

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4774>



Syria/Kurdistan

# The Kurdish national movement in Syria: political goals, controversy and dynamic

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV502 - November 2016 -  
Publication date: Saturday 19 November 2016

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights  
reserved

---

**In this interview for the Greek website [Ela Liberta](#) at the end of October, Joseph Daher explains his position on the Kurdish movement in Syria in detail.**

### **What are the goals of PYD and what is the purpose of its alliances?**

Joseph Daher : There is a consensus among all Kurdish political parties, including PYD, to establish in a future Syria without Assad a form of decentralization, while all emphasizing the full integrity of Syrian territory within a federal system. The way to reach it is however different for numerous reasons. PYD has for example pursued a policy of strengthening its political influence through its own armed forces to control Kurdish majority inhabited areas, even more, and to try to link the 3 "Rojava" cantons geographically, but without any cooperation with Syrian Arab opposition forces, and sometimes even against them. On the other side, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) has argued that a federalist system has to be established following discussions with and explanations to the actors of the Syrian Arab opposition, which for the majority views federalism as a step toward separatism and division.

Regarding alliances, PYD officials actually recognized they have made a strategic decision not to confront military regime forces when they could, yet refusing accusations of collusion, describing themselves as a "third current" between an "oppressive regime and hardline rebel militants". At the same time there is no doubt that the PYD has engaged the regime in a conciliatory rather than confrontational manner and has pursued a modus vivendi that served both actors, at least for the short term. The possibility of the PYD to organize freely in Syria and to bring few thousands of armed fighters to Syria from Qandil enclave in Iraq in the first year of the uprising in 2011 allowed it to reestablish a presence and operate openly in Syria. This was made according to few sources and in exchange for cooperation with regime security forces in order to crush anti regime protests in majority Kurdish populated areas, which did occur notably in Afrin and some Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo. This did not prevent at the same period confrontations between PYD members and regime forces, while PYD promoting an anti regime propaganda in its social medias.

The self-governance of majority-Kurdish areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – also known as 'Rojava – Northern Syria' – is a direct result of the mass movement by the people of Syria (Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians together) against the Assad regime. The popular uprising pushed the regime to conclude a deal with the PYD in July 2012, in which they withdrew from several majority-Kurdish regions in the North to redeploy its armed forces to repress the uprising elsewhere, while maintaining small presence in some areas such as Qamichli and Hassaka.

Rather than being an Assad proxy, we can consider that the PYD has played a mutual beneficial role for itself and the Assad regime, seeking to take advantage of the lack of security and to expand the land it currently controls

Therefore, there is no *stricto sensu* alliance between the Assad regime and the PYD as some say, but a pragmatic agreement of non confrontation, with conflicts in some periods, but that can't last for ever. The best proof of this situation is that although a kind of non-aggression pact existed between PYD and the regime, Assad has repeatedly declared that it refuses any kind of autonomy for the Kurds in Syria. In August, the Syrian Regime air force bombed the Kurdish neighbourhoods of the city of Hassaka, while Assad tacitly accepts Turkish military intervention and support to FSA and Islamic fundamentalist movements against the PYD in Northern Syria.

This does not mean in the same time that in the future new tactical and temporary collaboration between the two actors in a particular political context can occur.

## The Kurdish national movement in Syria: political goals, controversy and dynamic

---

In relation to the dominant trend of the opposition in exile, relations are not good, notably because of chauvinism of many groups and personalities within the Syrian Arab opposition – particularly the Syrian National Coalition, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhoods and the rightwing, while being allied to Turkey's AKP government.

The majority of the Syrian Arab opposition believes that Kurds are normal Syrian citizens who have been deprived of some of their rights and that the problem is therefore limited to the single issue of the census in 1962, which resulted in around 120,000 Kurds being denied nationality and declared as foreigners, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination. There were between 250,00 and 300,000 stateless Kurds in the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, roughly 15 percent of the estimated two million total Kurdish population in Syria. The far majority of the opposition political parties have not been ready in any way to recognize the Kurds as a separate "people" or "nation" and are not ready and willing to listen to demands for federalism and administrative decentralization. As mentioned before, the demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the quasi majority of Kurdish parties in the country despite their political differences and rivalries.

We have to understand that the demand for a federal system by the Syrian Kurdish political parties is rooted in decades of state oppression, and this since the independence of the country in 1946, on a national basis (policies of quasi systematic discrimination against Kurds, policies of colonization in the framework of the "Arab Belt" and cultural repressions at all levels), but also has socio-economic consequences: the most impoverished areas of the country were the areas mostly populated by Kurds such as in the north-eastern Jazirah.

In this perspective, the majority of the Syrian Arab opposition did not address or even acknowledge this reality, mirroring the regime's position.

Lately, the great majority of the Syrian Kurdish political movements, including the PYD and Kurdish National Council, were angered by the recent transition plan, proposed by the opposition's High Negotiations Committee for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, as the plan did not envision any form of federalism in post-war Syria. The High Negotiations Committee for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces proposed the principle of administrative decentralization in managing the country's affairs. The Kurdish National Council, which is part of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Etilaf), but which has failed repetitively to recognize Kurdish rights with this latter or the previous Syrian National Council at the 2011 Tunis Conference and at subsequent conferences in Geneva and Riyadh, stated clearly that "this document is not part of a solution, but rather a danger to a democratic, pluralistic and unified Syria guaranteeing cultural, social and political rights to all its ethnic, religious and linguistic groups". They add "Whoever reads the document notes immediately that point 1 of the "General Principles" exclusively lists the Arab culture and Islam as sources "for intellectual production and social relations". This definition clearly excludes other cultures – be they ethnic, linguistic or religious – and sets the majority culture as the leading one. As Syrian Kurds we feel repulsed by this narrow perception of the Syrian people. The similarities between this definition and the chauvinist policies under the Assad regime are undeniable". Just as on October 25, 2016, The Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC) condemned the Turkish bombardment of populated districts in Aleppo Governorate. The council explicitly demanded that the Turkish Army stop killing civilians and demanded that it withdraws its forces from Aleppo countryside,

At the same time as we mentioned before, PYD policies have also been problematic such as its non-conflict orientation towards the Assad regime, support for Russian intervention in Syria and even benefiting in the beginning of 2016 of Russian bombing in the countryside of Aleppo to conquer new territories against FSA and Islamic opposition forces. According to latest news, new military fights are unfortunately occurring between these actors in the northern region of Aleppo. And there are also some accusations of human rights violations against Arab populations. In addition, it has practiced authoritarian and repressive measures against other Kurdish groups and activists.

In general, no solution for the Kurdish issue and an inclusive Syria can be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper "people" or "nation" in Syria and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere; this clearly does not mean being uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD or any other Kurdish political party.

We need to reaffirm that the defeat of the Syrian revolution and of the popular movement would probably mark the end of the Rojava experience and the return to an era of oppression for the Kurds of Syria. The Assad regime and the Islamic reactionary forces would not allow any possible development of a political experience that is out of their authoritarian program.

This is why we should not isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution.

This is important to understand because among all international and regional powers, there is a near consensus around certain points: to liquidate the revolutionary popular movement initiated in March 2011, stabilize the regime in Damascus and keep at its head the dictator Bashar Al-Assad for the short-to-medium term. Also their objective is to oppose Kurdish autonomy and try to militarily defeat jihadist groups such as Daesh.

### **What is the relationship of the PYD with the democratic forces of the Syrian opposition?**

J.D: Unfortunately, increased separation and division has appeared at times between the Syrian Arab and Kurdish movements, and most particularly the PYD. The majority of the Syrian Arab forces opposed to the Assad regime see federalism as a step toward separatism and division. This is strengthened, as mentioned previously, by the non confrontational policies of the PYD towards the Assad regime, which included notably maintaining communication channels open since the uprising began in 2011, cohabiting with regime forces in the cities of Qamichli and Hassaka, (despite occasional and violent confrontations) and abuses and violations of Human Rights against Syrian Arab civilians in areas dominated by the military forces of PYD, raise suspicions and opposition of a part of the Arab population of Syria.

According to a survey conducted between November 2015 and January 2016 by the independent Syrian-led civil society organization The Day After Tomorrow (TDA), respondents in both regime (86.7%) and opposition-held areas (67.4%) agree on rejecting federalism, while proponents of federalism almost reach a consensus in Kurdish-led Self-Administration areas (79.6%). These results show that a Kurdish-Arab divide exists and that the first imperative regarding any future political system in Syria is dealing with the "Kurdish issue".

In addition to this, in Kurdish majority inhabited regions, Syrian Kurdish democratic forces have tensed relations with PYD, because of campaigns of repression of this latter and its authoritarian policies.

### **Are there other Kurdish political forces.? Which of them are left or forces of the movement? What they seek? What is their relationship with the PYD?**

J.D: It is firstly important to note that all Kurdish political parties, except may be the Future movement headed by Mishaal Tammo at the time before being assassinated in October 2011 and the Yekiti party that was important since the beginning of the 1990s in mobilising the Kurdish youth against the regime, were absent or not the main actors mobilising the Syrian Kurdish streets at the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, adopting a more cautious approach. The protest movement in these areas emerged around pre-existing youth groups or newly established "Local Coordination Committees", seeing themselves as part of the national movement against the regime and calling for its overthrow. Young activists organized themselves by using social medias, including facebook. Local

coordinating committees in the Arab parts of the country were the model for the development of similar groups in the Kurdish regions. The collaboration between some of the Arab and Kurdish youth groups and LCCs continued in a significant way until around March 2012 and then it weakened to become more localised, especially after the main Syrian Arab opposition in exile rejected the demands of the Kurdish parties.

Meanwhile, Kurdish traditional political parties although may be rhetorically supporting the demands of the protesters, tried to divide or weaken, including repression in the case of the PYD, the Kurdish youth movement through various ways and organized their own demonstrations to boost their own credentials rather than the popular national movement against the regime.

This situation did not prevent however in October 2011 the organization of a conference gathering the majority of Kurdish political parties, putting aside internal differences, independents, Kurdish youth organisations, Kurdish women organisations, human rights activists and professionals. The objective was to unite the Kurdish opposition and establish a united and representative Kurdish voice in Syria, especially in the context of Kurdish concerns about the political program and agenda of several actors within the Syrian National Council, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its close relations with the AKP Turkish government. This is how was created the Kurdish National Council. Unfortunately, with time, the voice of the Kurdish youth and local coordination committees within the KNC, were taken over once more by the domination of the traditional Kurdish political parties which marginalized them by their control of the decision making process and political support from outside, notably Barzani.

The KNC was formed in Erbil, Iraq, under the sponsorship of Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. The stated mission of the KNC was to find a “democratic solution to the Kurdish issue” while emphasizing that it was part of the revolution. In June 2016, the KNC was composed of 12 parties, but most of them were acting outside of Syria now. Moreover, the KNC leadership left to Erbil, the regional capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), because it was unable to organise in Syria.

Despite several attempts of reconciliation between the PYD and KNC these past few years, relations are very bad with attacks on both sides. KNC members and representatives have been arrested on numerous occasions in areas controlled by the PYD, while the border with the Kurdish areas of Iraq controlled by Barzani were often closed by this latter to pressure the PYD resulting in lack of essential goods and medical supplies.

The domination of the PYD on these Kurdish inhabited majority areas did not however put an end to the activities of youth groups independent from the PYD and KNC. In cities like Qamichli, ?Amudah, ?Ayn al-?Arab (Kobani?), and ad-Darbasiyah, young people have joining forces in groups united by common interests and goals, not by party affiliation. Youth and community centers focusing on education, culture, politics, and human rights and built upon on the work of volunteers have developed considerably and enjoyed great popularity until nowadays.

### **What conditions prevail in the areas controlled by the PYD (civil liberties, human rights etc.)?**

J.D: Institutions in PYD controlled areas are dominated by PYD-affiliated organisations, with an assortment of Kurdish, Syriac and Assyrian personalities who had little to lose from entering the project. For a far majority of Kurdish political parties and activists, Rojava is only a new form of authoritarianism rather than democratic confederalism in action. As evidence of this many of them pointed out to the exclusion of opposition parties and activists from youth groups within Rojava. Members and leaders of the people’s councils, which were established by the authorities of Rojava, are theoretically responsible for local governance and including representatives of all Kurdish political parties as well as non-Kurdish population in mixed areas, are appointed by the PYD. Likewise, the movement maintains overall decision-making authority, consigning the councils other than for distribution of gas and humanitarian aid to a largely symbolic role. The commune’s institution, one of the key element in the new Rojava system, whose role is to provide humanitarian assistance to the inhabitants in their neighbourhoods, has been

criticized to enforcing the rule of PYD linked organisations.

At the same time, these new institutions lack legitimacy among large sections of the Syrian Arabs in these areas, although an Arab president had to be elected to the male/female joint presidency of the town's local council. For instance Shaykh Humaydi Daham al-Jarba, the head of a tribal Arab militia and an outspoken supporter of the Assad regime, was nominated as the governor of the Jazirah canton in Rojava in 2014. His son became the commander of the al-Sanadid Forces, one of the main Arab militias fighting alongside the PYD-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Prominence of tribal leaders in the Rojava institution was also preserved, rather than challenges.

The authoritarianism of the PYD was demonstrated in its repression and imprisonment of activists, political opponents and the closure of critical organizations or institutions, such as the independent radio Arta in February 2014 and April 2016. Members of other rival Syrian Kurdish opposition parties like the Yekiti Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria and Azadi party have particularly suffered from the repression by the authorities in the autonomous regions of Rojava for their peaceful activism and criticism of the PYD. Just lately, the KNC's president, Ibrahim Berro, was arrested in August 2016 at an Asayish checkpoint in Qamichli, and then exiled to Iraqi Kurdistan the day after. As a reaction, in mid September, the local councils of the Kurdish National Council in the northern province of Hassaka, Maabdeh, Amoudah, Qamishli, al-Jawadiyeh, and Malakiyeh organized a sit-in against the practices of the PYD and arbitrary arrests. The protesters demanded the release of political prisoners imprisoned by the party whose number has reached about 100. New protests occurred in October as well.

The PYD has faced growing opposition within the Kurdish population in Syria and active pro revolutionary Kurdish activists for their authoritarian policies. The increasing political and military hegemony of the PYD and the inability of the KNC to project influence inside Syria further weakened the coalition with internal divisions.

At the same time, in the areas controlled by the PYD, there are advances on some aspects that must be acknowledged such as promotion of women rights and gender equality, secularisation of laws and institutions, and to a certain extent some forms of coexistence between the various ethnicities and religious sects, despite some tensions. Some parties within the KNC also saw cooperation with the PYD as the unique way to maintain a power-base in Syria, while large sections of the population saw it as a necessary evil to defend itself against some FSA, Islamic and salafist jihadist forces attacking Kurdish regions since summer 2012. For example, the launch of the campaign "Western Kurdistan for his children" by the PYD in the summer 2012 against the attacks by Islamic fundamentalist groups against the cities mostly inhabited by Kurds also diminished criticisms against the party and gathered temporarily the Syrian Kurdish political scene with the support of other Kurdish groups to this campaign, while reiterating the need for the PYD to work and collaborate with them. The PYD and its military branch, YPG, role as the sole viable protector of Syria's Kurds were further strengthened therefore. These kind of feeling come back every time the Syrian Arab opposition gathered around the Etilaf reject Kurdish rights and make racist discourses and speeches against Kurds or when various opposition armed forces, from FSA to Islamic Fundamentalist region supported or not by Turkey, attack PYD and Kurdish regions.

[Syria Freedom Forever](#)