



Volume 5, Number 23

December 11, 2011

The Dilemma of Syria's Kurds

Joel Daniel Parker

It is well known that the opposition in Syria to President Bashar al-Asad's regime is fractious. No group demonstrates this better than Syria's Kurdish population. The most enduring protest movement of the Arab Spring is found in Syria, where human rights organizations allege that the security forces have killed over 4,000 persons to date. While 19 out of 22 Arab League countries have initiated economic sanctions targeted at the regime, and Western countries are increasingly convinced that the fall of the regime is merely a matter of time, it is difficult to identify a consensus among the Kurdish minority regarding the crisis. This is at a time when the conflict is increasingly taking on sectarian and more violent tones, with Sunni Muslims lining up against the heterodox 'Alawi sect (from which the core of the Asad regime comes), and its Shi'i allies in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. For Syria's Kurds, who are predominantly Sunnis, the dilemma of which side to choose is not colored by religious issues per se, but by concern for what is best for the community, an ethnic minority in an Arab state.

In practice, Syria's Arab nationalist undergirding has led to a desperate situation: some 300,000 or more Kurds are deprived of basic citizenship rights, owing to a pre-Ba'thist governmental decision in 1962. The exclusion of Syria's Kurds from the Syrian body politic as long as they refused to be fully integrated into the Arab cultural milieu remained a policy constant under successive Ba'th regimes, including 41 years of the Asad dynasty. So it would seem that the Kurds would be among the first to fully support and even lead the opposition against Bashar al-Asad. Yet at the moment, Sunni Arabs are at the helm of the opposition, whether through Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood or as part of the Free Syrian Army, hosted by Turkey and led by Riad al-As'ad, a Sunni Arab. Even the multi-ethnic organizations that have been part of the core opposition since 2005, such as the Damascus

Declaration group, still embrace Arab nationalism as the hegemonic political ideology of Syria.¹

Syrian Kurds face obstacles in joining the two major umbrella opposition groups that were established in recent months and claim to represent the protests inside Syria: the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC). The organizations have contrasting approaches: the increasingly dominant SNC calls for the removal of Bashar al-Asad, while the second calls for dialogue with the regime and democratization measures. The NCC includes three Kurdish groups (out of 13) and tends to be secular in orientation, but it is increasingly out of touch with public sentiment that opposes further dialogue with the authorities. The SNC is primarily Sunni Arab, with only one Kurdish party from inside Syria taking part: the Kurdish Future Current, whose leadership was harassed by the government in recent years.² Moreover, the leader of the Future Current, Mish'al Tammo, was assassinated soon after proclaiming his support for the protests against the regime and indicating his intention to join the SNC. The killing reverberated throughout Syria's Kurdish community, but failed to mobilize it against the regime.³

Both longstanding and new Kurdish political groups are divided along geographic lines. Many Kurds of Syrian origin have lived in exile for years in Western European cities, America, Russia and elsewhere, where they absorbed some of the political ideologies of their surroundings and, in most cases, became loyal citizens of their country of refuge. Those who stayed in Syria have been subjected to the tightly controlled education and media of the Ba'th Party. Most Kurdish political organizations have been suppressed and it has become increasingly clear that the surviving groups have lost much of their motivation to challenge the regime. That said, there is a spark of discontent among the youth in Syria that crosses ethnic and sectarian boundaries and has spread to many Kurdish youth. However, in Syrian Kurdish society, it is still the older generation that represents local communities. So while the elders negotiate with the Syrian regime, many young Syrian Kurds face a dilemma: even if they are inclined to act, they are unsure whether they should seek to play an active role in the Syrian episode of the 'Arab Spring' or whether they should work towards creating a parallel 'Kurdish Spring'.

The complex geopolitical situation of the greater Kurdistan communities makes Kurds of Syrian origin wary of increased Turkish involvement in Syrian affairs, and vice versa. This suspicion affects their policy choices. By contrast, Asad has been courting the Kurds since the start of the uprising. As early as March 2011, when the protests in Syria were just starting to gain momentum, Asad offered to give the stateless Kurds 'Syrian Arab' citizenship and permitted the peaceful celebration of Kurdish New Year.⁴ As it became clear

¹ See their original proclamation, for example,

² Vladimir Troyansky & Ofra Bengio, "Facing the Ba'th: the Syrian-Kurdish Awakening," *Tel Aviv Notes*, 19 Aug. 2010.

³ http://english.ruvr.ru/radio_broadcast/25298789/58578976.html

⁴ <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111>

that the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had turned against the Asad regime, reports surfaced that Asad had threatened to step up his support for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey, and was even reviving his ties to associates of the PKK.⁵ The PKK has been an almost constant thorn in Turkey's side for decades; in the 1980s and 1990s, Hafiz al-Asad gave them a safe haven until Turkey threatened to invade in 1998, after which Syria expelled their leader, Abdullah Öcalan. While the PKK is not the most influential Kurdish organization in Syria, such gestures and threats are likely to win favor among local Kurds who prefer Asad to Erdoğan.

On November 23, Erdoğan apologized for Turkey's role in killing some 14,000 Kurds in military campaigns in the late 1930s. Although that was indirectly meant to embarrass his political rival, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, whose Republican People's Party was in power at that time, it was also intended to send a message to Kurds elsewhere that he is ready to engage seriously with the Kurdish question.⁶ As for Iraqi Kurds, their ties with Syrian Kurds have actually weakened in the last few years due to the Kurdish Regional Government's about-face regarding Turkey after 2004. Iraqi Kurdish leaders barely protested when Turkey invaded Northern Iraq to fight PKK militants in 2008.⁷ For militant Kurdish activists in Syria, however, a move towards normalization with Turkey, the West and Saudi Arabia would mean that they would have to forego their separatist agenda and at the same time accept a new level of cultural and political transparency, as Iraqi Kurds have discovered.

There are some signs that the Kurdish opposition outside of Syria may have grown disillusioned with the mainstream opposition's refusal to radically rethink Syria's inherited political culture, including the dominant Arab nationalist discourse, which essentially left the Kurds outside of the nation. In Istanbul last month, Kurdish groups walked out of a meeting of opposition leaders because the other groups refused to even consider dropping the term 'Arab' from the country's official name, the "Syrian Arab Republic", in a post-Asad order. This rupture over the issue of Arab nationalism explains how the Kurds went from being the largest single faction at the first meeting of the exiled Syrian opposition, numbering 65 (22 percent) of the 300-person delegation that met on June 1st,⁸ to having only four members (13 percent) on the 29-person SNC that was formed in October.⁹ Although the percentage of Kurds on the SNC leadership committee is proportionate to their population size, the complete absence of Christians, 'Alawis and Druzes would seem to leave open spots for Kurds who, unlike the other minority communities, have been disaffected with the Ba'th regime for decades.

Although Syrian Kurds inside the country are largely silent on the subject of Arab nationalism, it was interesting to see how quickly Omar Osi of the

⁵ <http://www.meforum.org/3100/syria-turkey-kurds>

⁶ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/turkey-pm-apologizes-for-1930-killing-of-14-000-kurds-1.397314>

⁷ <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111>

⁸ <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10034>

⁹ See, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-260061-syrian-national-council-member-we-are-electing-our-leadership-in-istanbul.html> for information regarding the October SNC numbers.

National Initiative of Syria's Kurds turned against the Arab League's involvement in the Syrian issue. He immediately condemned the initial Arab League resolution against Asad as a plot by Israel and America — implying that the Arab League had become a tool of foreign imperialism.¹⁰

Asad may be willing to offer Kurds fairly large returns on their investment if they stick with him and he is able remain at the helm. Alternatively, in the event of Asad's departure but with the 'Alawis remaining the dominant force in the ruling elite, the Kurds may fare well. The Kurds, like the Druzes and Christians, are not threatening to the 'Alawi minority. Owing to the distances between their particular home regions, they tend not to have overlapping or competing interests, and all roughly share the same population percentages. If Asad and/or his hardcore supporters survive this particular challenge, they will probably seek to bring together the country's various minorities and the urban wealthy and upper-middle class Syrians of Damascus and Aleppo, who until now have been reluctant to march in the streets against the regime.

Joel Parker is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website <http://www.dayan.tau.ac.il>.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."

¹⁰ SANA website, English edition, 13 Nov. 2011, "Arab League Resolution is the Latest Chapter of the Conspiracy against Syria".