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Position Paper

The Kurdish Question in the Syrian Revolution



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The Kurdish question came to the forefront of the Syrian revolution at the end of July 2012. Indeed, the Kurds were active in the revolution and its developments but the July events put their destiny and that of Kurds in the Middle East as a whole at extreme risk in terms of their relationship with the future of Syria as well as the regional conflict caused by the complexities of the revolution.

Since the Syrian regime lost control over a number of cities and towns during the past year and a half, reports maintained that Kurdish groups linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – which has fought a painful guerrilla war against Turkey since the mid-eighties – have been supporting regime forces and security units, particularly in Aleppo and its countryside where Kurds live in small numbers and are scattered. However, the second half of July saw a significant and rapid decline of Damascus's grip on a large number of international border posts with Iraq and Turkey and vast urban and rural areas in the northwest and northeast as well as Deir Ezzor in the east. What is noteworthy is that regime forces, which have avoided using violence to confront demonstrations in Kurdish cities in the north-eastern province of Hasaka since the beginning of the revolution, withdrew from a number of its cities and towns without a fight and handed them over to organised Kurdish groups.

This is a reading of the background of the Kurdish question in Syria and the complications entailed.

Syrian Kurds and their Political Forces

There are no definite figures for the Kurdish population in Syria. It is believed that they account for a tenth of the Syrian population, or slightly over two million people – the majority of whom live in Hasaka and adhere to Sunni Islam. Nonetheless, there are Kurds in Damascus (whose roots go back to the Ottoman period) and Aleppo. Kurdish parties say that the Kurds constitute a majority of the residents of Hasaka but official and unofficial sources have always maintained that the high percentage of the Kurdish population in the cities of Hasaka does not necessarily mean that they are the majority in any of its main cities including Qamishli (whose name itself is Kurdish).

While the Kurds of Damascus and Aleppo are the most integrated, several hundreds of thousands of Kurds from Hasaka are suffering from having been denied citizenship by the state. The problem of the right to citizenship stems from the Baath party's rise to power in 1963, and what the state sees as the ambiguity of some Kurds' origins – i.e. whether they took refuge in Syria from Iraq and Turkey during periods of national conflict in the Kurdish areas of the two countries or are indigenous Syrians. Whatever the case may be, the fact that the state has denied them their rights for fifty years is an indication that the regime has ignored the rights of all Kurds. Recently, in an attempt to blackmail the Kurds and weaken their participation in the popular protest movement, the regime issued a decision granting nearly 200,000 Kurds Syrian nationality.

Unlike in Iraq, where the armed nationalist movement worked for decades to contain any inclinations towards political fragmentation, there are more than 15 Kurdish partisan organisations in Syria with varying visions and programmes that range from national, cultural, social and economic demands to the pursuit of an independent Kurdish national entity. One of the most prominent forces is the Democratic Union Party founded in 2003. Led by Saleh Muslim Mohammed, who is known to have close ties with the PKK, it is no more than an extension of it. Nearly 20 percent of the PKK's militants are Syrian Kurds – which the regime remained silent about the whole time, whether while the PKK enjoyed its support, after the improvement of Syrian-Turkish relationships, or after the start of the revolution. Hence, the regime sought to strengthen its relations with the Turkish Kurdish separatist party.

Most other Kurdish parties (a total of 11 political organisations) have come together since October 2011 under the framework of the Kurdish National Assembly. The assembly, which was formed under the pressure of Massoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, is not a coherent coalition. Unlike the Democratic Union Party, it

is unarmed though there are indications that its constituents have received and are still receiving military training in Erbil with the assistance of the government of the region.

On 11 July 2012, Barzani pressured both the Democratic Union Party and the National Assembly to sign an agreement in Erbil, which led to the establishment of a joint administration that would manage the border posts between Syria and northern Iraq and the areas in the Hasaka province from which the Syrian army had withdrawn. However, the agreement is still fragile. The Democratic Union Party seems to have the upper hand and the joint Kurdish administration that took over the management of border posts and cities and towns in Kurdish Hasaka is, in fact, in favour of the latter.

Regardless of what the true motives of the Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the National Assembly parties may be, it is still difficult to envisage the establishment of autonomy in north-eastern Syria parallel to that of the Iraqi Kurdistan region. In addition to the relatively smaller Kurdish population in Syria, the demographic overlap between them and the Arab Syrians, and the wide variation of objectives Kurdish forces have in the political orientations of the Kurdish communities themselves, there is a large scale regional and international opposition to the existence of a Syrian Kurdish entity.

The United States expressed its opposition to this entity clearly and conclusively. As for Turkey, there is no doubt there is a willingness to use force if the situation develops into turning Hasaka into a semi-independent entity under the control of the Democratic Union Party, which is seen by the Turks as merely an affiliate of the PKK. Because of the growing convergence between Ankara and Erbil in terms of both politics and oil pipelines in northern Iraq, it is unlikely that the Barzani government would encourage Syrian Kurds to secede from Syria in one way or another.

However, the problem relates not only to the internal situation in Syria but also to the regional dimensions of the Syrian Kurdish file, which adds new complexities to the already escalating regional complexities of the crisis in Syria.

Syrian and Regional Dimensions

The logic that founded the regime's approach to the popular movement since its inception is basically "my way or the highway" in the sense that the Syrian people and the world around them are to accept the continuation of the regime and its perception of reform or else the country and the region as a whole will be blown up by endless conflict. The recent plot disclosed in Lebanon (on 10-11 August 2012) that led to the arrest of former minister Michel Samaha and demonstrated an attempt to aggravate the sectarian situation in Lebanon is only one indication of how the pillars of the Syrian regime view crisis management. The second indication, albeit older, is the series of massacres in rural Homs and Hama that aimed to clear the lowlands separating Mount Alawites and the centre of the Arab Sunni majority area to pave the way for the birth of an Alawite faction that is capable of defending itself should the ruling group in Damascus find itself having to resort to such an option.

The surrendering of Hasaka, and before that areas in and around Aleppo, to the armed divisions of the Union of Kurdistan provides a typical example of the policy the regime is pursuing in the face of the revolution. On one hand, this development indicates the regime's determination to sow the political landscape with division and fragmentation if it is to be forced to step down from power. A Kurdish region will not only create a significant burden on the shoulders of any new regime but will also provide a cover for a plan for a mini Alawite state as well. On the other, the official trend to enhance the power and influence of the PKK and the groups associated with it signifies new regional polarisation using the Kurdish card as has been used many times before as a pretext and in an immoral manner by the rulers of Damascus.

It is not only Damascus that uses the PKK to send threat messages to Turkey. A few weeks after the withdrawal of regime forces from most cities and towns in Hasaka, Turkish authorities learned (see the Turkish Zaman, 9 August) that the PKK, under the

pressure of increasing military operations, was gradually giving up its traditional bases in the Qandil mountains to move near Semdinli in the Hakkari province on the Turkish border with Iran. In other words, the exacerbation of both the Syrian crisis and the regional conflict over the future of Syria did not only lead to a renewal of Syrian support for the PKK, but also brought about support from Iran.

To what extent Iran will go in its relations with the PKK – with all the blatant hostility they may show Turkey and the Turks – is difficult to predict for the time being. States always face difficulties in addressing strategic failures. Iran sees a complete strategic failure in Syria, and it is not unlikely that Iranian leadership may take measures with very serious consequences regionally to deal with it. Certainly, however, is that Iran's relations with the armed separatist party, which have caused more than 45 thousand casualties in Turkey since the mid-eighties, will not be seen with any degree of leniency in Ankara.

The Kurds and the Destiny of Syria

Defections from the regime and its military and security establishments are increasing, particularly from among the leading Sunni divisions. The regime has drastically become more Alawite, even though it had already been accused of sectarianism before the outbreak of revolution. Such a decline in its structure presents to it a number of possibilities: first, that the revolution forces and concerned regional powers reach a quick political settlement to facilitate the birth of a new government and retain what remains of the central state, which will succeed in restoring its strength over time and relatively and steadily preserve the country's unity and stability; second, that the regime's delayed collapse leads to the collapse of Syria's political unity; and third, that the country goes through a long civil war, leading to the complete collapse of the state and large-scale fragmentation of authority over the land and the people.

Differences between the Kurdish National Assembly and the Syrian National Council – the most prominent opposition forces expected to play a lead role in the new Syria – are yet to be resolved. The Kurdish National Assembly withdrew from the meeting of the Syrian opposition in Cairo, which was held under the auspices of the Arab League, due to a dispute over the wording on the status of Kurds in the statement on the future of Syria. But if there is a fast transition of government in Syria and Syrians succeed in maintaining the structure of the state and some of the military force, they will not be incapable of maintaining the unity of the country by addressing the key demands of the Kurds. There are numerous Kurdish public figures, politicians, intellectuals and scholars that are an integral part of public life. These will play an important role in defusing the volatility of the Kurdish issue in Syria.

However, the prolongation of the conflict over the future of the country will introduce the Kurdish question to a number of possibilities including more Iranian involvement in both Syrian and Kurdish affairs and the escalation of tension between Turkey and Iran. Then, Iranian-Turkish tension will directly affect not only the two countries but also the situation in Iraq, which then will be dragged, with or without the consent of some of its forces, into the arena of conflict. This will come alongside the crisis's other regional effects whether on Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or the Kurdish region in northern Iraq.

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