

## 2

# THE KURDISH IDENTITY: FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

*Ola Rifai*

The Kurdish question adds a problematic dimension to the identity dilemma in Syria that exploded with the uprising. Unsurprisingly, the uprising provided a window of opportunities for Syria's Kurds to achieve their objectives, which varies from moderate to radical. Like other factions of the Syrian society, the Kurds did not represent a monolithic clique, nor did they endorse a united agenda. Instead, they were subjected to a continuous process of fragmentation. In this light, the Kurdish identity also seems to have been subjected to a drastic process of reproduction by state and non-state political entrepreneurs, who employed materialistic and symbolic features to craft an identity that would facilitate their rule. This paper analyses the various aspects of this process during the first two years of the uprising. The first section examines the role of the Syrian regime and the Kurdish political entrepreneurs in the reproduction of Kurdish identity from above. This is followed by a study of the involvement of external state and non-state actors (namely, those in Turkey and Iraq) in reproducing the Kurdish identity. The second section studies the role of symbolic features in reconstructing the Kurdish identity and in inflaming identity clashes from a bottom-up approach. The paper is based on fieldwork done by the author in Syria in (2012-2013).

### *Discourses from above: The Syrian regime rapprochement with the Kurds*

Fundamentally, the troubled Syrian regime strove to discourage the Kurdish identity group from joining the rebellion. Thus, from the onset of the uprising, the regime attempted to inveigle the Kurds into trusting it by turning a blind eye to all revolutionary activities in the Kurdish enclaves, and by allowing anti-Assad Kurds to operate there without punishment. Many anti-Assad Kurds interviewed by the author in Syria, assured that the regime's security services in Kurdish areas were aware that anti-Assad activities were taking place, during the early days of the uprising, yet they opted to ignore it. According to Hamber, a 26 year-old anti-Assad Kurd from Qamishli:

“during the first months of the uprising, we [the Kurdish youth] were protesting while displaying revolutionary flags and chanting anti-Assad slogans right in front of the regime's security services, who totally ignored us. Not a single bullet was fired against us”.<sup>1</sup>

In essence, the Assad regime adopted a policy of containment in relation to the Kurds. In the first place, only one month after the uprising, a governmental grant of citizenship was issued to thousands of Kurds in northern Syria, who had been deprived of this right for decades.<sup>2</sup> Secondly and more importantly, the regime formed an indirect alliance with a key Kurdish player, the Democratic Union Party or the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD) in Kurdish*.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with this alliance, in July 2012 Assad's forces completely withdrew from Kurdish areas and henceforth granted the Kurds a quasi-autonomy, in which the PYD was allowed to fill the political and security vacuums. Seemingly, this boosted the PYD's power over other players.<sup>4</sup> The regime's logic behind this *realpolitik* strategy was twofold. First and foremost, the regime wished to contain the Kurdish threat. Secondly, the alliance was made in an attempt to fragment the opposition, as it encouraged the growth of factions not just amongst Kurds themselves, but between Kurds and Arabs as well. Another motive for the regime's

## THE KURDISH IDENTITY; FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

empowerment of the PYD was to challenge Turkey, since the PYD which is now functioning across the southern Turkish border, has long been a thorn in Turkey's side. Consequently, the regime's rhetoric manipulated the Kurdish identity, as it pitted it against Arab identity and inflamed identity clashes on a top-down approach. Furthermore, as the following sections argue, the regime discourse interplays with discourses by Kurdish political entrepreneurs and also with discourses at the grassroots level in redrawing ethnic boundaries between Arab and Kurdish identity groups.

### *Attempts by Kurdish political entrepreneurs to reproduce Kurdish identity*

In the outbreak of the uprising, three actors emerged as key players struggling to gain a foothold in the Kurdish political theater. However, their power differs according to economic, social and geographic factors. Each of them sought to promote a different version of Kurdish identity by exploiting materialistic and symbolic elements. These players are: 1) – the PYD, a Syrian Kurdish branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK), 2) - the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of Kurdish leftist parties, and 3) - the Union of Kurdish Youth Committees in Syria (UKYC), an umbrella opposition group that includes all Kurdish revolutionary youth movements. Indeed, the first two actors constitute the old guard of the Kurdish opposition, whilst the UKYC represents what this paper considers to be the new guard of the Syrian secular opposition. As this section argues, three of these actors played crucial roles in reproducing Kurdish identity from above.

### *The PYD: an emerging hegemony?*

Although the Syrian regime's policies towards the PYD deprived the later off appearing legitimate in the eyes of many Syrian Arabs and some Kurds, the PYD nevertheless succeeded in establishing itself as the "most powerful Kurdish player".<sup>5</sup> The PYD was founded in 2003 by PKK militants of Syrian origin in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. Subsequently, the party came to be ideologically and militarily affiliated with the PKK.<sup>6</sup> Mainly, the PYD's rhetoric prioritises an affiliation with Kurdistan over an affiliation with the Syrian state, and advocates the creation of 'Western Kurdistan' [referring to the Kurdish enclaves in northeast Syria] as an autonomous state in a federal structure. The PYD's constitution states that the party adheres to "federalization since it indicates the most appropriate solution for Kurds in Western Kurdistan".<sup>7</sup> However, the constitution rejects territorial separation, and emphasises that Western Kurdistan should exist within a "free democratic Syria". In this vein, Saleh Muslim, (leader of the PYD since 2010), gave general summary of the PYD's standpoint in relation to the separation of the Syrian state: "The PYD believes that the Kurdish areas are part of Greater Syria, and hence we seek to collaborate with our partners in this country and to establish a democratic system in which Kurds can enjoy their rights. We do not seek liberation, but are determined to govern our own affairs by ourselves".<sup>8</sup>

However, experts argue that the intimate ties between the PKK and the PYD illustrate the PYD's secessionist aspirations, and the latter has been accused of intangibly defining the concept of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the PYD openly shares the PKK's ideology, and echoes its political phraseology of 'democratic autonomy'. The PKK and the PYD share a common objective of producing a transnational identity that belongs to Kurdistan and not to the Syrian territorial state.<sup>10</sup> In order to craft such an identity, the PYD has striven, since the early days of the uprising, to establish a power triangle composed

## SYRIA STUDIES

of arms, money and a supportive base. In fact, as observers on the ground have assured, the PYD has successfully created this triangle thanks to the logistic support of the Syrian regime and to the PKK's funding.<sup>11</sup> At the head of this triangle is the Popular Protection Unit or the *Yekineyen Parastina Gel* (YPG). This is the PYD's paramilitary wing that consists of some 10,000 well-trained fighters, most of whom are former PKK fighters of Syrian origin who entered Syria from neighboring Turkey. The YPG is the strongest militia functioning in the Kurdish areas, and it has filled the vacuum left by the regime's forces.<sup>12</sup> Its main mission is to secure the Kurdish zones, monitor the borders with Iraq and Turkey and most importantly, to thwart the attempts of any rivals to take power. Yet, in the eyes of many Syrian Arabs and of some Kurds, the YPG lacked legitimacy and was perceived as being a proxy for the regime.<sup>13</sup>

Paralleling this military power, the PYD formed the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK), which is an institutional body that delivers social services to the Kurdish areas, and which supplies humanitarian aid to those in need. Also, the PCWK established schools and centres that focus on teaching the Kurdish language, and on restoring the original Kurdish names to towns, cities and villages in the Syrian Kurdish areas.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the PCWK's main aim is to reinforce the Kurdish identity of the Kurdish areas in Syria. In fact, many Syrian Kurds interviewed by the author affirmed that the PCWK have widened the support base of the PYD, as it answered the need of the people efficiently given the absence of state institutions. As a Syrian Kurd of Dirbasiyya eloquently summarised: "The PCWK deals successfully with day-to-day needs, by providing things like fuel, gas and flour to Kurdish people, especially in the remote areas. Although I do not agree with the PYD's logic, practically speaking it succeeded in governing the Kurdish affairs during the hard circumstances of the uprising. If an election is to take place among the Kurds now, I can assure you that the PYD would win 100% of the votes".<sup>15</sup> Hence, through this material structure which comprises charitable network and military wing, the PYD managed to secure the third corner of its power triangle: the supportive base. Forming a large part of this supportive base are the rural, lower-middle class areas such like Jarabulus and Dyriyyk of al-Hassaka.<sup>16</sup>

Against this backdrop, *security dilemma* seems to interact with discourses directed from above and to consequently reproduce the Kurdish identity. Indeed, Arab-Kurd confrontations were reported for several weeks in January 2013 in Ras al-ayn town ('*Serê Kaniyê*' in Kurdish) on the Turkish border, when militias affiliated with the NF raided the town and killed several members of the YPG. Reportedly, the Jihadist militias staged the attack against the PYD, since they consider it as a proxy for the Syrian regime. The fighting escalated briskly as more Jihadi militias crossed the border from Turkey.<sup>17</sup> Although a ceasefire was declared a few weeks later, tensions remained high. As a result, fear and chaos spread among other Kurdish towns which, after the clashes, had a renewed sense of gratitude towards the military wing of the PYD which protected them from their Arab fellows.<sup>18</sup> The clashes, therefore, seem to have emphasised the Kurdish identity, and enhanced the PYD's popularity. Serdar, a Kurdish Syrian Journalist of *Serê Kaniyê*, summarised the implications of these clashes for Kurds: "The clashes gave the PYD a heroic role, as many Kurds perceived that the PYD had defended them from attacks by radical Arab militias, and that hereafter it will safeguard their existence throughout the chaotic and insecure situation that is currently unfolding, and which is to continue in the post-Assad era. Prior to the clashes, the PYD was not popular among residents of *Serê Kaniyê*, who were leaning more towards the KNC. But now, all of them support it. In their eyes, PYD is protecting them, as well as addressing their daily needs. It gives them security and bread".<sup>19</sup>

## THE KURDISH IDENTITY; FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

In essence, the PYD injected a strong Kurdish subtext to its rhetoric and activities, and manipulated symbols from Kurdish history in order to reinforce the Kurdish identity using a top-down approach. For instance, portraits of the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan (an icon for Kurdish nationalism) were constantly displayed during rallies organised by the PYD, and the script on the banners was mostly written in Kurdish. Other features of PYD mass rallies utilised Kurdish symbols, such as traditional customs and music. Furthermore, the Kurdish and the party flags were the only flags waved, the revolutionary flag was not acknowledged.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, the PYD's modus operandi seemed to accord with its agenda without paralleling the nation-wide uprising.

Importantly, the PYD constructed its own communication tools for promoting its logic. For instance, it has a website that publishes news and articles concerning Kurdish affairs in Syria, and which use discourse that promotes the Kurdish identity. For example, it refers to the Kurdish areas in Syria as 'Western Kurdistan' omitting any mention of Syria. Moreover, under a subsection titled 'pictures of Kurdistan', the website shows landscape pictures that were taken in some Kurdish areas in Syria.<sup>21</sup> Besides, the PYD has created a Facebook page that has some 18,700 members, in which the party posts its news. Also, the PYD founded a Channel on YouTube to which it regularly uploads videos of its activities.<sup>22</sup>

### *The KNC: fragility and division?*

The KNC is an umbrella opposition group that was co-founded in Erbil, Iraq under the patronage of Massoud Barazani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KNC consists of sixteen Kurdish parties belonging to the old guard, but it is dominated by individuals affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is Barazani's own party.<sup>23</sup> Although the KNC is the PYD's only rival, its chances are nonetheless limited, due to the growth of fragmentation and faction amongst its members over constitutive issues like ideology and framework. Furthermore, power struggles and personal enmity seem to have hindered the KNC in pursuit of its objectives.<sup>24</sup> The KNC originally sought to produce an identity based on the Kurdish patriotic feeling, and to achieve a greater degree of autonomy for the Kurdish people, while acting in a context of transnational affiliation with Syria. However, unlike the PYD, the KNC advocated more of a policy of integration with post-Assad Syria. In its discourse, the KNC frequently voices an affiliation with the Syrian state. As a brief extract from its political framework highlights this perspective: "The Syrian people are undertaking an epic, peaceful, revolutionary journey that seeks to oust authoritarianism from power. This revolution aims to build a democratic plural state, a *watan*, ('motherland') for all [Syrians], regardless of their religions, ethnicities and sects. The Kurdish people in Syria presents one component of the Syrian people, [and] an essential and purebred ingredient of the country. [Hence, KNC calls for] the elimination of discriminatory policies and laws, including the prohibition of the use of the Kurdish language and the establishment of Kurdish schools. The KNC advocates a policy of political decentralisation, while remaining in the context of Syria's territorial entity".<sup>25</sup> However, this only a vague delineation of the KNC's concept of decentralisation.

Indeed, the KNC aimed to reproduce Kurdish identity by emphasising the importance of Kurdish elements, and by exploiting the symbols and myths from Kurdish history. For example, the KNC's website devoted a special section to stories about Kurdish national heroes, dubbed 'in order not to

## SYRIA STUDIES

forget'.<sup>26</sup> Another section labeled 'today's character'<sup>27</sup>, and a subsection titled 'today in history' was designed to evoke special events in the Kurdish history. Additionally, the KNC often displayed both the Kurdish and the party flags alongside portrait of Barazani and other Kurdish nationalists, while the revolutionary flag was rarely waved by members of the Council.

Importantly, although the KNC was founded in the early months of the uprising and fought hard to gain momentum, it nevertheless seemed that it could not secure a solid enough foothold to compete with the PYD and its material resources are weak in comparison with that of the PYD. In the first place, the KNC lacked a military presence equal to that of the YPG. Although the KDP trained thousands of KNC fighters, these were mainly Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army who were based in KRG and not in the Syrian Kurdish areas. Very few of them were operating in Syria, and unlike YPG, their military presence was modest and fragile.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the KNC initiated a low-scale charitable network that provided social services to Kurdish people, such as distributing food baskets to those in need. This network operated mainly in urban area and as a Kurdish activist affiliated with the KNC affirms, this compromised its effectiveness: "KNC's social services [w]re not efficient and [were] not comparable to that of the PYD. Unlike the PYD, the KNC lacked the funds and the logistic capabilities to deliver its services".<sup>29</sup>

In this vein, the KNC seemed to form a social contract with a particular stratum, namely the urban middle-classes of Amoda in Hassaka and Kobani in Aleppo. Unlike the PYD, the KNC was unable to mobilise the lower-classes from the rural and remote areas.<sup>30</sup>

### *Union of Kurdish Youth Committees in Syria (UKYC), the new guard of the Kurdish opposition: vulnerabilities and inadequate chances?*

A mere few weeks after the uprising, UKYC was created by apolitical Kurdish youths who operated under the umbrella of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), - a pivotal force in the uprising consisted of youth groups who organised themselves by resorting to social media.<sup>31</sup> Essentially, the UKYC strove for the advancement of a civic identity that was based on citizenship rights, and which vehemently opposed secessionist aspirations while stressing the importance of association with the Syrian state. According to its manifesto, the group believes that: "The Kurdish national affiliation does not compete with the Syrian affiliation, rather they overlap each other. We do respect all the components of the Syrian society [...]. The Kurdish people are an essential component of Syria, and hence they should accomplish their political, cultural and socio-economic rights. The Kurdish language should be considered as the first language in Syria besides Arabic. The governing system of the Kurdish areas inside the Syrian state border should be determined via a public referendum by those inhabiting these areas".<sup>32</sup>

In essence, UKYC's members represent the new guard in the Kurdish opposition who are educated, secular middle-class young people aged between 19 and 30. Most of these Kurdish youths are university students. Thus, prior to the uprising, they were not residing at the Kurdish enclaves. Although the main governmental universities are based in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia and Deir el-Zour, some key departments are based in Damascus University. Even though the private universities mushroomed in the mid-2000s, most of them were based in the suburbs of Damascus and were dominated by the elite of urban areas, who by and large are Arabs. Hence, Kurdish students had to move to other cities, mainly Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, to study and consequently, these youth became more integrated with Syrian Arabs than with the less educated contemporaries who remained in the Kurdish enclaves.

## THE KURDISH IDENTITY; FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

Moreover, they became more integrated with Syrian Arabs than the older generation. Significantly, these Kurdish youths went back to their cities and towns after the outbreak of the uprising where, they attempted to establish ties between the Kurdish movements in their areas and with other youth groups from Arab areas. This served to enhance the Arab-Kurdish relations and to foster the growth of Syrian nationalism.<sup>33</sup> For instance, a 25 year-old UKYC activist and medical student of Damascus University stresses his affiliation with the Syrian state. When asked whether he considers himself as a Syrian Kurd or a Kurd Syrian, he instantly replied: “I have always been asked to answer this question. But I cannot, and I consider it as senseless. It is as if you are asking me who I love more, my mother or my father?. I am a Syrian and I am a Kurd, why do I have to select one of them to come first?”.<sup>34</sup> An unaffiliated Kurdish youth interviewed by the International Crisis Group shares his perspective: “There is a country called Syria, and as young Kurds we are part of it. I am a Kurd and a Syrian at the same time. I feel closer to a Syrian Arab of my age than to an Iraqi Kurd. The solution I see in Syria is to have a secular and democratic state that recognises my identity as a Kurd. I see my future with Syria, not with Barazani”.<sup>35</sup>

However, on the other hand, some revolutionary youths of Arab origin voiced their suspicions about the UKYC’s endorsement of Kurdish symbolic elements, such as the Kurdish flag or graffiti in Kurdish language. For example, during an anti-regime protest in the Lawan district in the suburbs of Damascus (attended by the author), some Kurdish youth of the Barazeh area were banned by their Arab fellows from displaying the Kurdish flag, and as a result the Kurdish youth displayed their anger by leaving the protest.<sup>36</sup> Hence, the Kurdish new guard and the Arab new guard does not constitute a solid opposition group. However, the new guard of the Kurdish opposition were determined to show their support of the nation-wide rebellion. For instance, the UKYC launched its anti-regime rallies on Fridays, and echoed the slogans, banners and themes of Friday’s demonstrations that were taking place in other Syrian cities in order to express solidarity with their fellow Arabs -as during the uprising, the main demonstrations often took place after Friday’s prayer session. On the other hand, the PYD and the KNC held their rallies on Wednesdays to distinguish themselves from anti-Assad Syrian Arabs.<sup>37</sup> However, although the youth of the UKYC are extremely active on the ground and formed the bedrock of the uprising in the Kurdish areas, their activities seem to have been restricted to urban areas, (particularly to Amouda and Qamishli) where, according to observers the PYD has a weaker position. In essence, the UKYC manipulated symbols and the accessible material structure in its attempts to reproduce a civic version of Kurdish identity that encourages Syrian-Kurdish cohesion. A good indicator is the profile picture of UKYC’s Facebook page (which has some 17,000 members), that shows the Syrian map surrounded by the revolutionary flag and the Kurdish flag, while in the middle writing in Arabic and in Kurdish reads: ‘Syria is for all Syrians’.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in addition to using the Arabic language, the UKYC applied terminology that highlighted an affiliation with Syria, such as ‘Syria’, ‘Syrian people’, ‘the uprising of Syrian people’. This contrasts with the stances of the PYD and the KNC, who frequently refer to the Kurdish enclaves as Kurdistan’s Syria or Western Kurdistan, and who often use the Kurdish language. In parallel, via collaboration with the UKYC, a group of apolitical Kurdish youth established a radio news station labeled *wilat* (‘motherland’ in Kurdish), which produces broadcasts that try to appeal to both Syrian Arabs and Kurds. *Wilat*’s programs and music were broadcasted in both Arabic and Kurdish in an attempt to bolster solidarity between Kurds and Arabs. According to insider sources at *wilat*, the

## SYRIA STUDIES

radio station is self-funded and relies on a team of Kurdish youth who are “well-educated and work inside Syria”.<sup>39</sup>

Against this backdrop, the UKYC can be viewed as being a moderate actor in the Kurdish drama in its struggle to produce a civic trend in Kurdish identity. Yet these youths had some fatal flaws. Firstly, the UKYC lacked the funds and the support that other actors enjoyed, and it neither had a charitable network nor an armed wing to match the material power of its competitors. Secondly, the UKYC could not establish a social contract except with a particular stratum (the urban, educated youth of the middle-class), unlike its radical rival, the PYD, who successfully enlisted the support of Kurds in both remote and urban areas. Thirdly and most importantly, several members of the UKYC were subjected to suppression by the PYD and by the Syrian regime, which consequently lost them their foothold. Besides, given the length of the uprising and the speed with which it escalated, “these youth were hard-pressed to find room to grow within”.<sup>40</sup> In the words of a former UKYC activist who fled to Turkey: “Political money and violence handicapped the UKYC and catalyzed its fracture, many of its members fled the country due to the threat of the PYD, while some of them were mobilised by a particular Kurdish clique. Very few activists continued to operate there [in the Kurdish areas of Syria], but they were paralysed and were left to fight alone”.<sup>41</sup>

Based on the above account, it seems that these political entrepreneurs; PYD, KNC and the UKYC play crucial roles in reproducing the Kurdish identity via a top-down approach. Indeed, all of them manipulated material structure and symbolic elements to reconstruct a particular version of identity. The interaction between variables in this top-down approach (political entrepreneurs, materials, symbols) seems to interplay with each other and also with the *security dilemma*. Consequently this interaction subject the Kurdish identity to a continuous process of reproduction.

### *Kurdish identity amidst the realpolitik of Barazani and Erdogan:*

Like other regional players in neighboring countries, Turkey was alarmed by the power shift in the Kurdish situation across her southern borders, where the PYD, (a carbon copy of Turkey’s longstanding foe, the PKK) arose as a hegemonic actor. This posed a potential threat to Turkish national security, and hence the government in Ankara sought to develop strategies for neutralising the Kurdish threat. Based on political calculations, these strategies leaned towards a policy of containment rather than escalation, as Turkey determined not to physically enter the Syrian quagmire. Hence, the Turkish administration employed strategic tactics to remedy the situation. Firstly, it strengthened the PYD’s rivals, the KNC and also some Arab cliques among the opposition.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, it entered into negotiations in an effort to solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey, seeking a ‘historical’ rapprochement with the PKK.<sup>43</sup> Seemingly, the use of such rhetoric has had some crucial repercussions on the reproduction of Kurdish identity.

In essence, the Turks sought to empower the KNC in order to redress the balance of power amongst the Kurdish players, and thus the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan lent its political support to the KNC via Ankara’s strategic ally, Massoud Barazani. On the other hand, Barazani seemed to share Turkey’s interests in curbing the PYD, since the latter presented a powerful rival who would jeopardise the KDP’s foothold in Kurdish areas in the post-Assad era. Also, by enacting the role of mediator, Barazani aimed to gain a certain amount of leverage in Turkey.<sup>44</sup> Pragmatically, his rhetoric vis-à-vis the PYD was twofold. In the first place, Barazani provided political, economic and, military support to the KNC but avoided causing any escalation. In the second place, he aimed to forge an alliance with

## THE KURDISH IDENTITY; FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

the PYD in order to contain its threat. Therefore, in July 2012, just before the withdrawal of the regime's forces from the Kurdish areas, Barazani sponsored the Erbil Declaration, a power-sharing agreement between the two rivals according to which the PYD and the KNC would jointly govern Kurdish regions in Syria. Nevertheless, it seems that neither Erdogan nor Barazani achieved their objectives in curbing the PYD, since on the ground the KNC could not compete with the PYD's rapidly accelerating power.<sup>45</sup>

Additionally, Turkey sought to weaken the PYD by bolstering Syrian Arab opposition cliques who harbor anti-Kurdish sentiment, particularly the Syrian National Council (SNC), of which the KNC was a former member.<sup>46</sup> The SNC has openly and repeatedly emphasised the 'Arabic character' of Syria, and labeled the Kurdish ambition of federalism as an "illusion".<sup>47</sup> In effect, this provoked the PYD to accuse Turkey and the SNC of countering Kurdish aspirations.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the Syrian national Coalition, (another opposition faction sponsored by Turkey), refuted the KNC's proposal to drop the word 'Arab' from the name 'Syrian Arab Republic'.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, this accentuated the Arabs-Kurdish divide.

In this light, it should be noted that, since the onset of the uprising, various factions of the non-Kurdish opposition have striven to mobilise the Kurdish population. However, it seemed that they could neither develop appropriate strategies for tackling the Kurdish question, nor for mitigating Arab-Kurdish tensions. On the one hand, Islamist opposition blocs, supported by Turkey, have openly criticised the KNC's rhetoric and rejected its logic while ignoring chances for reconciliation. On the other hand, cliques of the secular opposition, such as the Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (of which the PYD is a senior member), has vaguely discussed issues of federalism and autonomy that are crucial concerns for the Kurds.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the non-Kurdish opposition could not formulate a clear vision of how the Kurdish question would be addressed in the post-Assad era. As a Kurdish analyst argues, this effectively provoked the Kurds to manipulate the uprising for their own ends: "Kurds are now fighting to achieve their rights, which were denied by the Assad regime prior to the uprising, and which during the uprising were neglected by the opposition".<sup>51</sup>

Against this backdrop, the conclusion that imposes itself is that the *realpolitik* strategies developed by Erdogan and Barazani played important roles in reproducing Kurdish identity that served their agendas. Although both of them applied policy of containment in their attempts to reconcile Kurdish factions, they nevertheless inflamed identity clashes from above by supporting a particular player against the other. Both politicians sought to uphold the KNC's version of a moderate identity over the PYD's radical version of Kurdish identity. Furthermore, they positioned these identities at odds with the Arab identity. Indeed, the top-down rhetoric by these external political entrepreneurs emphasised the ethnic boundaries between both identity groups.

### *Discourses from below*

For approximately fifty years the Kurds of Syria were banned from displaying any symbolic element of their identity, such as music and costumes. Instead they were forced to alter symbolic features of their Kurdish identity to accord with Arab identity, such as by changing their Kurdish names to Arabic names.<sup>52</sup> Hence, it is unsurprisingly that since the outset of the uprising Kurds have been determined to emphasis the symbols and myths of their ethnicity. Although political entrepreneurs of the various



## SYRIA STUDIES

Kurdish factions utilised Kurdish symbols to construct identity, these symbols nevertheless seemed to bolster Kurdish national sentiment at the grassroots level without being completely directed from above.

Notably, since the onset of the uprising, Kurdish language, music, dance, customs and flags have been visibly presented across Kurdish regions in Syria.<sup>53</sup> Kurds are now publicly allowed to dance the popular Kurdish *dabkkih* (a folklore dance), and to wave the Kurdish flag. Furthermore, the Newroz festival (the most important festival in the Kurdish culture), is now celebrated openly by tens of thousands of Kurds without the risk of their being punished by the Syrian regime.<sup>54</sup> Certainly, the presentation of such symbols strengthened the Kurdish sense of ethnic belonging as well as instilling in the Kurdish people a sense of pride in their ethnicity. More importantly, the public displays of such symbolic elements seem to interact with the discourses direct from above and the insecurity crisis, and therefore subject the Kurdish identity to a continuous process of reproduction. Sidar, a Kurdish youth of Qamishli, acknowledged the influential role of symbols in bolstering a Kurdish individual's affinity with his or her ethnicity. When asked to give his perspective on Kurdish Symbols, such as the Kurdish flag and the Newroz festival, he replied passionately that: "These symbols personify my existence. When chanting *azadi* ('freedom' in Kurdish) and waving the Kurdish flag I tell the others that I'm a Kurd. I feel very proud of my Kurdish belonging".<sup>55</sup>

Notably, throughout the uprising, the Kurdish language (a key symbol of Kurdish identity), dominated the discourse heard in the Kurdish enclaves where during anti-regime marches, most slogans, songs and banners were voiced in the Kurdish language. Moreover, shortly after the withdrawal of the regime's forces, a myriad of schools started to teach core modules in Kurdish language, and devoted three hours of the school-day to teaching the Kurdish language at an advanced level.<sup>56</sup> Speaking in Kurdish, Syrian Kurd teachers appeared on the al-Arabiya Satellite Channel, affirming that: "the first teaching language [in Kurd's regions of Syria] should be Kurdish while Arabic and English should be secondary".<sup>57</sup> Also, pictures and videos of rallies and other revolutionary activities conducted in the Kurdish areas were frequently posted online. As a result, many Syrian Arabs were alarmed by the dominance of Kurdish symbols, and regarded their fellow Kurds with suspicion. For instance Bakir, a Syria Arab rebel, stated his concerns about the presentation of Kurdish symbols: "I watch videos of their [the Kurds] protests and I cannot understand a word, since everything is in Kurdish. It seems that they have already created Kurdistan in Syria. They are opportunists".<sup>58</sup>

In this context, the Syrian regime endorsed the use of symbolic elements of Kurdish identity in its quest to mobilise the Kurds. For instance, on 21 March 2012, Syrian State TV broadcast live footage for the first time in half a century of the Newroz celebration, showing Kurdish youths dancing *dabkkih*. Furthermore, the Kurds were allowed to give interviews in the Kurdish language.<sup>59</sup>

All in all, although the manipulation of symbols was crucial to state and non-state political entrepreneurs' quest to reproduce Kurdish identity, symbolic elements also operated at the grassroots level where they interacted with discourses directed from above in the context of the *security dilemma*, and helped to construct identity clashes. Flags, music, language, customs and other symbolic features played vital role in empowering the Kurdish identity and generating Kurdish national sentiment, in that they highlight the line that distinguishes Kurdish identity from other identities. In other words, they emphasise the notion of 'us' versus 'them', and hence serve as potential motivations for identity clashes.

## THE KURDISH IDENTITY; FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

### *Conclusion*

On the basis of this analysis, the Syrian uprising paved the way for the reconstruction of Kurdish identity. Four variables seem to play the pivotal role in reconstructing Kurdish identity and in provoking identity clashes. In the first place, state and non-state political entrepreneurs strove to reproduce a Kurdish identity that would be compliant with their aim. In the second and in the third place, all of these actors utilised material and symbolic factors (such as media, arms and Kurdish folklore) to reinforce Kurdish identity over the Arab identity. On the one hand, the Syrian regime deployed policies of containment towards the Kurds in an attempt to divide the already fragmented opposition, and to neutralise the Kurdish risk in the northeast of the country. Hence, the regime provided the Kurds a quasi-autonomy. On the other hand, relying simultaneously on materialistic and symbolic features, the KNC, PYD and the UKYC were competing to reproduce different versions of Kurdish identity. As this paper has demonstrated, the KNC and the PYD vied to achieve greater autonomy for Kurds, and to associate the national sentiment with the Kurdish nation exclusively, rather than with the Syrian state. By contrast, the UKYC attempted to reproduce a Kurdish identity that highlighted an affiliation with the Syrian state, and which sought to foster accord among Kurds and Arabs. In fact, each of these players utilised material structure, and symbolic factors to reshape the Kurdish identity while struggling to consolidate their position in relation to other players. However, wide discrepancy in capabilities afforded the PYD a hegemonic status. Although the PYD lacked international legitimacy, it succeeded in establishing a solid power triangle composed of military, economic and public bases of support. This is owing to its productive mobilisation of various social strata under its umbrella, by which it came to be the *de facto* governor of Kurdish affairs. The KNC, suffered from fragmentation, and did not succeed in forming a power triangle to equal that of the PYD. Although the KNC benefited from regional and international backing, it lacked military and public support, and could not broaden its supportive base. On the other hand, the UKYC seems to have been the weakest competitor, as it lacked any pillars of power. No arms, no funds and no support, either at the international or grassroots level. Furthermore, most youths of the UKYC fled Syria for security reasons, which played a pivotal role in thwarting their attempts to seek out integration within the Syrian state. Yet, seemingly, regardless the variation in their agendas and capabilities, all of these political entrepreneurs reproduce Kurdish identity on a top-down approach and their discourses provoke identity clashes. The final variable which seems to play a pivotal role in reconstructing Kurdish identity is the insecurity crisis that the Kurds faced. Indeed, the *security dilemma* –which escalated with the length of the conflict emphasises the ethnic boundaries between Arab and the Kurdish identity group.

In summary, policies from above, deployed by the Syrian regime, Kurdish political entrepreneurs, Syrian Arab opposition and regional powers exploited Kurdish identity for *realpolitik* ends. All of these actors manipulated material and symbolic elements to advance a particular brand of Kurdish identity. More importantly, these top-down discourses interacted with discourse directed from below, and this interaction (which takes place in the presence of *security dilemma*) subjected the Kurdish identity to an enduring process of reproduction. At the time of writing, however, it is still unclear as to what version of identity will be finalised by this process, and what implications it will pose for the post-Assad Syria. Nevertheless, the Kurdish identity has certainly entered an era of empowerment, thanks to the *Arab spring*, which seems to have blossomed largely for the sake of Kurdish interests.

## SYRIA STUDIES

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Hamber in Damascus 1/10/2012.

<sup>2</sup> "Syria's Kurds: A struggle within a Struggle", International Crisis Group (ICG) N 136 22 January 2013, p 14.

<sup>3</sup> Next part of this section provides a discussion on PYD.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 2. Also see "Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future", Carnegie website, accessed on 22/4/2013, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=49703>

<sup>5</sup> ICG January 2013. *op.cit.*, p. 1-14

<sup>6</sup> "The rise of Syria's Kurds" Sada Website, accessed on 27/4/2013, available at

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/05/rise-of-syria-s-kurds/fa7v>

<sup>7</sup> See "Political program" on the PYD Facebook page, accessed on 1/4/2013, available at

<https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/381752831836315/?fref=ts>

<sup>8</sup> "Mawqi' murasyoun al-almaiyy yujry muqabala ma' al-ra'ys al-mushtarak li hizbina: saleh muslem" ('the German website murasyoun interviews our party leaderm Saleh muselim'), PYD website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at

[http://www.pydrojava.net/ara/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11035%3A-qq-&catid=77%3A2011-09-08-18-49-40&Itemid=60](http://www.pydrojava.net/ara/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11035%3A-qq-&catid=77%3A2011-09-08-18-49-40&Itemid=60)

<sup>9</sup> ICG January 2013. *op.cit.*, p. 20

<sup>10</sup> Ibid .

<sup>11</sup> Author's Interview with Kurdish of ras al-ayn, via Skype 21/4/2013.

<sup>12</sup> "The rise of Syria's Kurds" *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> ICG January 2013 *op.cit.*, p: 14

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>15</sup> Authors interview with an anonymous Kurd of Dirbasiyya, 10/3/2013 Skype.

<sup>16</sup> "Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future", *op.cit.*

<sup>17</sup> "fierce clashes pit Syrians Kurds against Jihadist", AFP website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at <http://www.aina.org/news/20130119104856.htm>

<sup>18</sup> "Syria's crisis: Border town show conflict's patchwork forces", BBC website, accessed on 23/4/2013 , available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21627499>

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Serdar, 21/4/2013, Skype.

<sup>20</sup> ICG January 2013. *op.cit.*, p. 11. Also see pictures of various rallies organized by the PYD on PYD Website, accessed on 7/10/2013, available at <http://www.pydrojava.net/en/>

<sup>21</sup> "Qamishlo" PYD Website, accessed on 2/4/2013, available at on <http://kurdistan.pydrojava.com/#home>

<sup>22</sup> The PYD Facebook Page, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at

<https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/381752831836315/?fref=ts>. Also see the PYD channel on YouTube, accessed on 26/10/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/user/pydrojava?feature=mhum#p/u>

<sup>23</sup> "The Kurdish National Council", Carnegie Website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502>

<sup>24</sup> "Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future", *op.cit.* also see ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.18

<sup>25</sup> "KNC's Political framework", KNC website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at [http://www.knc-s.com/detail\\_articals.php?id=273&z=2&l=1](http://www.knc-s.com/detail_articals.php?id=273&z=2&l=1)

<sup>26</sup> "ky la nansa" ('in order not to forget'), KNC website, accessed on 7/10/2013, available at <http://www.knc-s.com/allartical.php?z=35&l=1>

<sup>27</sup> "shakhsyat al-youm" ('Today's character'), KNC website, accessed on 7/10/2013, available at <http://www.knc-s.com/allartical.php?z=9&l=1>

<sup>28</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p. 4-18

## THE KURDISH IDENTITY; FROM BANISHMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

---

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous KNC activist 22/4/2013, Skype.

<sup>30</sup> "Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future", *op.cit.*. And also see ICG January 2013., *op.cit.* p. 4-5

<sup>31</sup> For an informative account on the LCC's roles during the Syrian uprising see Anthony Shdaid "Coalition of Factions From the Streets Fuels a New Opposition in Syria", *The New York Times* (30/6/2011)

<sup>32</sup> The UKYC Facebook page, accessed on 22/4/2013, available at

<https://www.facebook.com/Kurdish.youth.union3/info>

<sup>33</sup> Fieldwork Syria February – October 2012. Also see ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous Kurdish rebel 1/10/ 2012 in Damascus.

<sup>35</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.18

<sup>36</sup> Fieldwork on 24/5/2012 in Lawan suburb of Damascus.

<sup>37</sup> ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.9

<sup>38</sup> See appendix 13. Also the picture is available on the UKYC Facebook Page, accessed on 22/04/2015, available

at, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/photo.php?fbid=631213880230796&set=a.375000972518756.93814.284889871529867&type=1&theater> .

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous Kurd, 22/4/2013 via Skype.

<sup>40</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.10

<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with Darwish via Skype 21/4/2013.

<sup>42</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.28-29

<sup>43</sup> Ian Traynor "Turkey should seize offer for peace from Kurdish guerilla leader" *Guardian*, (21/3/2013). Also see "The timing of Turkey's Kurdish strategy", *Today's Zaman* Website, accessed on 14/5/2013 , available at, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-313314-the-timing-of-turkeys-kurdish-strategy.html>

<sup>44</sup> ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.iii

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p.4

<sup>46</sup> The SNC was founded on 23 August 2011 with the support of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It is a collation of opposition parties that is dominated by Islamists. In November 2012, the Syrian National Coalition, a new iteration of the SNC, was founded in Qatar. For a detailed account of Arab-Kurdish ties during the uprising, see Faruq Mustafa *akrad souriyya w al-hirak al-dymouqraty* (Syria's Kurds and the democratic movement) (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2013)

<sup>47</sup> In July 2012, during a conference for the Syrian opposition factions in Cairo, Burhan Ghalioun, the leader of the SNC at that time, insisted that "Kurds should not hold on to illusions of federalism". See ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>49</sup> This was a precondition forwarded by the KNC of joining the Syrian National Council, and was rebuffed later. This had a negative influence on the KNC-SNC ties. See ICG January 2013. *op.cit.*, p.80

<sup>50</sup> Farouq Mustafa, *op.cit.*, p.48-60

<sup>51</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous Kurd, 22/4/2013.

<sup>52</sup> See "mamnu' azadi" ('Azadi is forbidden'), *almodon*, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at <http://www.almodon.com/Culture/Left-Articles/ممنوع-ازاد>

<sup>53</sup> For comprehensive pictures of Kurdish rallies taken by international news agencies see "slogans, signs and protests: Syrian Kurds Revolt", *Al-monitor* Website, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/photo-galleries/slogans-signs-and-protests-syria.html?displayTab=qamishili-lcc->.

<sup>54</sup> Newroz is held on March 21, it is a celebration that marks the first day of the Kurdish year. According to Kurdish myth, it represents the day when goodness prevailed over the devil. For more information on Newroz's role in Kurdish culture, see "Newroz: The Kurdish festival story, the forbidden festival", *KurdNet* website, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/3/state3685.htm>

<sup>55</sup> Author's interview with Sidar 26/4/2013 Skype.

<sup>56</sup> See for instance "taqyr al-arabiyya 'an al-madaris al-kurdiyya fi souriyya", ('Al-Arabiya report about Kurdish Schools in Syria'), YouTube, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at

## SYRIA STUDIES

---

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nTxmagsf2Q> . Also, see “Crisis in Syria boosts Kurdish hope”, BBC Website, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19301543> and “Syria’s Kurds find the language of freedom”, IPS Website, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/09/syrian-kurds-find-the-language-of-freedom/>

<sup>57</sup>“taqryr al-arabiyya an al-madaris al-kurdiyya fi souriyya”, (Al-Arabiya report about Kurdish Schools in Syria) *op.cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Author’s interview with Mohamed, 21/3/2012 in Damascus.

<sup>59</sup>A four-minute archived video of this celebration is available on YouTube, see “Kul nayrouz w souriyya bi alf khyr” (Happy Newroz for Syria), YouTube, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeYosfXrHPs> . Also, only one week after the outbreak of the uprising, the Syrian State Agency issued a news report of the Newroz celebration, which stressed that Newroz “is an opportunity to emphasise amity, freedom and peace for all, wishing that everyone could enjoy the jovial atmosphere of this social tradition which is rooted in the Syrian cultural identity.” See “Kurdish Community in Syria celebrate Nowrouz Day” SANA website, accessed on 22/4/2015, available at <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2011/03/21/337857.htm>