to the PKK and the Syrian government resurfaced. As described in Chapter 1, the PYD had acted illegally in Syria and had been targeted by the regime prior to the uprising as part of the agreement between Turkey and Syria in 1998 to combat PKK activity. Many PYD members had been arrested since its establishment in 2003, but the Syrian uprising altered political agendas and allegiances in Syria as well as beyond it. Cooperative relations between Turkey and Syria unravelled in the face of Assad's violent crackdown against protestors. Independent reports and Turkish intelligence suggested that Assad was again supporting PKK activities in Turkey and allowing the PYD to operate freely in Syria.³² These allegations also came from the Arab opposition as well as from within the Kurdish communities in Syria themselves. The evidence to support such accusations included the following: the PYD party leader, Salih Muslim, exiled from Syria in 2010 and then encamped with the PKK in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, returned to Syria in 2011, reportedly with as many as 2,000 PKK guerrilla fighters, without intervention by the regime; initially the PYD did not explicitly call for the fall of the regime and remained open to dialogue with it; it openly established a number of Kurdish language schools without interference from Syrian authorities; it was accused of preventing and disrupting protests against the regime in Efrîn; it erected checkpoints and began policing Kurdish areas in the presence of regime security services and its takeover of Kurdish towns and regions was peaceful and swift, raising suspicions that they had an agreement with the Syrian authorities to secure the areas from the FSA and to incite sectarian divisions within Syria.

Each point here was refuted by the PYD. The party categorically denied any connections to the Assad regime or to the PKK, aside from an ideological affinity with Öcalan's theory of democratic confederation.³³ In response to questions about the parties' policies regarding the regime and how the PYD could set up language and cultural centres without authorisation from the government, Salih Muslim responded with the following:

We demand a fundamental change to the oppressive system. There are some who hold up the slogan: the fall of the regime. In contrast we demand the fall of the oppressive authoritarian system. Our problems are not problems of powers. The ruling powers in Damascus come and go. For us Kurds, this isn't so important. What is important is that we Kurds assert our existence. The current regime does not accept us, nor do those who will potentially come into power. Our politics differ from a politics that seeks power. That needs to be clear.

[S]ince the beginning of the unrest, the regime has had no possibility to attack us. If it does attack us, it will see what happens. We are profiting from the unrest. It is a historical chance for us. We have a right and are making use of it. We do not kill anyone and we also do not fight against anyone. We are preparing our people and ourselves for the period after the fall of the regime.³⁴

As a political party the PYD has a more aggressive political strategy than the other parties and, although it has never taken up arms in Syria before June 2012,³⁵ its strategy bears some similarities to that of the PKK. A cadre party, involving strict organisation, training and regular political, cultural and social activities, the party promotes the use of practical steps towards political goals and the exploitation of opportunities in order to further party objectives. Organisationally it claims to be independent, but it shares an ideology with the PKK and a loyalty to Abdullah Öcalan. It is also one of the parties within the *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (KCK or Union of Communities in Kurdistan) which is led by Öcalan and *Kongra-Gel*, and which also includes the PKK, PJAK (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê* in Iran) as well as the armed wings of the PKK and the PYD. The PYD defines itself in relation to the Syrian state rather than to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Nonetheless, Öcalan's ideology, Turkish policy and Kurdish activities and activists in Turkey feature heavily in party statements, symbolism and rhetoric. The PYD has taken advantage of the power vacuum in Kurdish regions and has resisted FSA entry into Kurdish areas. Their actions, however, cannot be understood as proof of collusion with the Syrian regime and the party has repeatedly rejected such accusations, Salih Muslim stating that the PYD had 'no relations with the regime at all', but that it would not fight someone else's battle.³⁶ Yet,

alongside its practical steps on the ground in Syria, the PYD has demonstrated repeatedly a commitment to supporting the Kurdish struggle in Turkey, and resisting the encroachment of Arab and Islamist opposition groups, which its claims are supported by Turkey, into Kurdish regions in Syria.

Amongst the Kurds in Syria the PYD provokes strong opinions, either in favour of it or against. This is due to their tactics, their focus on Turkey, their association with the PKK, and, consequently, presumed PKK relations with the Assad regime. As soon as it began, the push by the PYD to gain control of Kurdish areas in Syria met with opposition from amongst the Kurds. Although the Efrîn region already had a strong PYD presence, pockets of resistance to their domination emerged. For example, in the village of Gazwiyeh, a local group was formed in 2011 when the PYD attempted to establish a checkpoint in the borders of the village. The group did not allow the PYD to do this, instead establishing their own checkpoint.³⁷ Evidence of further attempts to curb the control of the PYD over Kurdish areas emerged alongside additional reports of PYD attacks on Kurdish activists. KurdWatch reported that on 15 May 2012, a group of Kurds, calling themselves the 'Liberation of Efrîn' and claiming to be part of the Free Syrian Army, fired shots into the air in an attempt to intimidate a PYD guard in the town of Kafr Jenna. The previous day the group had attacked a Syrian Army guard near Kafr Jenna seizing weapons and ammunition.³⁸ Other battalions of Kurdish army defectors have since been formed seeking to fight the regime and to counter the force of the PYD.³⁹ Clashes between PYD and KNC supporters at protests began to occur regularly, and there were frequent reports of aggressive attempts to disrupt the political activities of other parties and groups, including arresting and detaining Kurdish political activists, and even of their torture.

Although it has been very hard to judge the popularity of the KNC or the PYD, it is fair to say that some of the PYD tactics in Syria had negative effects on the KNC. On 8 June 2012 the first PYD checkpoints were erected in Qamishli where support for the KNC was stronger than for the PYD.⁴⁰ The spread of PYD checkpoints brought it into further conflict with the KNC. At the same time, the PYD's strategy exposed the weakness of the KNC on the ground in the Kurdish regions. Criticism of the KNC grew on account of its apparent unwillingness to take decisive steps to protect the Kurdish regions, to give practical support the Kurdish youth or to confront the PYD. According to Azad Muhiyuddin, a number of Kurdish independent activists had left the Council, critical of its lack of activity on the ground and of its decision-making processes which were dominated by the political parties.⁴¹ Others spoke of a sense of resignation in the face of the prominence and domination of the PYD over social and political affairs in the Kurdish areas and referred to it as a necessary evil.⁴² Azad Muhiyuddin stated that:

Whether we want it or not, the PYD is currently the strongest force in al-Qamishli. Without the PYD nothing works. What the PYD has accomplished in fifteen days, the Kurdish [National Council] could not achieve in five months.⁴³

Demonstrations in the Kurdish regions became more and more divided. In Qamishli as many as four or five separate demonstrations were held every Friday, most of them starting from the Qasimo Mosque in the western district of Qamishli. Protests were organised by the PYD, the Kurdish National Council, as well as *Şepêla Pêşerojê ya Kurdî li Sûriyê* and various youth groups. In comparison, demonstrations became less frequent in the Efrîn region where the PYD's power was greatest, and where organisation of protests by groups unaffiliated with the PYD was restricted.

The threat of civil war

The threat of civil war loomed over Syria as the uprising came to be militarised. There were reports of increased activity of militias, massacres by groups connected to the regime and revenge attacks which sent death tolls soaring. The semi-tribal nature of Syrian society and the location of different ethnic groups and sects meant that the main effects of a civil war situation would likely be confined to specific geographical fault lines within the country and specific cities. The Kurdish regions had thus far avoided a regime campaign against the Kurdish political movement and, in the absence of an influx of the FSA, the almost entirely Kurdish region of Efrîn could remain free of conflict based on Sunni, Alawite and Shi'a divisions. The Jazira was more likely to feel the affects of civil war with its mixed population, including Arab tribes, and various Christian denominations as well as Kurds.

A more immediate threat to Kurdish interests came from within the Kurdish regions themselves. The eruption of isolated but regular clashes between PYD and KNC supporters in Qamishli in May raised the possibility of conflict amongst Kurds. Kurds of different political orientations had been set on a collision course, on the one side the political parties that originate from 1957, represented primarily by the KNC, and on the other the PYD and its armed units. Conflict escalated at the beginning of June 2012. On 3 June inhabitants of Basute village in the Efrîn region opposed the PYD when its People's Defence Units (YPG's)⁴⁴ attempted to establish a checkpoint in the village. It was reported that the PYD consequently kidnapped seven activists from the local coordinating committees and released them only when the villagers agreed to the erection of the checkpoint.⁴⁵ Then on 7 June, 12 Kurdish activists, who had taken part in a KNC meeting the previous night, were taken by the PYD and held in custody awaiting trial in

special courts established by the PYD.⁴⁶ The PYD claimed that these were acts of self-defence against people who had attacked their checkpoints and that their security measures were intended to protect the Kurdish people, neighbourhoods, villages and towns in the face of escalating violence and civil war in Syria.⁴⁷ These few events are examples and only a fraction of those reported over the following months. The PYD denied many of these accusations but also accused other Kurdish activists of colluding with the Turkish government on several occasions, a charge it also levied against the SNC and the FSA.

The imbalances between the PYD and the KNC were clear, the latter opting to pursue peaceful struggle while the former armed its YPG's as a defensive strategy. In late July 2012, however, Masoud Barzani confirmed that a 'good number' of young Kurds who had fled from Syria were being trained under the guidance of KDP *peshmerga*.⁴⁸ According to Hêmin Hawrami, the head of the external relations department in the KDP, a 'very small' number of Syrian Kurds 'were trained in basic training in camps in the region in order to fill any security gap after the fall of the Syrian regime'.⁴⁹ Estimates put this number at anywhere between 600 and 3,000. This was in addition to Syrian Kurdish army defectors who had fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.⁵⁰ These armed forces were primed to become part of a national force, controlled jointly by the KNC and PCWK, for the defence of Kurdish areas in the wake of the fall of the regime. Although the support of the KDP of *el-Partî* in Syria and for the formation of the KNC suggested that these units would fall under the control of the KNC in the event of any PYD–KNC conflict. Nevertheless, the KNC's commitment to peaceful struggle and its refusal to take up arms against other Kurds meant that the KNC continued to combat the influence of the PYD verbally, by trying to gain support on the ground for its political policies and by attempts at cooperation with the PYD itself.

The Erbil Agreement and the 'liberation' of Kurdish areas

Prompted by the prospect of an escalation of PYD–KNC tensions and Kurd-on-Kurd conflict in Syria, Masoud Barzani decided to intervene in Syrian Kurdish affairs once again. Under pressure from him, on 11 June 2012 representatives of the KNC and the PYD, mediated by the KDP Iraq, met in Erbil (Hawlêr) to reach a solution to the problems that had developed between the two groups and to agree on some power sharing and division of labour in the Kurdish political and social arenas. Dubbed the Erbil Agreement, the resulting minutes of the meeting set out a plan with the following proposals:

1. Establish a joint Supreme Committee of both councils to coordinate political and diplomatic work as well as to develop a unified political

objective. This objective will be based on the immutable values of the Kurdish people as a nation and ethnicity in Syria and should work towards the overthrow of the dictatorship in Damascus, the construction of a democratic, pluralistic state and the creation of a new Syria with many ethnicities. This new Syria will satisfy the aspirations of our people by recognizing its existence as an original people in the constitution. The Kurdish question must be solved democratically.

2. Establish a Supreme Organizational Committee of both councils to coordinate practical work in the field in all regions.
3. Establish subcommittees to coordinate practical work in the field in the individual regions.
4. Cease all propaganda activities.
5. Abolish all forms of armed presence in the Kurdish regions and communities.
6. Establish joint, unarmed protection committees.⁵¹

A supplementary agreement on the functions of the resulting Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) was signed on 1 July before the committee of five representatives of the KNC and five of the PCWK was formed on 9–10 July in Qamishli. Within days, the PYD had stepped into the power vacuum left by the redeployment of the Syrian military away from the Kurdish regions as rebels moved into the key cities of Damascus and Aleppo. First taking control of Kobanî, by 29 July 2012 all of the following towns were declared 'liberated' and under Kurdish control: Efrîn, al-Darbasiyah (Dirbasiye), al-Ma'bada (Girkê Legê), Malikiyah (Dêrîk), Qahtaniya (Tirbespî), al-Qos (Ala Qews), Amuda (Amûdê), Ayn al-Arab (Kobanî), Jindires (Cindirês), and Ra's al-'Ayn (Serê Kaniyê), as well as the Ashrafiyah and Sheikh Maqsoud districts of Aleppo.

The Erbil Agreement itself was very significant. The parties jointly asserted their commitment to Kurdish unity and to achieving their aims of self-rule and protecting Kurdish areas. The agreement involved compromise on both sides, but for the parties within the KNC it allowed them to reassert their position as representatives of Syrian Kurds and to check the PYD's unilateral seizure of control over both the Kurdish areas and Kurdish political and civil organisation. Dr Abdul Hakim Bashar described KNC interests as avoiding civil war, distancing the PYD from the regime and encouraging the PYD to serve Kurdish interests.⁵² For its part, involvement in the SKC imparted legitimacy to the PYD and its actions. The experience of SKC control, however, was somewhat mixed. The differences in the tactics of the two sides naturally led to the continuation of tensions between them. The dynamics of power within the organisation suggested that the lion's share was held by the PCWK despite the 50-50 division of authority and responsibility. The PYD

continued to act unilaterally without consultation of the KNC, for example, occupying government offices in Dêrîk and establishing governing councils. Security in the Kurdish areas and borders was dominated by the People's Defence Units (YPG's), an organisation created by the PYD which broke relations with the SKC in September 2012, declaring itself independent of any political organisation. In reality the YPG's retained their connection to the PYD and facilitated PYD activities and policies. The KNC was unable to secure the return of Kurdish army defectors who received training in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the PYD blocking their return under the premise that they would only be permitted to return 'when they are ready to join the ranks of the People's Defence Units',⁵³ implying that the PYD expected security to be solely their area of responsibility. The PYD referred to the SKC as the chief decision making body on security matters. Reports indicated, however, that the SKC did not even recognise the People's Defence Units which operated outside the ambit of the Committee and which had declared on 18 September 2012 that they would not abide by decisions of the SKC.⁵⁴

In late September 2012, the two sides were brought together once again in an attempt to salvage the Erbil Agreement. Agreement was reached on a number of issues: that Qamishli would be the headquarters of the SKC, with branches in Efrîn, Kobanî, Amûdê and Dêrîk; that borders would be jointly administered and orders would come solely and directly from the SKC; a humanitarian aid committee would be formed; a justice committee would be formed with the task of managing the legal system in Kurdish areas; that a reconciliation meeting between the PYD and the KNC would be held.⁵⁵ The conciliatory tone of the agreement testified to the concerted attempt on both sides to prevent a civil war between Kurds in Syria that could have serious regional ramifications for the wider Kurdish issue. But, at the time of writing, tensions between the two sides remain, particularly on the issue of security.

The Experience of Kurdish Control

The experience of Kurdish experiments in self-rule was successful in many ways. The agenda of the political parties and the reality on the ground had begun to reflect popular calls from the street for Kurdish self-rule, self-determination and the establishment of a federal Kurdish region in Syria. The experiment was one step towards achieving that aim. The parties' commitment to unity had been severely tested by its internal political dynamic as well as external interference, but had, at the time of writing, withstood attempts to undermine the credibility of the PYD and to break the nascent Kurdish autonomy that had developed after June 2012. The PYD had been able to secure Kurdish areas, providing necessary protection from the worst effects of the Syrian uprising. In spite of the obvious detrimental consequences of unemployment, inflation, shortages of basic goods

and services that go hand in hand with protracted conflict, some semblance of normal daily life in Kurdish areas was maintained. Schools managed by Kurdish parties provided education to children and adults alike and even taught the Kurdish language freely. Many businesses continued to trade, and bakeries and factories managed by the PYD maintained supplies of basic goods, and in comparison to FSA-held areas, many of which were in ruins, Kurdish areas remained relatively peaceful. Were it not for the PYD's armed groups and its practical management of Kurdish areas there is little doubt that the Efrîn region would have been used by the FSA, or Salafist groups, as bases for rebel actions in and around Aleppo, and that it would have become a target of regime attacks. At the time of writing, aside from the regime's attacks on the Kurdish areas of Aleppo and on Serê Kaniyê, the Kurdish regions had been spared the brutality demonstrated by the regime in other areas of Syria.

Opinions of and practical experience of Kurdish rule in Syria was mixed. The PYD claimed to be governing approximately 60 per cent of Kurdish areas in 2012, and by February 2013 as much as 80 per cent.⁵⁶ While Dr Abdul Hakim Bashar (who was at the time the leader of the KNC) said that 'no Kurdish cities have been liberated. Syrian security forces have a presence in every Kurdish city.'⁵⁷ Questions were also raised about the extent of the SKC's control. Reports from inside Syria showed that regime forces, including *mukhabarat* and even the military, were still present in areas claimed to be under the control of the SKC. Other reports suggested that the Efrîn region was free of any government representation and completely under the control of the PYD, while in 'liberated' cities and areas in the Jazira region, plain clothed security services could still be seen monitoring developments while Kurdish parties controlled and administered local affairs without interference from the regime. Some critics of the parties accused the PYD of being aided by the security services in Qamishli.⁵⁸ At the same time, others questioned the representativeness of Dr Bashar and his commitment to Kurdish unity.

Although the PYD had acted decisively and swiftly when divisions within the KNC had prevented other parties from doing so, and although it had made concerted efforts to dispel external criticism, the PYD had been unable to convince the majority that it was free of ties to the PKK. The PYD continued to face accusations of collusion with the regime and there was even talk of a dictatorship of the PYD.⁵⁹ It was accused of extorting taxes and levies on goods brought over the borders under their control. Control of public facilities such as petrol stations and factories were said to have been handed to the PYD by the regime. In late October 2012, when PYD representatives in Kobanî ordered nine Kurdish parties to lower the Syrian independence flag after clashes between the PYD and the FSA in Ashrafiyah district of Aleppo⁶⁰ further tensions developed between the KNC and the PYD. The events led local representatives of the KNC in Efrîn and Aleppo

to temporarily suspend their membership of the SKC. *El-Partî* of Dr Abdul Hakim Bashar withdrew from the SKC and stationed armed men outside party offices to protect the building and party members from possible PYD retaliations.⁶¹ The KNC parties placed the blame for threatening the unity of the Kurdish political movement on the PYD actions and, for their part, announced a cooperation agreement between *el-Partî*, *Yekîti* and *Azadî* (of Mustafa Juma'a) in Kobanî.⁶²

Reports from within the Kurdish regions suggested that a sense of acquiescence to their situation had arisen.⁶³ The unity of the political movement was being maintained and Kurdish areas were being protected and managed by Kurdish forces and had, thus far, been spared the worst effects of the uprising. Although criticisms of the political system that had emerged in the Kurdish regions abounded, the fear of the regime and concerns about what might follow its overthrow produced a resignation to managing the existing balances of power within the Kurdish regions.

National responses to Kurdish 'self-rule' (Syria, Turkey and the KRG)

During the Syrian uprising the Kurdish regions and political parties have proved to be much less prone to external interference and to falling prey to the interest and agendas of external political powers than Arab opposition groups. This was due primarily to the fact that, historically, the Kurdish issue has not been adopted as a cause by competing state powers in the Middle East, which have seen the Kurds and Kurdish nationalism as a threat to their interests rather than a way of meeting them. International powers have also regarded the pursuit of Kurdish interests as an obstacle to preserving the status quo in the Middle East. While this left Kurdish political parties in want of significant political or financial support for the pursuit of Kurdish national rights, they have not been entirely immune to the effects of external power plays. Certainly the Kurds have been used as pawns in inter-state rivalries and, as detailed in Chapters 1 and 3, ties between Kurdish political parties in neighbouring states and those in Syria have complicated Kurdish politics there. These same relationships and their regional and international implications have had significant bearing on the attempts of Kurds to muster support from Western governments during the uprising.

The assertion of control over Kurdish areas took the Syrian opposition as well as Turkey and international observers by surprise. The Kurdish issue sprang into the international media and became the subject of several reports by think tanks.⁶⁴ Commentators began to talk of a Kurdish spring emerging from the fallout of the Arab spring. Suddenly the consequences of Kurdish self-rule in Syria for the wider Kurdish question and regional politics became

a pressing issue. The spectre of Sykes–Picot re-emerged and the idea of a domino effect through the different Kurdish regions made redrawing the map of the Middle East a real possibility. An existing federal entity in Iraq, nascent self-rule in Syria, renewal of activity by the PKK in Turkey and by Kurdish political groups in Iran were all signs that the Kurds were moving towards achieving additional rights from their respective governments.

The reaction of the Syrian government to the Kurdish takeover was muted, to say the least. With attention focused on Syria's major cities and its campaign against the Sunni Arab rebel opposition forces in these areas, the regime did little to prevent the Kurdish takeover of areas and towns in the Kurdish regions. Remaining elements of the *mukhabarat* continued to monitor developments in the regions but did little to interfere. Some Kurds claimed that Syrian authorities had attempted to instigate inter-Kurdish conflict and provoke sectarian tensions in Syria through their hands-off approach to developments in the Kurdish regions. This back seat taken by the regime, as the PYD moved into government offices, erected checkpoints and took control of border crossings, fuelled fears of Kurdish separatism amongst the Sunni Arab opposition and was taken as evidence of PYD connivance with the regime by Syrian opposition figures and by Kurdish opponents of the PYD. By allowing Kurds to control Kurdish regions the regime was understood to be deliberately fomenting sectarian differences that would damage the momentum of the uprising.

The view of the Syrian Arab opposition was generally negative. The idea of political decentralisation was not popular within other political opposition groups in Syria. Historically, the spectre of sectarianism and the break-up of the Syrian state has been a fear played upon by the regime since its rise to power and has been ingrained in the Syrian psyche. The experience of federalism in Iraq, for most Sunni Arab Syrians, has not been viewed as a success story, as it is by the Kurds. Its application in Syria is viewed as a precursor to national secessionism and religious conflict at the expense of the majority.

The Syrian National Council viewed the assertion of Kurdish control over Kurdish areas as not in the interests of the Kurds, their regions or the wider Syrian situation and urged the SKC to cede control of these areas to the FSA. The prospect of Kurd-on-Kurd conflict within the Kurdish regions was a real possibility, as was conflict between Kurds and Arabs or Assyrians, particularly in the Jazira region. Abdalbaset Sieda, a Kurd himself, saw the Kurdish issue as a Syrian issue best dealt with in cooperation with other peoples in the Kurdish areas and in Syria as a whole.⁶⁵ The fulfilment of this vision of the SNC national project was prevented by outspoken members of the opposition, who continued to accuse the Kurds of separatism and categorically rejected any form of decentralisation.

The FSA as a whole did not have a public or official position on the Kurds and their assertion of control in Kurdish regions. The FSA was composed

of various groups and battalions which remained predominantly local, and amongst whom cooperation was not coordinated centrally. Several FSA groups publically spoke out against Kurdish separatism in reaction to the Kurdish moves. Colonel Riad al-Asaad, FSA leader, stated that they would not allow any territory to be separated from Syria and that 'we will never leave Qamishli for the agenda of any Kurdish faction, and we are willing to fight for each inch of Syrian land'. He added that the FSA were not ready to open up a second front with the Kurds at this time, implying that, after the fall of the regime, FSA forces could be redeployed.

A few Kurdish battalions are to be found affiliated with the FSA, but the Kurdish opposition is concerned about the predominance of brigades with Islamic and jihadist names. One rebel group named itself the 'Martyr Saddam Hussein' raising obvious outrage amongst Kurds. Many FSA groups accused the PYD of working with the regime, and for its part, the PYD accused the FSA of working for Turkish interests and of being under Turkish control.⁶⁶ In late October 2012, PYD and FSA forces clashed in the Ashrafiyah district of Aleppo. At the time of writing, some tensions remained between the PYD and the FSA but evidence of cooperation and alliance building between the Kurds and the FSA also existed.⁶⁷ Kurdish parties, in particular the PYD in the Aleppo region, had provided shelter for FSA fighters escaping regime attacks and had even helped to transport arms to the FSA.⁶⁸ While the Kurdish parties were intent on preventing FSA entrenchment in Kurdish areas, preferring Arab rebels to 'liberate' Arab areas, they worked to facilitate their struggle against the regime by providing refuge and coordinating efforts in areas where their interests coincided. Given the fears of what may follow the fall of the regime, caution remains in Kurdish relations with the FSA. Dr Abdul Hakim Bashar feared that the aggressive PYD tactics in the Kurdish regions would push Kurdish youth towards the FSA in attempts to protect themselves and their communities from the PYD.⁶⁹ Indeed, evidence of this existed in the Kurdish regions and Abdulbaset Sieda implied that the experience of what Kurds on the ground were referring to as a 'PYD dictatorship' was encouraging Kurdish youth groups and some parties to develop relations with the SNC.⁷⁰

The Syrian crisis and the Kurdish seizure of control over northern Syria presented Turkey with immediate problems. Its own Kurdish issue and the upsurge in violence on the part of the PKK in Turkey and the PYD-PKK connection all complicated the Turkish position on Syria's Kurds. Declarations from Ankara suggested that Turkey would intervene against any attempt of the PKK to establish bases in northern Syria. Turkey feared that an autonomous Kurdish area in Syria with a strong PYD presence would provide a haven for the PKK to launch cross-border attacks. As Turkish relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government improved and the PKK bases in

the Qandil Mountains of the Kurdistan region became less secure, northern Syria, and in particular a Kurdish entity, was viewed by Turkey as an area in which the PKK could seek to establish bases.

While PYD officials categorically denied that they are connected to the PKK, admitting only an ideological affinity with it, Turkish intelligence agencies claimed to have evidence to the contrary. Turkey's position on any form of Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria was guided by its desire to contain its own Kurdish 'problem' and prevent any haven for the PKK, seen as synonymous with the PYD, from developing there. These interests, and the presently entrenched PYD presence in the Kurdish areas set a pretext for Turkish involvement in Syria and support for a future Sunni Arab dominated central government intent on claiming back territory controlled by the Kurds. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria and the parallel increase in PKK activity in Turkey pressed the importance of finding a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. In the absence of such a solution, the PKK remained a thorn in Turkey's side and a complication in Ankara's relations in Syria.

The Iraqi KDP has played a particularly influential and instrumental role in Kurdish politics in Syria during the uprising. Masoud Barzani was influential in forming the KNC in October 2011, and in brokering a peaceful agreement between the PYD and the KNC in Erbil in June 2012. The KDP has sought to overcome inherent divisions and weaknesses within the Kurdish political parties' movement by encouraging and facilitating unity between them. Yet, this decisive intervention in Syrian Kurdish affairs has raised questions about Masoud Barzani and the KDP's interests in the region and highlighted the political manoeuvrings and power plays involving the KDP, Turkey and the PKK.

The idea that the KDP was seeking influence amongst the Syrian Kurds and in a post-Assad 'Kurdistan Region of Syria' was raised in several reports. Analysts explained the part played by Barzani in terms of an attempt to make a bid for leadership of the pan-Kurdish nation.⁷¹ This prompted some to suggest that Syrian Kurdistan had become an arena for PKK-KDP cooperation.⁷² Any power struggle between the two parties could result in the split of the region between the two spheres of influence, increasing inter-Kurdish conflict and limiting the influence of the KDP to Syria's eastern Kurdish regions. Consequently, the KDP's involvement in the PYD-KNC relations was viewed as an attempt by the KDP to extend its influence amongst Syrian Kurds.

An alternative scenario was that Turkish interests played a more important part than those of the PKK. Relations between the KRG and Turkey, and the development of a strategic oil pipeline between the two countries, in spite of the PKK, led observers to point to cooperation between Ankara and the KRG in curbing the influence of the PKK on Syrian Kurdish affairs.

Strengthening the KNC and countering the force of the PYD was in Turkey's interests, although Ankara itself was unable to directly intervene with support for the KNC because of its own Kurdish issue and its support for the SNC and the FSA. The poor representation of KNC parties in the western Kurdish regions and the concentration of party leaders in the Jazira has prevented the KNC from gaining enough influence in the western Kurdish regions in Syria (Efrîn and Kobani) to balance that of the PYD. Moreover, its position in the Jazira has been threatened by unilateral PYD actions and control over security. Consequently, KNC cooperation with the PYD became essential for the KDP to maintain balance between the two forces and for the KRG, and Turkey, to acquire an influence in any Syrian Kurdish region that develops.

Indeed, Barzani's intervention in Syrian Kurdish affairs has positioned him as a mediator between Turkey and both the PYD and the PKK. For Turkey, Barzani's support of the SKC facilitates the containment of the PYD, places pressure on it to distance itself from the PKK and establish itself as a definitively Syrian Kurdish political party. This also allows Turkey some indirect influence on developments within the Kurdish areas of Syria. For the PYD, involvement in the SKC indirectly imparts that legitimacy, which the PYD lacks due to its association with the PKK, and opens a door for dialogue with the Turkish government. For Syrian Kurds, Barzani's intervention has relieved tensions between the various political groups and provided a tentative balance to the PYD power play.

International responses

This indeterminate position between opposition to a decentralised Syrian Kurdish entity by the non-Kurdish opposition on the one side, and limited support from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq on the other, is maintained by the absence of any international declaration of support for Kurdish demands. Despite attempts of Kurdish party leaders and political activists in the diaspora to win support from western governments for Kurdish demands in Syria, these governments, as well as Middle Eastern ones have focused political and financial support on the main Syrian (Arab) opposition groups, particularly the Syrian National Council, the FSA and the Syrian National Coalition. The sensitivity of the Kurdish issue to political relations inside Syria and its regional relations, to Turkey, a potential EU member, and indeed to the geopolitics of the region, has prevented Western governments from backing Kurdish demands or even from pressuring the Arab opposition to concede to political decentralisation of the state. In the event that this stance continues and the Kurds are left with little external support aside from that within the KRG, they are likely to continue their strategy of defence against both the regime and the Syrian opposition.

Governmental and non-governmental institutions have shown serious interest in the Kurdish issue in Syria, collating information from various experts and organisations. This interest picked up considerably when the Kurds began to assert control over Kurdish regions and the implications of the Kurdish issue in Syria to the geopolitics of the region became a pressing matter. There have been, however, no decisive steps towards practical or moral support for Kurdish demands in Syria and the Kurds and the Kurdish regions remain caught between the various local, regional and international actors and political agendas involved in the Syrian uprising. Once again the Kurdish political parties have become resigned to maintaining a status quo established to facilitate their existence.

The first year of the Syrian uprising proved decisive in positioning the Kurdish political parties in relation to the regime and the Syrian Arab opposition. Tentative steps were made by both sides to engage the Kurds and influence their position. But neither side committed itself to guarantee Kurdish rights or to provide the recognition and the political decentralisation that the Kurds required in this historic moment. Consequently, the Kurds have found themselves caught between the regime and the Arab opposition with little option but to entrench in the Kurdish regions, protect themselves from the worst effects of the Syrian uprising and take whatever steps are possible to establish a reality on the ground that would ensure Kurdish rights are recognised and demands fulfilled. The power vacuum left by the regime was filled by the Kurdish political parties, in particular the PYD, who adapted to the requirements of Kurdish self-rule, establishing local councils, distributing foods, water and fuel. The practical experience of Kurdish self-rule encouraged changes within the character of the Kurdish parties turning them into organisations engaging in the politics of power and governance. The commitment of the parties to unarmed struggle meant that the PYD obtained a monopoly over security and even over local councils and the distribution of goods and services.

Amid the political manoeuvring and coalition building of the political parties, a parallel dynamic saw Kurdish youth groups and intellectuals organising with much greater force and establishing themselves as the grass roots voices of the Kurdish street. The youth became the primary agents of the uprising in the Kurdish areas leaving the parties to follow their lead. They adopted manifestos indistinguishable from the majority of those of the political parties, a fact which blurred distinctions between the political parties and the youth organisations. Yet while criticism of the parties was heard from within them, the youth organisations did not develop into political parties or challenge their claim to representation of the Kurdish political movement. Instead the monopoly over Kurdish politics of the parties that traced their origins to 1957 was challenged by the rise of the PYD. This forced the parties to redress

their focus on internal disputes and on relations with the Arab opposition and turn their attention to the practicalities of shielding Kurdish regions from the conflict in Syria, preparing for the fall of the regime and for self-rule.

Although the removal of the regimes 'red lines' allowed the parties to decisively address their internal factionalism and detachment from Kurdish society, the parties which trace their genealogy to 1957 remain constrained by their external environment, internal divisions and their unwillingness to relinquish personal power to those outside the party remit. Instead of pooling valuable resources and opening up the party movement to reform, the incorporation of the youth groups, independent activists and intellectuals within the KNC rendered these other groups less effective on the ground and subjected them to the domination by party interests. The PYD became a further constraint on the parties' ability to negotiate their new political environment. It acted decisively when the KNC was consumed with internal factionalism. It armed groups for the defence of the Kurdish people and regions when the KNC remained constrained by its past and committed to non-violent struggle. It has led the management the Kurdish regions when the KNC was rendered ineffective by its concerns that challenging the PYD would lead to inter-Kurdish conflict. While through its establishment and its call for a federal Kurdish entity in Syria the KNC has risen to the challenge posed to the achievement of Kurdish rights by the non-Kurdish opposition, it has surrendered to an unfavourable and unqual balance of power with the PYD within the Kurdish regions.

Despite imbalances in power relations between the Kurdish parties and although problems remain, all parties have displayed a strong commitment to the unity of the Kurdish political movement embodied in the KNC, the PCWK and the SKC. The establishment of the SKC and its management of the Kurdish areas laid the institutional foundations for the achievement of the Kurdish vision of what would follow the end of the uprising. Through this early experience of Kurdish 'self-rule' the Kurds have attempted to position and ready themselves for the power vacuum and potential conflict that would develop in the wake of the overthrow of the regime. Neither the regime, nor the Syrian Arab opposition have accepted Kurdish demands in Syria and worrying questions remain as to the opposition's commitment to even basic rights to freedom of culture, expression and identity.

While most parties of the KNC committed to federalism as the only viable solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria and as the best protection from the prophesied descent into civil and sectarian war after the fall of the regime, questions remain about the exact form of a Kurdish federal entity or autonomous region that might emerge from the crisis. External support for such an entity is, so far, also limited. The Kurds, however, having achieved such significant political advances, albeit without the resources of the state and in an uncertain position, will not easily relinquish the degree of control that they have obtained during the Syrian uprising.

EPILOGUE

THE NEW WORLD OF SYRIAN AND KURDISH POLITICS

In March 2011 the Kurdish political parties entered into the Syrian uprising, their historic chance to attain Kurdish demands. At the time, they were burdened with a crisis of legitimacy caused by internal factionalism, disengagement with the Kurdish youth and intellectuals and a focus on external political avenues. The new circumstances in Syria and the power vacuum left by the regime in the Kurdish areas ushered in a fundamental shift in Kurdish politics in Syria, opening opportunities for the parties to develop into organisations with a stake in the politics of state, as entities that practice the politics of governance. Yet, the parties' crisis of legitimacy continued to affect their decision-making processes and their ability to negotiate the challenges that the uprising brought with it.

In the wake of the 2004 Qamishli uprising protest became more common and visible, but did not add any new dimension to organised protests in Syria. Rather, the parties restricted protest to symbolic acts of solidarity. There were no verbal or visual references to those held responsible for the deaths of those now revered as martyrs, and no references to the political identity of the victims of state repression. The warnings from the regime and the counter-measures taken against participants in these events and the political parties' leaders from 2008 triggered an additional retreat of the parties and distanced them further from their stated aims and from Kurdish society. The research conducted for this book showed that the events of March 2004 were significant, more in terms of confirming popular nationalist consciousness and the unity of the Kurdish people, than in terms of any particular watershed in the actual politics of the parties. Consequently, when the parties failed to exploit the opportunities presented to them and criticism of them became