

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE ROJAVA EXPERIMENT:
UNDERSTANDING THE KURDISH QUEST FOR
AUTONOMY IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND THE EFFECTS
OF PYD DOMINANCE

by
NATHANIEL JOSEPH MCPHERSON

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

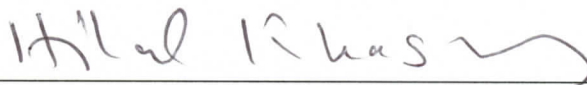
Beirut, Lebanon
August 2016

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

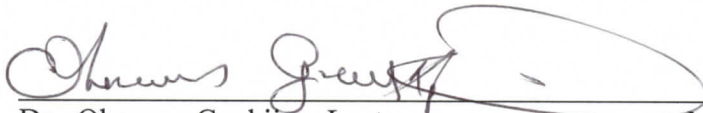
THE ROJAVA EXPERIMENT:
UNDERSTANDING THE KURDISH QUEST FOR
AUTONOMY IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND THE EFFECTS
OF PYD DOMINANCE

by
NATHANIEL JOSEPH MCPHERSON


Approved by:



Dr. Hilal Khashan, Professor and Department Chairperson Advisor
Political Studies and Public Administration



Dr. Ohannes Geukjian, Lecturer Member of Committee
Political Studies and Public Administration



Dr. Lokman Meho, Associate Professor Member of Committee
Political Studies and Public Administration

Date of thesis defense: August 30, 2016

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT


THESIS, DISSERTATION, PROJECT RELEASE FORM

Student Name: McPherson Nathaniel Joseph
Last First Middle

Master's Thesis Master's Project Doctoral Dissertation

I authorize the American University of Beirut to: (a) reproduce hard or electronic copies of my thesis, dissertation, or project; (b) include such copies in the archives and digital repositories of the University; and (c) make freely available such copies to third parties for research or educational purposes.

I authorize the American University of Beirut, **three years after the date of submitting my thesis, dissertation, or project**, to: (a) reproduce hard or electronic copies of it; (b) include such copies in the archives and digital repositories of the University; and (c) make freely available such copies to third parties for research or educational purposes.


Signature

August 31st, 2016
Date

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	xi
LIST OF ACRONYMS	xii

Chapter

I. SYRIAN KURDS: EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES.....	1
A. Topic in Review	2
B. Research Questions.....	4
C. Relevance of Study.....	5
D. Theoretical Framework and Methodology.....	7
E. Overview of Thesis.....	9
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	11
A. The Kurds: From Past to Present	11
1. Origins of the Kurds.....	14
2. Era of Treaties: Broken Promises.....	18
3. Syrian Kurds, Fragmentation, and the Rise of the PKK	24
4. Modern History: Creation of Rojava	30
B. Syria in Turmoil: Sustainability of the Rojava Project.....	42
C. Building Legitimacy During Conflict	48
D. Determining Factors for Success or Failure	51

III. METHODOLOGY	55
A. Linking Legitimacy and Rhetoric	55
B. Content Analysis	57
C. Results	58
IV. DISCUSSION.....	63
A. Minority Inclusivity	63
B. Intra-Kurd Conflict	67
C. PKK Affiliation	71
D. Secession from Syria	74
V. KURDISH NATIONALISM IN SYRIA: A STOCKTAKING	76

Appendix

I. KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES IN SYRIA	85
II. KURDISH TERRITORIAL EXPANSION 2014 TO 2016..	86
III. CODING INSTRUCTIONS.....	87
 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	 89

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Nathaniel J. McPherson for Master of Arts
Major: Political Studies

Title: The Rojava Experiment: Understanding the Kurdish Quest for Autonomy in Northern Syria and the Effects of PYD Dominance

Burgeoning Kurdish nationalism in Syria, sparked by the Qamishli Revolt in 2004, has been given further room for growth since the outset of the Syrian Civil War. In Kurdish majority regions of Syria, the Regime has granted tacit approval of self-governance by drawing down troop presence during the initial stages of the conflict. Furthermore, as the war wages on, Kurdish armed groups, specifically the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have proven their effectiveness in countering ISIL advances. Little is known about the PYD, which arrived on the scene in 2003, beyond their close affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey. The PYD has played a strategic role in the formation of Rojava, an enclave of Kurdish nationalism in northern Syria, where it plays the role of a governing body. This however raises important questions about the source of the PYD's legitimacy and its ability to withstand the inevitable end of the Syrian conflict. This study expects to demonstrate how the PYD intends to overcome obstacles to reaching autonomy by, first, identifying these impediments through an investigation of literature and, secondly, by exploring how the PYD either addresses or neglects these impediments through an analysis of their rhetoric. Furthermore, through inspecting the PYD, the paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of how non-state actors establish and maintain legitimacy in the context of failed and fragile states.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure

1: Kurdish Populations Map	11
2: Regional Kurdish Population Distribution.....	12
3: Kurdish Concentration in Syria	13
4: Arab-Belt.....	28
5: Syria's Oil Fields and Energy Infrastructure.....	47
6: Interviews - Frequency by Case.....	61
7: Frequency of Coded Elements	62
8: Minorities by Year as Percent.....	66
9: References to Minority Groups.....	66
10: Minority vs. Kurdish References	67
11: References to Other Parties.....	70
12: Kurdish Political Unity	71
13: PYD Affiliation to PKK.....	73
14: Secession from Syria.....	75

LIST OF ACRONYMS

EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GAP	Southeastern Anatolia Project
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdish National Congress
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
KRI	Kurdish Region of Iraq
KSC	Kurdish Supreme Committee
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK	Kurdish Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SNC	Syrian National Congress
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society
UN	United Nations
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

CHAPTER I

SYRIAN KURDS: EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

Burgeoning Kurdish nationalism in Syria, sparked by the Qamishli Revolt in 2004, has been given further room for growth since the outset of the Syrian Civil War. In Kurdish majority regions of northernmost Syria,¹ the Regime has granted tacit approval of self-governance by drawing down troop presence during the initial stages of the conflict. As the war wages on, Kurdish armed groups, assisted by coalition airstrikes, have demonstrated their effectiveness in battle. This is readily witnessed by their ability to counter the advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).² Their successes on the ground have granted them status among the international coalition established to defeat ISIL, primarily the United States and its allies. These factors, coupled with other recent developments in neighboring countries, namely the creation of Iraqi Kurdistan, have breathed new life into Kurdish hopes for an autonomous region in Syria (Eppel, 2014b). These hopes are embodied through the creation of Rojava,³ a self-styled Kurdish autonomous region in Syria created in 2013. However, external actors that do not relish the creation of such an entity, Turkey in particular, will likely stand in opposition to its permanence and test its fortitude.

¹ Syrian Kurds mainly reside in the governorate of Hasakeh in Syria's northeastern corner. However, Kurds also dwell in cities near the Turkish border including Kobani, in northcentral Syria, and Afrin in the northwest. See APPENDIX II: Kurdish Territorial Expansion from 2014 to 2016 for a map of Kurdish areas of Syria.

² ISIL is the preferred acronym used in this work, however, the group is also known by several other names including the Islamic State (IS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

³ Also referred to as Western Kurdistan or Syrian Kurdistan

Internally, the Kurds of Syria face severe fragmentation issues. Syria is host to over 17 Kurdish political parties⁴ which are all pursuing a competitive advantage in midst of the volatile and unpredictable circumstances in the region (Allsopp, 2014). One group in particular has risen from the field to dominate its competition. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) has emerged as a potent political actor and stands shoulders above its political rivals. Established in 2003, the PYD touts a bold new form of governance and it is closely tied to the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, the standard bearers of Kurdish insurrection. The PYD's objectives, sustainability, and grounds for legitimacy are the central theme of this study. Furthermore, given the context of the PYD's rise to dominance, the concept of legitimacy and how it is gained and lost during conflict will be explored to facilitate a better understanding of the staying power of newly emerged non-state actors.

A. Topic in Review

Much has been written about the topic of legitimacy, particularly in context to the state building effort on behalf of the United States and the coalition forces in Iraq.⁵ A closer look at the texts surrounding this topic and political legitimacy as a concept will provide invaluable insight when discussing the case of the Syrian Kurds and the recent gains of the PYD during the Syrian Civil War. The group's military strength is unrivaled among other Kurdish political parties and is thus, a primary source of its

⁴ For a comprehensive list of the Kurdish political parties operating out of Syria see Appendix I: Kurdish Political Parties in Syria

⁵ See the works of Michael Rear in *Intervention, ethnic conflict and state-building in Iraq: a paradigm for the post-colonial state*, Routledge, New York, 2008.

political power. However, a legitimate and effective authority should serve those that it governs (Peter, 2009; Raz, 1988). The PYD's unparalleled military dominance of Rojava makes it a *de facto* authority, however, if it seeks to maintain its role through the support and provision of services to its constituency, the PYD may increase its effective legitimacy. The popular support of its constituency can also be best understood in terms of Kurdish identity and theories related to ethno-nationalist movements. In particular, it is legitimacy which is gained during times of turmoil that is most relevant to the PYD case. Establishing legitimacy during conflict is especially difficult due to the dynamic circumstances of a wartime environment. For a political group to gain legitimacy when so many actors are involved, it must be wary of two coexisting sources of legitimacy, internal and external.

The history of the Kurds is one marked by internal fragmentation and external manipulation (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Gunter, 2014b). Both of these factors are at play in the current context of the Kurdish self-governance project in northern Syria, known by the Kurds as Rojava. The PYD enjoys a degree of popular support amongst its Kurdish constituency (Federici, 2015), however, many groups in northern Syria are leery of its quick rise to power. In addition to wary Kurdish groups, other ethnic groups such as the Armenians, Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians might pose a challenge to the PYD's projection of authority if they remain marginalized under Kurdish rule. A common ethnic identity has always been a powerful source of fuel for Kurdish nationalist movements, but it is unknown to what extent the PYD utilizes this rhetoric to garner support (Eppel, 2014b). Moreover, the plethora of Kurdish political parties in Syria, which all possess competing agendas, have a tendency to let political differences

override any unity caused by a common Kurdish identity (Caves, 2012; Gunes & Lowe, 2015). Externally the PYD faces a different set of challenges.

The PYD seems to pander to the regional and global powers by distancing itself from its affiliate in Turkey, the PKK. However, it is uncertain how effective and committed the PYD is to maintaining this separation (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). It remains imperative for the PYD to divorce itself from its PKK roots in order to foster trust from Ankara, which would quickly turn its wrath on the PYD if they are deemed a threat to Turkey's security or interests in the region (Federici, 2015). Secession also remains a contentious issue amongst regional actors because few would directly benefit from the creation of a Kurdish state in Syria (Spyer, 2013b). Thus, the PYD must seek to reassure its neighbors who possess the power to deter Kurdish efforts for self-determination by strictly adhering to non-secessionist discourse.

B. Research Questions

Since the outset of the Syrian crisis, the PYD has clearly expressed its desires to obtain a free and independent Kurdish region in Syria which they have articulated in their rhetoric and reinforced by their political and military actions. The primary objective of this thesis is to determine how the PYD intends to overcome the main obstacles on the path to achieving autonomy. As identified by a brief review of the topic, Kurdish self-determination in Syria hinges on the PYD's ability to achieve four main internal and external objectives, to include; 1) attaining minority inclusivity, 2) overcoming intra-Kurd conflict, 3) establishing convincing dissociation from PKK, and 4) quelling secessionist fears. Exploring the tactics employed by the PYD for building

internal and external legitimacy reveals how they intend to overcome these four main challenges. The PYD uses its stature as the leader of the Rojava project to publicly proclaim its objectives while also broadcasting how they expect to address these hurdles to its long-term agenda. The awareness and tenacity of the PYD, in regards to these four main points, may place it on a trajectory to outlast the Syrian Civil War and to emerge as a new autonomous entity in the region.

This study expects to demonstrate how the PYD intends to overcome obstacles to reaching autonomy by; 1) discussing the economic viability of the Rojava project, 2) identifying impediments to its legitimacy through an investigation of literature, and 3) exploring how the PYD either addresses or neglects these impediments through an analysis of their rhetoric. Furthermore, through inspecting the PYD, the paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of how groups establish and maintain legitimacy in the context of failed and fragile states. The study of how these non-state actors emerge and endure amidst armed struggle becomes convincingly more prudent in light of the fact that conflicts are becoming increasingly more protracted in nature.⁶

C. Relevance of Study

The Kurds of Syria have played an important role in the development of the Syrian state as well as contributed to the propagation of Kurdish nationalism (Allsopp, 2014). Previous scholarly works have focused on the Kurds in neighboring Turkey,

⁶ This is especially the case when international actors intervene, there are a plethora of actors with vested interests, or there are large quantities of resources available. (Hironaka, Ann. *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009. Web.)

Iraq, and Iran, but the Kurds in Syria have received relatively scant academic coverage. Syria hosts the smallest population of Kurds compared to its neighbors, nonetheless they have played a strategic role in developing modern Kurdish politics. An expert of Syrian Kurds, Harriet Allsopp (2014), recognizes this lack of literature surrounding the Kurds of Syria, “While there are several books on Syria, the Syrian Arab Ba’th Party and its rule in Syria, the subject of the Kurds ...has received little academic attention.”⁷ She continues by expressing that a detailed analysis of Syrian Kurd political organization “requires more than a simple analysis” and demands a more extensive “examination of their political development in Syria.”⁸ A brief survey of the current Kurdish political landscape in Syria reveals that one group in particular has emerged as a dominant force in shaping the current conflict and determining the future of Syrian Kurds, and perhaps of the region, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The PYD has emerged as a formidable political and military force which is unmatched by other Kurdish parties within Syria. Little is known about the group beyond their close affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) of Turkey. The PYD has attempted to maintain its distance from its cross-border partner which has been designated a terrorist organization by both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Before its official creation in 2003, the PYD’s roots can be traced back to Syria’s role in hosting PKK militants during the 1980s and 1990s. Syria also provided *de facto* asylum to the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, from 1979 until his expulsion in 1998. The PYD’s military wing, known as People’s

⁷ Allsopp, Harriet. *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*. 144 Vol. London: I. B. Tauris, 2014. Web. p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 2.

Protection Units or YPG, is led by battle hardened PKK commanders from Turkey's southeast province of Diyarbakir (Baczko, Dorronsoro, & Quesnay, 2013; Spyer, 2013a). The PYD has played a strategic role in the formation of Rojava, an enclave of Kurdish nationalism in northern Syria, where it plays the role of a governing body. This however raises important questions about the source of the PYD's legitimacy and its ability to withstand the inevitable end of the Syrian conflict.

D. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The historic overview, literature review, and analysis will be conducted through the application of a Constructivist International Relations (IR) theoretical framework. As a set of assumptions about human motivation and agency (Wolfrum, 2010), Constructivism provides a rich framework by which to understand the complex nature of Kurdish nationalism and the emergence of the PYD. By focusing heavily on history, norms, beliefs, and ideas, this theory lends itself to the analysis of non-state actors (Wolfrum, 2010). Furthermore, it grants insight and revelation about the motivations and perspectives of the Kurds in their centuries old struggle by constructing how they view the world through the terms of their own shared history and experiences. Content analysis will provide the practical toolset by which to determine these viewpoints, which are expressed through the PYD's communication.

Content analysis offers a means by which to determine the goals and trajectory of the newly formed Kurdish political-military entity, thus providing key insights to understanding the broader PYD agenda. These insights will either confirm or deny the hypothesis that the PYD is overcoming the four obstacles to achieving lasting self-

determination. Babbie (2007) describes content analysis as the examination “of recorded human communications.” Furthermore, content analysis is said to answer the classic question of “Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?” (Babbie, 2007). This allows for links to be drawn between the PYD’s public discourse and its trajectory as a political entity. If rhetoric is an expression of how the group frames its grounds for legitimacy, then content analysis will reveal what the PYD is saying, who they are addressing, and what effects they might be having. Discourse analysis will provide key insights of how the PYD publicly expresses its mission to overcoming any hindrances to its aspirations which are identified through a review of the literature.

In order to conduct the content analysis, two primary sources will be utilized. Transcripts from the PYD’s interviews and speeches will serve as fodder for the analysis. In particular, the discourse of the PYD’s most vocal leader, Salih Muslim Muhammad, will identify which tools the party intends to employ to establish legitimacy and how they communicate these political positions. The information gleaned from the discourse analysis will be understood through exploring the concept of legitimacy and Kurdish ethno-nationalism using the lens of Constructivist IR theory. Furthermore, analyzing the political landscape of the Kurds in Syria – mainly through comparing and contrasting political parties and their agendas – will provide a deeper understanding of current Kurdish divisions, frame their current role in the Syrian conflict, and help project potential outcomes of Kurdish political aspirations in the region. Turkey’s role in shaping the future of northern Syria will be given extra

scrutiny due to Turkey's vested interests in projecting power in the region, maintaining its own territorial integrity, and dealing with its own Kurdish issue, the PKK.

E. Overview of Thesis

The best path to understanding where Syria's Kurds are headed is to review where they originated. This paper will not attempt to predict what will happen with the Kurds following the inevitable end to the Syrian conflict, but rather establish the current trajectory of its most prominent political entity engaged in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Through a Constructivist IR framework, the literature review will cover the history of the Kurds, explore their roots as a people group, uncover the birth of modern Kurdish nationalism, and discuss the missed opportunities for statehood following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This will be followed by a thorough investigation of the causes behind Kurdish fragmentation and the rise of armed factions, particularly the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey. Finally, an in-depth examination of the Syrian Kurdish experience will provide context to explain the rise of the PYD and the declaration of the *de facto* independent cantons of Rojava. Furthermore, a brief explanation of the causes of the Syrian crisis and the role of the Kurds during the uprisings will provide an even richer backdrop for analysis. This historical overview will set the stage for a deeper understanding of the PYD, which is the primary objective of this thesis.

After a brief overview of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism and the rise of the PYD, a portion of the text will be devoted to classifying the political actors including the full gamut of Kurdish parties and non-state actors. This will place the

PYD along the spectrum of competing groups vying for similar political agendas while also demonstrating the difficulties faced by the PYD within their immediate Kurdish environment. The broader context of the Syrian Civil War is also relevant to the analysis of the Kurds in Northern Syria. The factors that led to the Syrian uprisings in 2011 and the Kurds' role in the uprisings will be briefly reviewed. These factors will provide a means by which to evaluate the sustainability of the Rojava project from the perspective of available resources.

Lastly, a portion of the literature review will examine preexisting texts related to legitimacy, particularly that which is attained during an open conflict. This will begin to draw parallels between previous examples of actors seeking statehood and help weigh the PYD's odds of success or failure. After thoroughly covering the literature surrounding the subject, an analysis of the rhetoric used by the PYD's main spokesman and current co-chairman, Salih Muslim, will be conducted. In conclusion, a discussion of the analysis results in light of the broader topic of legitimacy in conflict will shed light on the staying power of the PYD and the ultimate success or failure of its stated objectives.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

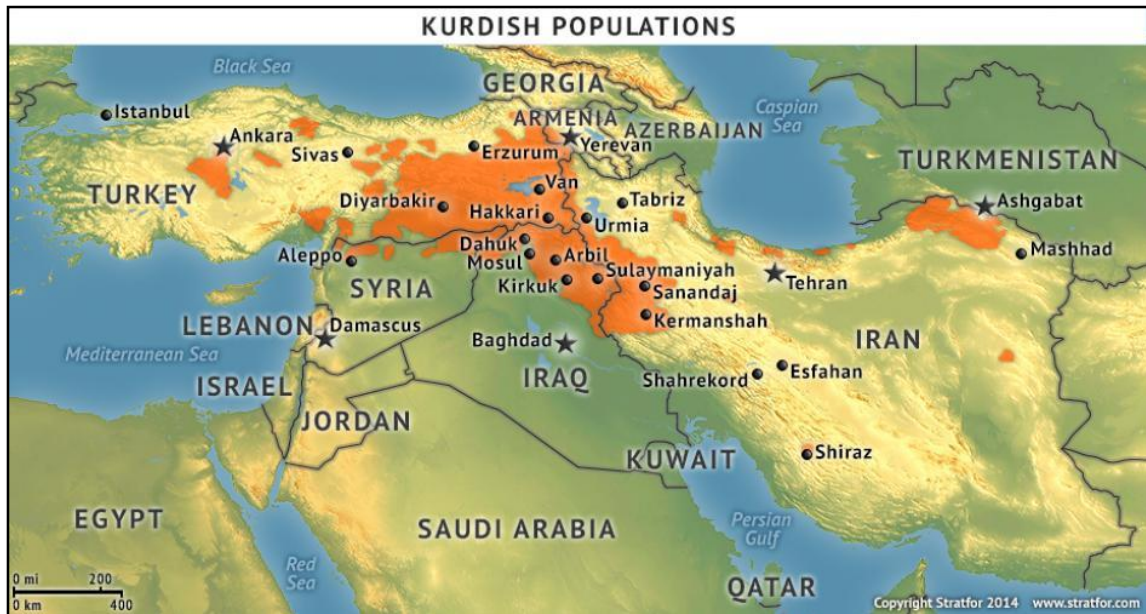


Figure 1: Kurdish Populations Map⁹

A. The Kurds: From Past to Present

Developments such as the creation of the autonomous Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) or the ongoing struggle of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey may lead some to believe that Kurdish nationalism is a recent manifestation. However, the recent rise in Kurdish ethnic identity and nationalism has roots that extend back decades, and perhaps even centuries. To better understand where Kurdish identity is derived it is imperative to take a look back to discover how and when they first emerged

⁹ Kurdish Populations is republished with permission of Stratfor.
<https://www.stratfor.com/image/kurdish-populations-0>. Accessed July 29, 2016.

from the annals of history. In the last century, Kurdish identity has become intertwined with the concept of Kurdistan. The Kurds make historic claims to a homeland that stretches across Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.¹⁰ Upon inspection, the map of the region reveals a Kurdish population of approximately 30 million¹¹ spread from modern day

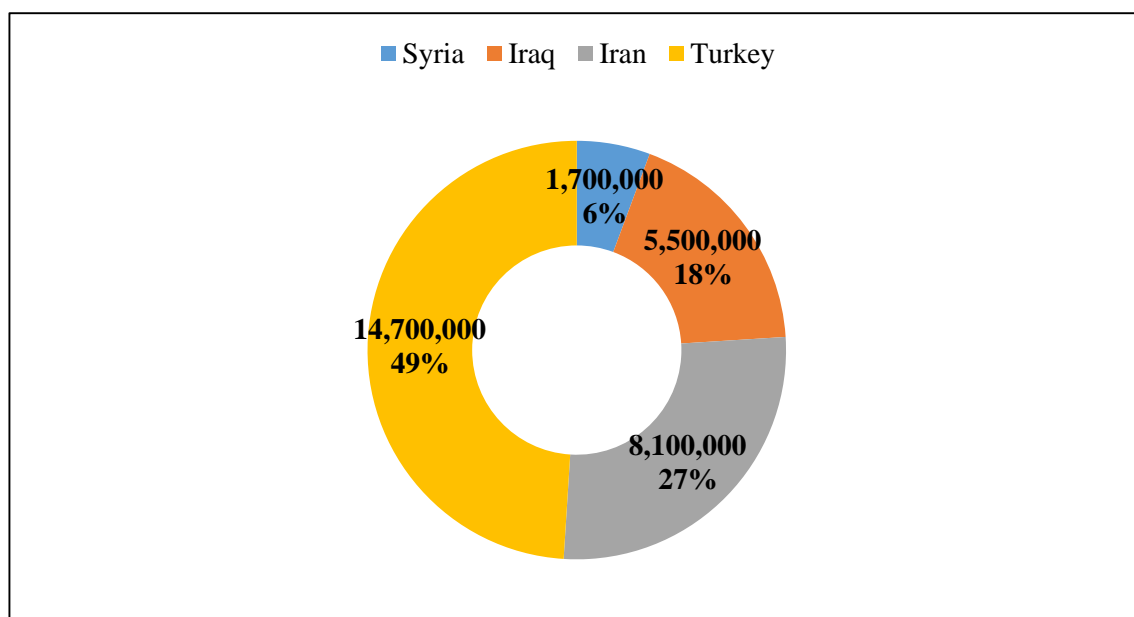


Figure 2: Regional Kurdish Population Distribution

Armenia, to central Turkey, and as far east as Iran’s shared border with Turkmenistan. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds are also recorded to live in areas of the former Soviet Union, while some scholars place the number upwards of one million assimilated Kurds in these areas (Gunter, 2014b). It is also important to note that although these areas are home to a large number of Kurds they also host large populations of other ethnicities including Assyrians, Armenians, Turkomans, Turks, Arabs, and Iranians (Gunter, 2014b). Historically speaking, Kurdistan has always been highly heterogeneous and never been home to the Kurds alone (Bruinessen, 2000). So, in some places the Kurds

¹⁰ Modern population distribution seen in Figure 2: Regional Kurdish Population.

¹¹ See Figure 2: Regional Kurdish Population Distribution. Of the 30 million Kurds in the region, 15 million live in Turkey, 6.5 million live in Iran, five million live in Iraq, and 2 million live in Syria (Gunter, 2014).

constitute a majority of the population, while others merely possess a smaller contingent.¹² Furthermore, a large diaspora of approximately 1.5 million Kurds resides in Western Europe. Simply put, the Kurds and their quest for statehood grows increasingly complex with the realization that their population spans across continents and is divided among several nation states.

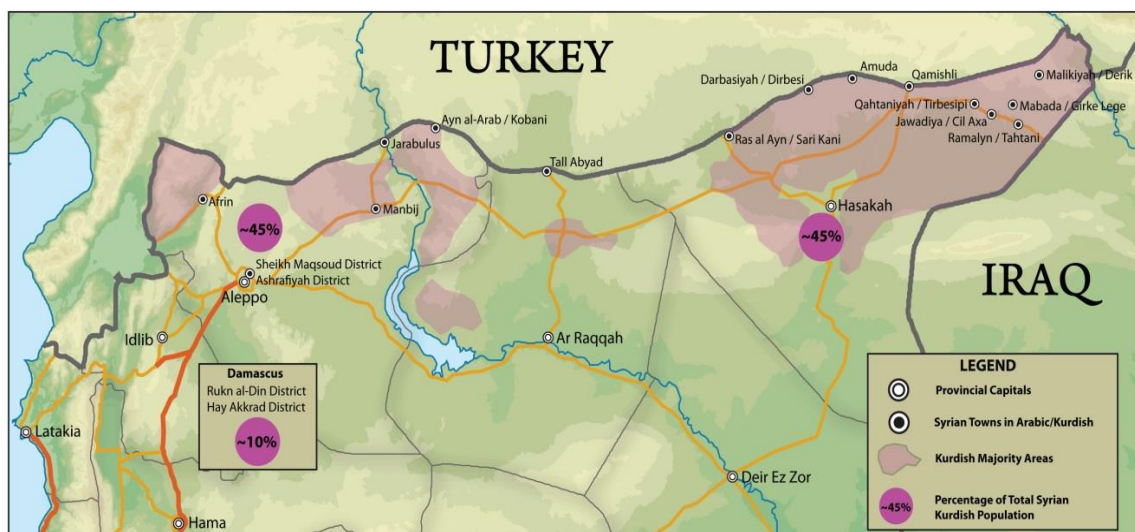


Figure 3: Kurdish Concentration in Syria

As we will discover, the Kurdish dilemma transcends the modern age and a number of attempts at autonomy have been attempted in the past. Generations of Kurds have strived for the goal of a statehood. However, these aspirations have been foiled by regional actors who would almost certainly lose territory in the process. The Kurdish people also face a number of internal fragmentation issues which has a compounding effect on the obstructions posed by external forces. Shifting alliances and compulsory alignment with host governments have often pitted Kurd against Kurd. In addition, the

¹² See Figure 3: Kurdish Concentration in Syria for a map of Kurdish majority areas. Map provided by the Institute for the Study of War. <http://www.understandingwar.org/> Accessed August 15, 2016. Caves, John. *Backgrounder: Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (Pyd)*. Institute for the Study of War, 2012. Print.

Kurdish language is broken into three main dialects; *Kurmanji*, *Sorani*, and *Pehlewani*, which can cause division at even the most fundamental level. Together these observations raise important questions about the origins of the Kurds: what records exist to support or deny the Kurdish territorial claims to a homeland? where and when did the Kurdish languages originate? and when was the first recorded reference to the Kurds? A look back will begin to answer some of these questions and offer insight into the validity of Kurdish claims of a historically rooted homeland.

1. Origins of the Kurds

The historical background of the Kurds is uncertain, yet it is undeniable that a distinct Kurdish culture has existed in the region for centuries (McDowall, 1991; Meho, 1997). Gutis, as the Kurds were known in ancient times, have a history which stretches as far back as 3000 BC (Minahan, 2002). Some historians support the idea that the Kurds were transformed some 4,000 years ago due to the immigration of several Indo-European tribes which settled in the region (Meho, 1997). Kurdish tradition holds that they are descended from the Medes, an ancient people group that are said to have assisted in the overthrow of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007; Gunter, 2014b; McDowall, 1991). The Kurdish new year known as Nevroz is celebrated on March 21st in commemoration of this historic victory (Minahan, 2002). Nevros is considered to be the Kurds' most celebrated holiday and is an important cultural icon. Moreover, myths involving King Solomon remain in their cultural narrative until today (Gunter, 2014b). Despite these differing claims, there is little doubt over the Kurds' historical roots and their distinct culture. Authors Edith and E.F.

Penrose (1978) simply state that, “the Kurdish consciousness of separate identity goes back far in history.” The term *Kurd* proves to be as challenging to trace back as the origins of the people themselves.

The name *Kurd* was first used to describe the mountain dwelling people by the Arabs, who conquered and Islamized the region in the seventh century. A Kurdish historian and author, McDowall (1991), states that, “by the beginning of the Arab period (7th Century AD) the ethnic term “Kurd” was applied to an amalgam of Iranian or Iranicised tribes, some autochthonous..., some semitic, and, probably, some Armenian communities.” These ethnic origins are reflected through the Kurdish language’s close resemblance to Farsi, the language of modern Iran (Minahan, 2002). History records that during the wars between the Persian and Greek empires, a band of mountain dwelling peoples called the *Carduchi* are said to have attacked retreating Greeks in 401 BC (Minahan, 2002). The term *Kurd* may have been derived from this band of fierce mountain dwellers, the *Carduchi*. Despite their somewhat ambiguous origins, history reveals some unquestionable Kurdish figures from as early as the 12th century.

The first, and perhaps most prominent, historical figure widely excepted to be Kurdish, is none other than Saladin (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007; Walker & University of Chicago. Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2011). Made famous for regaining Jerusalem from Christian Crusaders, Saladin went on to establish the Sunni Ayyubid Dynasty in the 12th century and became the first sultan of the region ranging from modern day Egypt to Syria. Several centuries after Saladin, two important texts emerged which many Kurdish nationalists evoke to support their case for a distinct Kurdish historical identity, the *Sharafnama* and the *Mem u Zin*.

Although the Kurds have never achieved a fully independent status, a number of partially independent dynasties have existed throughout history. This history of Kurdish emirates was first recorded in the Persian language by a Kurdish prince, Sharaf Khan Bitlisi, in the *Sharafnama*. Several dynasties are identified that existed between the 10th and 15th century, to include among others; the Marwanids, the Hasanwayhids, the Fadluyids of Great Lur, the princes of Little Lur, and the Ayyubids (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007; Meho, 1997). Beyond the *Sharafnama*, the poems of Ahmadi Khani clearly provoke Kurdish nationalism and unity from the time of its publication in 1695 to the modern age (Eppel, 2014a). In *Mem u Zin*, a tragic love poem, Khani writes,

“If only there were harmony among us, if we were to obey a single one of us, he would reduce to vassalage Turks, Arabs and Persians, all of them. We would perfect our religion, our state, and would educate ourselves in learning and wisdom.”¹³

Interestingly, Khani not only calls for the formation of a Kurdish state, he also speaks to the disunity that has plagued the Kurds for centuries and is one of the primary hurdles identified to achieving statehood. He calls his Kurdish brethren to live harmoniously and speaks to the possibilities achievable through unity.

Beyond these two works, many more prominent Kurdish intellectuals, authors, and poets have forged immortal texts that have remained central to inspiring a common Kurdish ethnic identity. Most of these authors have chosen to write in Persian, Arabic, or Turkish. Undoubtedly, works penned in Kurdish have been lost to the many conflicts

¹³ Cited in Michael M. Gunter, *The Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2007), p. 4

that have inundated Kurdish areas over the centuries (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007).

However, this does generate some difficulty in distinguishing Kurdish historical texts from other works of the bygone age. Kurdish literature has proven to be an essential component of Kurdish nationalism, however it is the prolific historical figures that serve as the lynch pin of modern nationalist movements.

One such figure is Shaykh Ubayd Allah, who championed a powerful yet ultimately unsuccessful revolt in 1880 (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007; McDowall, 2000). His legacy continues to shape nationalist rhetoric and serves as a model for many of the Kurdish revolts in the 20th century (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007). Also considered a forefather of Kurdish nationalism, Shaykh Ubayd Allah, stated in a letter to the British Consul-General,

“The Kurdish nation... is a people apart. Their Religion is different [from that of others], and their laws and customs are distinct ... the Chiefs and Rulers of Kurdistan, whether Turkish or Persian subjects, and the inhabitants of Kurdistan, one and all are united and agreed... We also are a nation apart. We want our affairs to be in our own hands.”¹⁴

To this day, Kurdish nationalists echo Shaykh Ubayd Allah’s stirring rhetoric. Some scholars argue that Shaykh Ubayd Allah and the rebellion in 1880 are the first true manifestation of modern Kurdish nationalism (Gunter, 2014b). Despite these historic roots, distinct cultures, prominent figures, and seminal texts, it is not until much later

¹⁴ Cited from David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 53.

that these factors began to play a role in formulating a sense of common Kurdish ethnic identity.

2. Era of Treaties: Broken Promises

The area that Kurdistan comprises has been a hotly contested plot of land for millennium. Notably, in the 16th century, two rival powers conquered and divided Kurdish land (Eppel, 2014a). The Ottoman Empire and the Safavids fought vehemently over control of the territory that stood between their respective empires. In 1514, the Ottomans had a decisive victory over the Safavids which effectively placed a large majority of Kurdistan under Ottoman rule. It wasn't until the border treaty between these two empires in 1639 that a clear demarcation divided Kurdish land. However, conflict over the territory persisted until the forging of the Treaty of Erzurum in 1823 (Eppel, 2014a). The Treaty of Erzurum finally brought the wars between these two powers for Kurdistan to a close. This treaty saw a majority of Kurds remaining under Ottoman rule, which endured until World War I shifted regional powers and redrew the map of the region.

Before the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson released his Fourteen Points which addressed minorities living under Ottoman rule. Specifically, point twelve declared that non-Turkish minorities should be granted the right for autonomous development (Gunter, 2014b; McDowall, 1991). This point spoke directly to the Kurdish cause and inspired hopes for the eventuality of Kurdish self-determination. The Fourteen Points also laid the groundwork for the League of Nations, a predecessor of the United Nations. The language used in Wilson's points led many to

believe that minorities living under Ottoman rule for centuries would finally break free of the empire, which in turn would set many ethnic groups on a course towards achieving their own nation building aspirations.

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds came close to realizing their goal of independence. Hopes of a new Kurdish state were high when the allied forces began partitioning the former territory of the empire. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which drew upon Wilson's Fourteen Points, witnessed support for the idea of a Kurdish state. This idea was subsequently formalized in the Sevres Treaty of 1920, which stated,

“...prepare for a local autonomy in those regions where the Kurdish element is preponderant lying east of the Euphrates, to the south of the still-to-be established Armenian frontier and to the north of the frontier between Turkey, Syria and Mesopotamia.”¹⁵

This specific zone, that the treaty designated, was to be set aside for the creation of a Kurdish state under the condition that the requirements laid out in a following article were met. Article 64 states that Turkey agrees to “renounce all rights and titles to the area”¹⁶ given that the population of Kurdistan expresses a desire to break away and it is deemed capable of independence. However, because the treaty was never ratified by its signatories, it disintegrated along with Kurdish hopes for independence. The collapse of

¹⁵ Article 62 of the Treaty of Sevres cited in David McDowall, *The Kurds: A Nation Denied* (London: Minority Rights Group 1991), p. 33.

¹⁶ Article 64 of the Treaty of Sevres cited in David McDowall, *The Kurds: A Nation Denied* (London: Minority Rights Group 1991), p. 33.

the Sevres Treaty meant there was a failure to establish rights for non-Turkish minorities. This fate was sealed with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne.

The Lausanne Treaty did not lay out any special provisions for the Turkish Kurds and officially established the Republic of Turkey in 1923 (Gunter, 2014b; Noi, 2012). Following the redrawing of the map of the Middle East, Kurdish populations found themselves part of four different countries; Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The newly formed countries of Syria and Iraq remained under French and British mandate following the close of the war. However, it was in the newly established nation of Turkey that Kurdish nationalism was inadvertently triggered due to historical and modern nation-building policies.

At the time of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish nationalism was still vastly underdeveloped and fragmented (Eppel, 2014b; Gunter, 2014b). One noteworthy reason for this stunted Kurdish nationalist development can be traced back to the era that it was ruled and fought over by the Ottomans and Persians. The lack of ethnically based nationalist projects in either the Ottoman or the Persian Empires, failed to inspire a truly salient sense of ethnic identity within the Kurdish community. Thus, the Kurds never developed a highly ethnicized sense of identity (Natali, 2005). This factor, in part, may have been one of the causes that led to the failure of a Kurdish state emerging after World War I. In contrast, Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalist movements were strong and well organized during the post war negotiations, which also threatened the emergence of an autonomous Kurdistan and stimulated a late blooming Kurdish nationalist movement. Although the historic groundwork had been laid for a nationalist

movement, as witnessed previously, it wasn't until these factors began to solidify and take root that the movement began to gain momentum.

The disintegration of the Empire and the failure of Ottomanism caused many Kurdish notables to search for a new identity (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007). Kurdish nationalism presented itself as the strongest alternative in the absence of any other viable ideology. This was reinforced by Kemalist reforms which shifted the multi-ethnic nature of the former Empire to the nation-state model (Gunter, 2014b). The reforms sought to force the Kurds to participate in the Turkish nationalist project through the abandonment of their own ethnic identities. A post World War I economic policy inspired many landowning Kurdish tribal elites to participate in the burgeoning economy and abandon Kurdish nationalism. This effectively weakened the Kurdish quest and caused stark divisions between the landowning Kurds and the peasant class. Furthermore, Turkey capitalized on a weakened Kurdish agenda through a series of policies that directly challenged the existence of a Kurdish identity in Turkey.

The practice of outright denial of Kurdish existence can be witnessed through the use of the term "Mountain Turks" to refer to the Kurds in Turkey's southeastern region (Eppel, 2014b; Gunter, 2014a). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey, violently suppressed the expression of Kurdish identity by enacting policies that aimed to eradicate Kurdish language and culture (Egin, 2013; Eppel, 2014b). On a state-building level, these policies were effective, however, they further polarized ethnicities that felt marginalized by the process. This caused factions of Kurds residing in Turkey to more stridently lean towards their Kurdish identity and invest more heavily in their own nationalist project. This can be witnessed through the heightened tensions

between Turkey and its Kurdish populations that manifested at the beginning of the 20th century.

The rise of Kurdish ethno-nationalism was a key element of the Shaykh Said Rebellion of 1925. The rebellion, which aimed to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate system, utilized Kurdish nationalism as a means for recruitment. However, it was also heavily dependent upon tribal and religious loyalties and failed to recruit Kurds from every segment of Kurdish society (McDowall, 1991). The campaign was able to quickly overtake up to a third of the Kurdish Anatolia territory. However, the initial successes of the rebellion were minimized due to the inability of the revolt to secure any major cities in the region. Turkish troops quickly deployed to eastern Turkey to suppress the revolt and consequently the Kurdish uprising was summarily and harshly stamped out. Upon the failure of the rebellion, Said and his close supporters were executed, Kurdish cities were destroyed, and anywhere from 40,000 to 250,000 peasants died (McDowall, 1991). Immediately following the end of the Shaykh Said Rebellion another revolt sprung up in northeastern Turkey near Mount Ararat. This revolt was sustained for a longer period of time because of its support from the Shah in neighboring Iran. However, once an agreement was reached between the Shah and Turkey in 1929, Turkish troops were able to enter Iran, surround the insurgents, and put an end to the Ararat Revolt (McDowall, 1991). The crushing of these uprisings in Turkey led to a mass exodus of Kurds from the surrounding territory (Noi, 2012). This in turn caused Kurdish presence in neighboring Syria and Lebanon to swell and ultimately accelerated the creation of the first transnational Kurdish organization, the *Xoybun*.

Kurdish exiles from Turkey residing in Bhamdoun, Lebanon founded the pan-Kurdish group called the *Xoybun* League in 1927. The term *xoybun* (or *khoybun*) literally translates as “be yourself” and the group was based on a secular nationalist ideology (Phillips & Kouchner, 2015; Tejel, 2012). The league generated the space for Kurdish intellectuals to gather and discuss issues of nationalism and self-determination and is considered the first true transnational Kurdish political organization (Noi, 2012). *Xoybun* served as the intellectual foundation of modern Kurdish nationalism and was able to achieve several breakthrough advances for the Kurds, including; generating a Kurdish alphabet in Latin characters, disseminating a regional publication called the *Hawar*, establishing a regionally broadcasted radio station, producing Kurdish literature, and seeking to train an independent Kurdish fighting force (Ahmed & Gunter, 2007; Noi, 2012; Phillips & Kouchner, 2015). The group also played a pivotal role in organizing a landmark Kurdish alliance. In 1944, Kurdish delegates met in Turkey’s Mt. Dalanpur to sign the Treaty of the Three Boundaries. Representatives hailed from every nation containing Kurdish populations and the treaty embodied Kurdish transnational unity and defined terms of collaboration for future aspirations (Gunter, 2014a). This development did not go unnoticed by Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.

Together, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, forged the Treaty of Saadabad in 1937 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955. Although the treaties were crafted as non-aggression pacts and sought to counter Soviet expansion into the region, they also contained terms of collaboration on the “Kurdish issue” (Gunter, 2014a). The treaties aimed to preserve post World War I international borders by limiting Kurdish cross-border communication and transnational organization. Michael Gunter (2014a), an author and Kurdish expert,

writes that “Syria was certainly a silent partner in both endeavors, and therefore its Kurds were a silent victim.” The *Xoybun* group, and the Kurdish transnational movement at large, proved no match for the resolve of these counter Kurdish policies. The group was officially dissolved in 1946 before it was able to forge cohesion amongst Kurdish groups in the region. Many former members of the *Xoybun* League joined the Communist party because of their interest in social and economic justice (Phillips & Kouchner, 2015). This period was also marked by an improvement of Kurdish-Soviet relations. A rise in communist popularity among Syrian Kurds led to further fragmentation and caused diminishing interest in the pan-Kurdish movement in favor of a communist ideology (Gunter, 2014b; Noi, 2012; Phillips & Kouchner, 2015). These fragmentations reappear in the second half of the 20th century as an ongoing crisis for the Kurdish cause.

3. Syrian Kurds, Fragmentation, and the Rise of the PKK

Many factors have contributed to current fractures of the Kurdish nationalist movement and, more fundamentally, have caused rifts in Kurdish identity. Since the end of World War I, Kurdish nationalism has developed differently in each of the states they have been partitioned into (Eppel, 2014b). Furthermore, after the failure of the Sevres Treaty, Kurds have often found themselves used as pawns in a complex game of regional geopolitics. Nation states which host Kurdish populations often exploit Kurdish fragmentation to coopt the Kurdish cause and use it as a tool for leverage against their regional opponents (Noi, 2012). Several prominent examples exist from recent history, including; Syria’s sponsorship for the PUK in Iraq and the PKK in

Turkey as well as Iran's assistance to Iraqi Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War. In 2003, the Kurds also played a strategic role during the US led invasion of Iraq by providing critical assistance at a time when Turkey refused to get involved. The significance of Syria's role in sponsoring Kurdish groups will be given special attention because the focus of this historical review is on the Syrian Kurd experience.

In 1975, Hafez Assad supported the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq in open defiance to Saddam Hussein (Noi, 2012). Syria sought to weaken the regime in Iraq through direct engagement with the Kurdish opposition and in 1979 Syria welcomed the other major Kurdish faction to operate in its territory, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). These rival organizations both opened offices in the northern Syrian city of Qamishli, located in a Kurdish majority area. Here these Kurdish organizations were permitted to recruit Syrian Kurds to participate in the fight against the Iraqi army by joining the *Peshmerga*. Frequently, Kurdish fighters were allowed to join these Kurdish insurgencies in fulfillment of their Syrian mandatory military service (Gunter, 2014a). The fact that Iraqi Kurds remained steadfastly engaged with Saddam's regime, and the PUK and KDP did not want to antagonize their Syrian host, equated to scant attention being given by these groups to the advancement of the Kurdish issue in Syria (Lowe, 2007). Another group that Hafez' Syria catered to was the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey.

Founded in 1978 by a group of students led by Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK began engaging in a number of political activities, including; riots, demonstrations, sabotage, and protests against the Turkish state. The newly formed group championed an ideology which merged Marxist revolutionary socialism with Kurdish nationalism

(Egin, 2013). The main rally cry of the organization was to defend Kurds against what they perceived as the state sponsored suppression of Kurdish culture. During this period the PKK was also actively in conflict with rival Kurdish organizations that operated from the same Diyarbakir province of southeastern Turkey. It wasn't until 1984 that the PKK began to engage in an armed struggle with the Turkish state in hopes of strong-arming Kurdish self-determination and independence into existence (Noi, 2012). In the early 1990's, the PKK began using suicide bombings as a means to achieving this mission and subsequently it was labelled a terrorist organization by the United States, NATO, and the European Union (EU). Between 1979 and 1999, the PKK had a base of operations in the Syrian controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon as well as in other areas across Syria. Under Hafez' auspices, the PKK leader plotted and trained PKK militants from Syrian territory (Noi, 2012). In a similar agreement as the one Syria had with the PUK and KDP of Iraq, Syrian Kurds were encouraged to join the PKK in lieu of serving in the Syrian military (Gunter, 2014a; Krajewski, 2015). Anywhere from 7,000 to 10,000 Syrian Kurds are estimated to have died fighting under the PKK flag against the Turkish army (Lowe, 2007). Syria's decision to harbor Ocalan and sponsor the PKK in its fight against Turkey developed for a few distinct reasons.

The Euphrates River originates in eastern Turkey and flows south, providing Syria with a critical supply of fresh water to sustain its fertile lands and maintain its economically important agricultural sector (Hinnebusch, Hindi, Khaddam, & Ababsa, 2011).¹⁷ Turkey's Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) was a series of projects that sought

¹⁷ Agriculture is second only to Industry and Mining (between 36 and 40% of GDP in 2005). Approximately 19.5 percent of Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was derived from the agricultural sector in 2005, and it made up as much as 31.6 percent as recently as 1995. Figures provided by the

to harness the Euphrates River for both irrigation and hydroelectric power. The scope of the project was vastly expanded in the 1980's to become a multisector development project in Turkey's southeastern region. GAP directly threatened to restrict the flow of the Euphrates River and diminish Syria's access to this important resource flowing across its border from Turkey. In addition to GAP, Syria was still displeased with Turkey's annexation of Alexandretta at the end of the French mandate.¹⁸ Thus, Syria sought to use the PKK as leverage to improve its position in securing favorable water quotas and address past grievances (Gunter, 2014a). The PKK may have been expected to keep a tight rein on Syrian Kurds in exchange for the regimes support (Gunter, 2014a). The Syrian-PKK partnership ended abruptly in October of 1998 due to Turkey's threats to go to war with Syria unless the PKK was expelled from their territory.

The Adana Agreement between Syria and Turkey was signed in 1998 in an effort to avoid further escalation towards a major conflict. The agreement stipulated that Syria was to label the PKK a terrorist organization, hinder any activity of the group or its affiliates, and inhibit any provision of supplies, weapons, or funding to the group (Noi, 2012). This effectively led to the closing of PKK camps and offices in Syrian territory and the flight of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to Kenya. Not long afterwards, Ocalan was captured and sentenced to life in prison in Turkey. While in prison, Ocalan has taken on a Mandela-like presence by continuing to communicate

World Bank indicators database (<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators>)

¹⁸ Alexandretta, or the Hatay province of Turkey as it is now known today, runs along the eastern Mediterranean coastline and is still marked as territory of Syria on many Syrian maps.

with his devoted followers and leading PKK negotiations with the Turkish government. Despite the role that Syria played in fostering and aiding Kurdish rebellion in Turkey during the previous decades, it has also directly engaged in policies that sought to control and fragment its domestic Kurdish population.

The fragmentation and cooption of the Kurds in Syria can be attributed to decades of counter Kurdish policy and attempts at assimilation. For instance,

Arabization policies in the 1960s and 1970s under the Ba'ath party attempted to create a so called “Arab-belt” along Syria’s border with Turkey.¹⁹ This

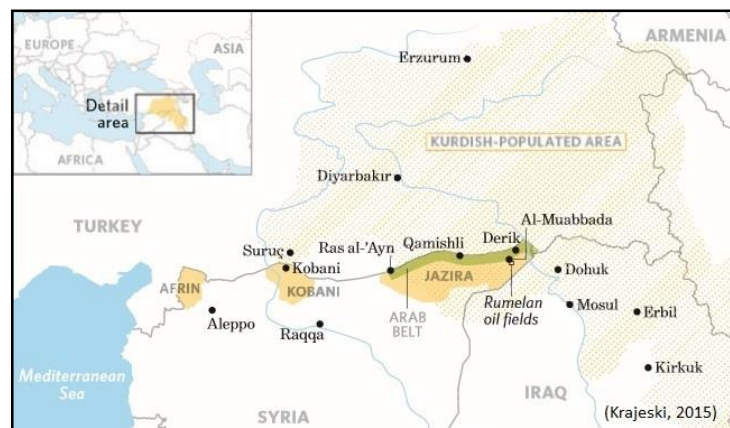


Figure 4: Arab-Belt

established a 200 mile strip a land along the border exclusively populated by Arabs, effectively separating Syrian Kurds from their Turkish and Iraqi counterparts (Krajeski, 2015). During this era Kurdish families living in the area were forcefully removed from their homes and relocated to other areas. The goal of the “Arab-belt” policy was to dilute Kurdish majority areas, diminish Kurdish influence over key resources (notably the Euphrates River and the fertile lands of northeastern Syria), and separate the Syrian Kurds from Kurdish populations in Iraq and Turkey (Fragiskatos, 2007). Similar attempts at assimilation and separation were carried out by other neighboring regimes at the time,

¹⁹ See Figure 4: Arab-Belt. Map from Krajeski, Jenna. "What the Kurds Want." *Virginia Quarterly Review: a national journal of literature and discussion* 91.4 (2015): 86. Web.

including in Iraq and Turkey. Another long running complaint of Syrian Kurds is their intentional exclusion from top positions of power within the Regime. This exclusion has existed for decades and persists until the modern day with no noteworthy Kurds holding high ranking positions in the Regime's political apparatus or the Syrian military.

During the peak of Arab nationalism in 1950s and 1960s the attack on Kurdish cultural expression reached its peak. The Kurmanji language was banned along with Kurdish music and publications (Fragiskatos, 2007). Furthermore, Kurdish political parties were disbanded and their leaders arrested. Kurds also faced restrictions in celebrating their Kurdish National Day, also known as Kurdish New Year or *Newroz* festival (Savelsberg & Tejel, 2013). Despite Hafez Assad's warm relationship with Ocalan and the PKK, these discriminatory and suppressive policies persisted throughout his rule until his death in 2000 (Fragiskatos, 2007). Lastly and perhaps most critically, some 250,000 to 300,000 Kurds residing in Syria have been denied citizenship. This legacy of the stateless Kurds in Syria began earlier in the century soon after the nation gained its independence.

Arguably, the worst injustice done by the Syrian Regime to the Kurds was the denial of citizenship resulting in a lack of basic civil rights of more than 300,000 Kurds (Noi, 2012). The failed Kurdish rebellions in Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s, namely the Shaykh Said Rebellion and the Ararat Revolt, led many Turkish Kurds to emigrate south into Syria. This caused Syria's relatively smaller population of Kurds to swell at a swift rate for the following decades. In 1962, a census was ordered in Jazira, a Kurdish region of Syria. The census abruptly required Kurds to provide proof that

they had resided in Syria before 1945. Those that were unable to verify their residency had their Syrian citizenships revoked, which immediately plunged some 300,000 Kurds into statelessness. The census is considered unfair because it was conducted without warning, it was performed in a single day, and the consequences for nonparticipation were not well explained (Fragiskatos, 2007). Two classifications of stateless Kurds exist in Syria; the *ajanib* and the *maktumin*. Roughly 200,000 Kurds were classified as *ajanib*, or foreigners, due to their lack of proof on census day. A further 80,000-100,000 were classified as *maktumin*, meaning concealed or hidden, because of their lack of participation in the census. Both *ajanib* and *maktumin* Kurds pass their stateless status onto their children. Generations have subsequently lost out on access to state services, education, and legal rights including property ownership (Fragiskatos, 2007; Noi, 2012).

Although hard to quantify, these policies have revealed their efficacy through hindering the creation of an independent Kurdistan and quelling any strong Kurdish political mobilization, particularly in Syria. To this day, the Kurds remain the largest people group in the Middle East which remain stateless (Federici, 2015; Hevian, 2013). However, the re-politicization of Kurdish ethnic identity in the 1990s, the creation of the semiautonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq, and the emergence of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in 2003, are signs of a growing Kurdish influence in the region.

4. Modern History: Creation of Rojava

Although exact figures are difficult to establish because the Syrian government does not keep official records of the Kurds, the current population living in Syria is approximately between 1.75 to 2 million (Krajeski, 2015; Lowe, 2007). Before the outset of the Syrian Civil War, this constituted about ten percent of the total population which makes the Kurds Syria's largest ethnic minority (Lowe, 2007). Kurdish populations are concentrated along Syria's border with Iraq and Turkey in the areas known as Jazira, Kubani, and Kurd Dagh. Large Kurdish communities also exist in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus (Lowe, 2007). Syrian Kurds' historical ties and close proximity to Turkey equates to a long standing relationship with the PKK and a reverence for its leader, Ocalan. At times the PKK's working relationship with the Syrian regime has caused strife for Syrian Kurds, while at other times it has generated opportunities.

The PKK alliance with the Syrian regime in the 1990s generated a state of *de facto* PKK control over some small areas of Syrian territory. This established an unprecedented opening for Kurdish culture to flourish. Many Kurdish intellectuals and political parties took advantage of the opportunity in what Kurd scholars, Savelsberg and Tejel (2013), describe as a "re-politicization of Kurdish ethnic identity" during this period. For example, in the 1970s, a mere three books were published in the Kurdish language, while later in the 1990s the number of books increased to 111 (Savelsberg & Tejel, 2013). This cultural awakening, fostered in part by the safe havens provided by the Syrian Regime, coincided with the creation of a *de facto* Kurdish state in Iraq

following the implementation of Operation Provide Comfort.²⁰ A small yet pivotal political party emerged in Syria during this period, the Kurdish Union Party (or Yekîî).

The Yekîî were a progressive left leaning secular party and although the Kurdish political scene in northern Syria already had a number of political parties, the Yekîî stood out for a number of reasons. They had offices in every main Kurdish urban center as well as Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia, and they were able to attract Kurds from every social demographic (Savelsberg & Tejel, 2013). Furthermore, they successfully advanced the Kurdish political agenda beyond identity based issues into new arenas such as civil society, human rights, and social justice. In the late 1990s they launched several small campaigns that included protests, publications, demonstrations, and striking around these core issues. These actions culminated on June 25 of 2003, when a small crowd demonstrating in Damascus was violently dispersed.²¹ This, and other smoldering issues, set the stage for growing unrest among Syria's Kurdish population.

Kurdish nationalist movements have been active for several decades in neighboring Turkey, Iraq, and even Iran while Syrian Kurds have remained relatively politically under-mobilized. Although Kurdish political parties had existed in Syria for several decades which touted a strong nationalist rhetoric, they remained impotent for a number of internal and external reasons. Internally, Kurdish parties suffered from

²⁰ Operation Provide Comfort (1991-1996) was a mission spearheaded by the US and other coalition forces to create an Iraqi no-fly zone in northern Iraq to protect and provide humanitarian aid to fleeing Kurdish populations during the aftermath of the Gulf War.

²¹ Reports of arrests and torture was also reported by Amnesty International. Sourced from Savelsberg, Eva, and Jordi Tejel. "The Syrian Kurds in "Transition to Somewhere"." *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*. Eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter., 2013. 189. Print.

undemocratic processes within their organizations. Furthermore, they possessed a reverence for strong leadership which created parties or factions built entirely around an individual or select group of individuals. This resulted in the formation of several Kurdish parties in Syria that were ideologically similar yet in conflict between leaderships (Allsopp, 2014). Externally, the Kurds in Syria were subjected to a number of effective policies implemented by Damascus to keep the Kurdish populations in Syria factionalized, repressed, and marginalized (Allsopp, 2014; Phillips & Kouchner, 2015). Several small demonstrations sprung up in the 1990s and increased in frequency and scale into the early 2000s. The death of Hafez Assad in 2000 witnessed a further loosening on the Syrian stance towards the Kurds. However, the Regime remained stridently opposed to protests and political activism. In 2002, two prominent Yekîti party members were arrested, tortured, and detained for fourteen months (Lowe, 2007). Furthermore, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime heightened tensions between Arab and Kurdish populations living in northern Syria (Lowe, 2007). Tensions reached a boiling point in 2004 with the eruption of uprisings in the predominantly Kurdish city of Qamishli.

On March 12, 2004, violent protests erupted across Kurdish areas of northern Syria as well as in Kurdish enclaves in Aleppo and the capital, Damascus. Local media reported that a riot, which started at a football match between the teams of al-Qamishli and Dayr az-Zaur, spilled over onto the streets of Qamishli (Lowe, 2007; Savelsberg & Tejel, 2013). The dispute was said to have been triggered by an exchange of inflammatory chants made between the predominantly Sunni Arab fans of Dayr as-Zaur and the Kurdish fans of the al-Qamishli team. As the violence from the stadium spilled

onto the streets, the governor of the Hasakah²² province gave the order for security forces to open fire on the rioters. The resulting security action resulted in death of six Kurds, three of which were reportedly children (Savelsberg & Tejel, 2013). The news of the deaths travelled quickly and riots quickly spread out from Qamishli to other Kurdish cities. The resulting unrest witnessed the destruction of private and government property, attacks on police stations, the vandalizing of Hafez Assad depictions, and the burning of Syrian flags (Lowe, 2007). By evening, protesters had mobilized as far away as Damascus.

The following day the regime was again caught off guard by the surprising number of Kurds that took to the streets in protest and mourning of those killed in the previous day's unrest. In typical fashion, the Syrian security forces responded with a harsh crackdown on protesters. According to an Amnesty International report, at least 36 were killed, more than 100 were severely injured, and over 2,000 Kurds were arrested.²³ Reportedly, the vast majority of deaths were at the hands of the Syrian security forces and several hundred more remained imprisoned without trial at the time of the reports publication a year after the uprisings. Further exacerbating the issue, in 2005 a prominent Kurdish Sheikh disappeared and was murdered in Damascus. Although details of his disappearance and death were never established, many suspected the regimes involvement (Lowe, 2007). Subsequent unrest at his funeral helped to sustain the momentum that the Qamishli Uprisings had triggered. These substantial events marked the beginning of a new phase for the Kurdish movement in Syria. Most

²² The province in which Qamishli resides.

²³ Figures cited from Amnesty International. *Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic One Year After the March 2004 Events*. MDE 24/002/2005 Vol. Amnesty International, 2005. Web.

notably, the Qamishli Uprisings of 2004 and following unrest witnessed the emergence of a new powerful actor on the Kurdish political scene, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

Founded in 2003, the PYD had clear links to the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey, the PKK (Allsopp, 2013; Gunter, 2014a). Taking advantage of the sense of Syrian Kurd solidarity leading up to and following the uprisings of 2004, the PYD grew in prominence. As other, more established, parties placated the regime and called for an end to the uprisings, the PYD did not. This showed their political defiance and connection to the dissatisfied constituency by refusing to dampen Kurdish unrest (Savelsberg & Tejel, 2013). Harriet Allsopp (2013) describes a “crisis of legitimacy” for Kurdish political parties in Syria at the time of the uprisings for two reasons; 1) the Kurdish parties withdrew from their constituency and instead focused on internal personal disputes and external relations advancing the Kurdish agenda abroad, and 2) party members and intellectuals left in droves because of a lack of respect and a perception of failure (Allsopp, 2013). However, the PYD emerged from this crisis as champions of the Kurdish cause. The PYD solidified their position as torch bearers of the Kurdish cause by encouraging acts of political and civil defiance and refusing to reduce intensity in the weeks following the Qamishli Uprising. While reflecting in an interview, the group’s leader, Salih Muslim, harkens back to the Qamishli Uprisings as the beginning of the Syrian Revolution for the Kurds, claiming that the events of 2011 only changed its dimension and level.²⁴ This reveals that the uprisings marked the

²⁴ Based on comments made by Salih Muslim in an interview with the Turkish newspaper, *Milliyet* and reported in the *BBC Monitoring European*. "Leader of Syrian Kurdish Party Discusses Ties with Turkey, Iran." *BBC Monitoring European* 2013. Web.

beginning of a new era for the PYD and Kurdish politics in Syria. As tension continued to mount over the coming year, the Syrian government made attempts to pacify the Kurdish population.

A year following the uprisings, in March 2005, Syria announced a presidential pardon for the 312 Kurds that remained in custody. This unprecedented announcement was accompanied by a decree from President Assad that the *ajanib* would be granted citizenship following an upcoming census (Lowe, 2007). The *ajanib*, or stateless Kurds, were a long standing issue in northern Syria. However, a majority of Kurds remained skeptical of the presidential decree because previous promises of similar action had gone undelivered.²⁵ Despite the regimes last ditch efforts to subdue the unrest, the Kurdish issue in Syria had already grown beyond control. The PYD was recognized as being of strategic importance to the noted rise in Kurdish nationalism and calls for autonomy in Syria. The party, along with their cross-border affiliates, the PKK, began situating themselves for the implementation of a new form of governance in the Kurdish regions known as “Democratic Confederalism.”

An export from an American anarchist philosopher, Murray Bookchin, “Democratic Confederalism” is a bottom-up libertarian socialist political system which relies on the formation of a network of local councils and administrative offices (Allsopp, 2013; Krajewski, 2015). The new form of governance gained notoriety when Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK, adopted it as the future model for Kurdish self-governance. Fascination with Bookchin’s work led the imprisoned PKK leader to write

²⁵ This same tactic was used later by the regime at the outset of the Syrian Civil War.

to Bookchin's widow in 2006. In the letter he stated that he "planned to create the first Bookchinist society on the planet."²⁶ This led to a shift in PKK goals. Although still engaged in armed conflict in Turkey, the PKK began to avoid violence towards noncombatants (Krajeski, 2015). It also began to focus more heavily on issues of governance, gender equality, and ecology rather than solely achieving its goals through militarized means. This evolution of the PKK and its shift in ideology and tactics transformed its mission in Syria and laid the groundwork for Rojava with the help of the PYD.

The PYD continued to grow in influence and effectiveness from the time of the Qamishli Revolts of 2004. Despite facing heavy crackdowns and persecution from the Regime, the PYD remained a powerful community mobilizer. A Human Rights Watch (2009) report observed that, "The harassment of PYD members, according to members of the party and outside observers, is because of Syria's security agreement with the Turks, and the PYD's ability to mobilize large crowds."²⁷ The report also notes several specific instances where the PYD faced extra scrutiny and longer, harsher sentences than members of other Kurdish political organizations in Syria. Particularly, Salih Muslim, party head of the PYD since 2010, and his wife were subjected to intense Regime harassment which caused them to flee Syrian authorities and go into hiding at the end of 2007 (HRW, 2009).²⁸ Muslim and his wife took refuge in a PKK camp in

²⁶ Cited in Krajeski, J. (2015). What the kurds want. *Virginia Quarterly Review: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion*, 91(4), 86.

²⁷ HRW. *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*. New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2009. Print. p. 31.

²⁸ Salih Muslim joined the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (The Party) in 1998. However, after becoming disillusioned with The Party, he left and joined the PYD in 2003 soon after its founding.

Iraqi Kurdistan and didn't return until the beginning of the Syrian uprisings began in March 2011.²⁹

Salih Muslim and the PYD deftly outmaneuvered other Kurdish political parties in the years following the Qamishli Revolts leading up to the Syrian uprisings. The group was well positioned to apply its experimental "Democratic Confederalism" at the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. Rojava is a PYD inspired autonomous region in northern Syria consisting of several cantons; Jazira, Kobani, Afrin, and Shahba.³⁰ Also known as Western Kurdistan, Rojava declared its autonomy in November of 2013 upon the withdrawal of Syrian troops.³¹ The troop withdrawal from Kurdish territory granted *de facto* independence to the Kurds in the north. The coalition government that oversees Rojava is known as the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM). The PYD maintains control over TEV-DEM through its monopoly on power gained through its ties to the PKK (Baczko et al., 2013). The PYD's dominance and ability to project its power and authority in the newly formed autonomous state is also derived from its strong and long standing military wing known as People's Protection Units (YPG). Aided, trained, and led by PKK commanders, the YPG, and its all-female counterpart the YPJ, is the premiere armed Kurdish force in Syria (Baczko et al., 2013). The exact dates of the birth of the YPG are unknown, but it's possible that it has been operating since 2004, soon after the emergence of the PYD. The group is estimated to be

²⁹ Reported by Carnegie Middle East Center. 2011. *Syria Resources: Saleh Muslim Mohammed*. Accessed August 16, 2016. <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48726>.

³⁰ At the time of writing, Shahba is an unofficial member of the autonomous region of Rojava since it's delegation attended a Rojava administration conference in February 2016.

³¹ For this, some have accused the PYD of collaboration with the Syrian regime. A claim which the group adamantly refutes. (Paasche, Till F. "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation." *Middle East Policy* 22.1 (2015): 77-88. Web.)

anywhere from 45,000 to, possibly, over 50,000³² fighters (Barfi, 2015; Perry, 2015) and excels at speed, stealth, and surprise on the battlefield. It is described as an archetypal guerilla fighting force (Stephens, 2014). Its maneuverability and decentralized form of command and control grants the YPG a strategic advantage over more traditionally operated fighting forces. Furthermore, it has demonstrated its fighting ability by engaging in combat against another prominent non-state entity operating out of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The YPG has successfully countered ISIL advances into Kurdish held territories of Syria by beating them at their own game of unconventional tactics (Stephens, 2014). The YPG directly benefits from years of knowledge gleaned through the PKK's armed struggle against the Turkish state since the early 1980s. The group has received limited support from international actors because of their close ties with the PKK, a designated terrorist organization, and the standing human rights allegations made against them.³³ The PYD is not the only Kurdish political force that has emerged in recent years.

Determined to consolidate and control the Kurdish effort in Syria during the war, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, helped establish a new political Kurdish coalition.³⁴ In 2011, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) sprang to life with the participation of 10 different Syrian Kurdish political parties (Allsopp, 2014). The KNC is now comprised of 16 different parties and is one of the two major blocs in

³² These figures are based on estimates from late 2015 and include as many as 300 foreign fighters from Western nations and Iran. The YPG also claims to have many Arabs and Christians fighting amongst their ranks. (Barak Barfi, "Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Oct 9, 2015. Accessed August 12, 2016.)

³³ Abrahams, Fred, and Lama Fakih. *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014. Print.

³⁴ The KNC is heavily influenced by Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), and represented by the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS), D. Abd al-Hakim.

Syrian Kurd politics, the other being the afore mentioned PYD.³⁵ Under the auspices of the KRG *Peshmerga*, the KNC has built up a small fighting force called the *Rojava Peshmerga* which is trained in Iraqi Kurdistan. The KNC faces a number of challenges that reflect the fragmentation inherent to Kurdish politics, not least of which is its tumultuous relationship with the PYD. The PYD's own Kurdish objectives, links to the PKK, and its strong military wing have allowed it to abstain from joining the KNC. The very creation of the KNC is said to have been an attempt to counterbalance the political potency of the PYD and the PKK in northern Syria (Hevian, 2013).

In an effort to broaden its influence, the KNC attempted to join its Syrian counterpart, the Syrian National Council (SNC), but it quickly severed connections because its demands were not met (Hevian, 2013).³⁶ The KNC's stated objectives include; recognition of Kurdish national identity in the Syrian constitution, the ending of discriminatory policies and compensation for those effected by them, and the political decentralization of government (Hevian, 2013). The KNC's ability to achieve these goals has been allayed by internal divisions, inherent fragmentation of Kurdish parties, and the lack of participation by the PYD. These factors have hindered the KNC from becoming an effective political presence in the current environment (Allsopp, 2013).

³⁵ Technically, the PYD leads a coalition called The People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK) which includes representation from several smaller movements and the Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement or TEV-DEM.

³⁶ The KNC demanded the recognition of a "Kurdish nation" within Syria, a term which was agreed upon at the Friends of Syria meeting in Tunisia but later omitted in the final publication of the National Charter. The KNC accused Turkey of manipulating SNC policy against the group. (Sourced from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The Kurdish National Council in Syria," <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/48502>. Accessed on August 8, 2016.)

In July of 2012, the Erbil Agreement was signed between the KNC and the PYD which created the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC). The KSC, sponsored by Barzani of the KRG, is said to be Rojava's "highest decision making body," a mandate which it has had difficulty living up to (Hevian, 2013). A secondary objective of the KSC is to seek collaboration on security committees and with local unarmed policing forces. These power sharing initiatives have been undermined by the PYD's open hostility towards their political rivals on the ground.³⁷ The KNC and its political allies in Erbil have done little to counter the PYD's dominance over Kurdish politics despite these attempts. An article from OxResearch (2014) touches on the inadequacies of the KNC, "The other main Kurdish political group -- the Kurdish National Council (KNC) -- is backed by the KRG's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and has greater international legitimacy; however, it is almost powerless to confront or displace the PYD."³⁸ PYD has seized upon the KNC's ineffectiveness and indecisiveness by acting quickly and boldly. The PYD remains the unrivalled *de facto* authority in Rojava and its military wing, the YPG, the preeminent fighting force on the ground repelling ISIL in Syria.

The PYD's dominance of the political scene in northern Syria is apparent given its roots in the Qamishli Revolt and its strength compared to rival political entities in the region.³⁹ An exploration of the factors leading to Syrian Civil War will provide insight into how the current conflict has shifted the political landscape in northern Syria and potentially opened a window of opportunity for PYD objectives. The next section will

³⁷ Sourced from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The Kurdish National Council in Syria," <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/48502>. Accessed on August 8, 2016.

³⁸ Cited from "MIDDLE EAST: Realpolitik may scupper Kurdish statehood." *OxResearch Daily Brief Service*, Oxford, 2014. p. 5.

³⁹ See a breakdown of Syria's Kurdish political parties and coalitions in APPENDIX I: Kurdish Political Parties in Syria

discuss the causes of the Syrian crisis, its effects on the Kurds, and the opportunities it has generated. The conflict dynamics, the emergence of a war economy, and the preexisting resources in Kurdish held areas all contribute to the viability of Kurdish autonomy. An analysis of these factors will help determine the sustainability of the Rojava project and the likelihood of its existence beyond the end of the conflict.

B. Syria in Turmoil: Sustainability of the Rojava Project

The Syrian Civil War is complex and the factors that led to it are many. This progression from social upheaval, revolt, and full-fledged civil war has been thoroughly explored by the academic community since its outbreak. Variables used for these studies have tended to focus on ethnic fractionalization, availability of resources, socio-economic disparities, types of regimes, topography, and the collapse of institutions (Richani, 2016). Although no single factor can be selected from the pool of speculative theories as to what triggered the revolution, a few hold more credence than others. Furthermore, because we are focused on the Kurds, the scope of Syrian Civil War analysis will be limited to theories that carry the greatest correlates to the Kurdish situation in the north. The factors conjectured by Nazih Richani, a civil-war researcher and professor of political science, carry simplistic yet richly nuanced implications in explaining the rise of hostilities towards the Regime. In Richani's (2016) prognosis of the current crisis in Syria, he attributes two main factors as primary drivers of the uprisings, drought and institutional deadlock.

Hardship first struck Syria's rural countryside in 2004. Heavy droughts in Syria, which started that year, lasted until 2008 and caused some two to three million Syrians

to plummet into extreme poverty. Syria's agricultural sector was dependent upon consistent rainfall because only about 16 percent of cropped land was irrigated (Hinnebusch et al., 2011). This dependence meant that Syria's crops were susceptible to irregular weather which produced a large variance in crop yield from year to year. The drought that struck in the early 2000s produced devastating effects. By the time it ended, the drought had ruined 60 percent of agricultural land and killed upwards of 85 percent of Syria's livestock. Over 800,000 Syrians lost their livelihoods during this four-year long drought (Richani, 2016). These conditions caused approximately 1.2 to 1.5 million Syrians to migrate from rural areas to urban centers (Droz, 2014). This rapid urbanization was further exacerbated by the continuing flow of refugees from neighboring Iraq following the US led invasion in 2003. Forty-six percent of Syria's population resided in rural areas before the drought (Richani, 2016). As mentioned previously, the Kurds lived in the most fertile lands of Syria and were not immune to the devastating effects of the drought which precluded the uprisings. It was these circumstances that caused disaffected communities in Syria's rural areas to form the hotbed of revolutionary sentiment. The uprisings officially began on March 18th, 2011 in a small agricultural town in the south of Syria called Dar'a.

The Regime had a number of policies it could have implemented that would have eased the burden borne by the agricultural community. The Regime's seeming inability to respond to the developing crisis plaguing the agricultural sector in a swift and effective manner leads to Richani's (2016) second point, institutional deadlock. In an interview, Syria's former Minister of Economy, Abdulla al Dardari, spoke of an "administrative stalemate" between the Baath Party and local organizations (Richani,

2016). This stalemate limited the Regimes ability to deliver critical aid to the struggling regions of Syria. Local organizations sought to circumvent the Baath Party's established channels of distribution, undermining its ability to reap key resources from kickbacks and crony capitalism, while also constricting Baathist influence in rural areas.⁴⁰ In response, the Regime hindered the implementation of a critical aid plan by two years. The plan, had it been enacted, would have relieved much of the hardship experienced by the rural economy. To compound this crisis, important government subsidies on fuel and seed were cut during this period. When asked to clarify the logic of such an ill-timed policy, Dardari explained that the goal of the initiative was to stimulate the stagnating rural economy by generating market incentives (Richani, 2016). This breakdown of the "authoritarian bargain"⁴¹ in Syria, instigated by drought and enflamed by poor policy and deadlock, brought the rural economy to its knees. The impacts of these factors play a pivotal role in contributing to unrest in the Kurdish areas in Syria's agrarian heartland. The Kurdish response to these challenges, through the harnessing of resources around them, forms the basis for sustaining the Rojava project.

The viability of the Rojava project hinges on two important realities in northern Syria. Gunter (2014), observes that Rojava "contains the country's most fertile areas and is also home to most of its oil reserves..." These fertile lands and rich oil reserves are of strategic importance to the Rojava project. The PYD and Rojava's governing

⁴⁰ An expansive Baathist network, established under Hafiz Assad, controlled the flow and distribution of government subsidies, fertilizer, and pesticides, which fueled the Regimes upper echelon with a valuable infusion of finances. (Sourced from Richani, Nazih. "The Political Economy and Complex Interdependency of the War System in Syria." *Civil Wars* 18.1 (2016): 45-68. Web)

⁴¹ The authoritarian bargain is described as "an implicit arrangement between ruling elites and citizens whereby citizens relinquish political freedom in exchange for public goods." (Sourced from Desai, Raj M., Anders Olofsgård, And Tarik M. Yousef. "The Logic of Authoritarian Bargains." *Economics & Politics*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009., pp. 93-125.

body, TEV-DEM, have exploited these resources to their advantage and harnessed them to drive their local economy in the newly emerged “Democratic Confederalist” autonomous region. An investigation into the details of how they employ these advantages towards the advancement of Rojava reveals the project’s potential for longevity.

The region now under control of the Kurds in northern Syria was the agricultural heartland of the country before its digression into civil war. Fed by the Euphrates river, the region produces crops ranging from cotton to vegetables such as wheat, barley, and maize (Hinnebusch et al., 2011). Rojava has begun developing local commerce built upon the buying and selling of these foodstuffs. Factories that process goods such as olive oil and produce goods such as textiles have continued to operate even after the withdrawal of Regime’s forces.⁴² Syrian currency remains the primary means by which commerce is conducted in the fledgling autonomous region. This means that Rojava has been hard hit by the plummeting value of the Syrian pound since the outset of the war. Despite this, the agricultural sector has been able to produce an excess of goods in Rojava and has grown beyond its own demand and consumption. This means that Rojava is able to sell the goods it produces to external black markets in Syria and Iraq.⁴³ In 2015, four years into the Syrian Civil War, it was reported that Kurdish held areas remain a vital source of wheat and barley to the regime controlled cities of Latakia, Tartus, Homs, and even Damascus (Kajjo, 2015). Furthermore, shipments said to be

⁴² Stated in an interview with Efrin’s Minister of Economy conducted by the Rojava Report in 2014. <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/efrin-economy-minister-rojava-challenging-norms-of-class-gender-and-power/>. Accessed April 1, 2016.

⁴³ Sources from "Striking out on their own: Syria's Kurdish areas." *The Economist (Online)*, The Economist Newspaper NA, Inc, London, 2014. Accessed August 15, 2016.

traveling through ISIL territory are subjected to a tax but are not restricted travel (Kajjo, 2015). These revelations showcase the emergence of a sophisticated war economy by which actors engaged in conflict remain dependent upon each other for access to vital resources (Richani, 2016). The Kurds' access to internally grown and produced goods creates a margin of self-sustainment. These capabilities could equate to the economic viability for the Rojava project. Another source of finance for the newly formed autonomous region is in its rich oil reserves.

The northwestern region of Syria is home to some of the country's richest oil reserves.⁴⁴ The Hasakeh province, a Kurdish held area, produced upwards of 150,000 barrels per day of crude oil before the outbreak of the civil war (Economist Intelligence Inc., 2014). The Kurds, upon the withdrawal of government forces in 2012, were able to restart production at one of Syria's largest oil fields, Rumeilan (Kajjo, 2016). Although, no longer at full production, the Kurds are able to extract about 40,000 barrels a day from Rumeilan and other oil fields in the region (Dagher, 2014; Economist Intelligence Inc., 2014). In the neighboring province of Jazira, oil production is at approximately 5 percent of prewar levels (The Economist, 2014). This oil is then mainly sold to local markets at a price of \$15 a barrel (Dagher, 2014) and is then refined through the use of rudimentary kilns. Approximately 3,000 of these kilns have sprung into existence since the outset of the crisis. Refined oil, in the form of petrol and diesel, is then sold at a price of \$40 a barrel (Dagher, 2014) which infuses the Kurdish areas with a much needed supply of fuel for electricity production and transportation, all why

⁴⁴ For a map of Syria's oil fields and infrastructure see Figure 5: Syria's Oil Fields and Energy Infrastructure.

stimulating its local economy. Oil sales equate to about \$288 million worth of annual revenue for Rojava (Kajjo, 2016). Evidence of Syrian oil (from areas outside the Regimes control) making its way to external markets through the use of intermediaries further entrenches the deep-seated system of interdependence which the Syrian Civil War has fomented (Solomon, Chazan, & Jones, 2015). The reality that Kurdish held territory in Syria is some of the nation's most productive in terms of both oil and agriculture reflects an advantageous position which allows the Kurds a level of economic sustainability moving forward.

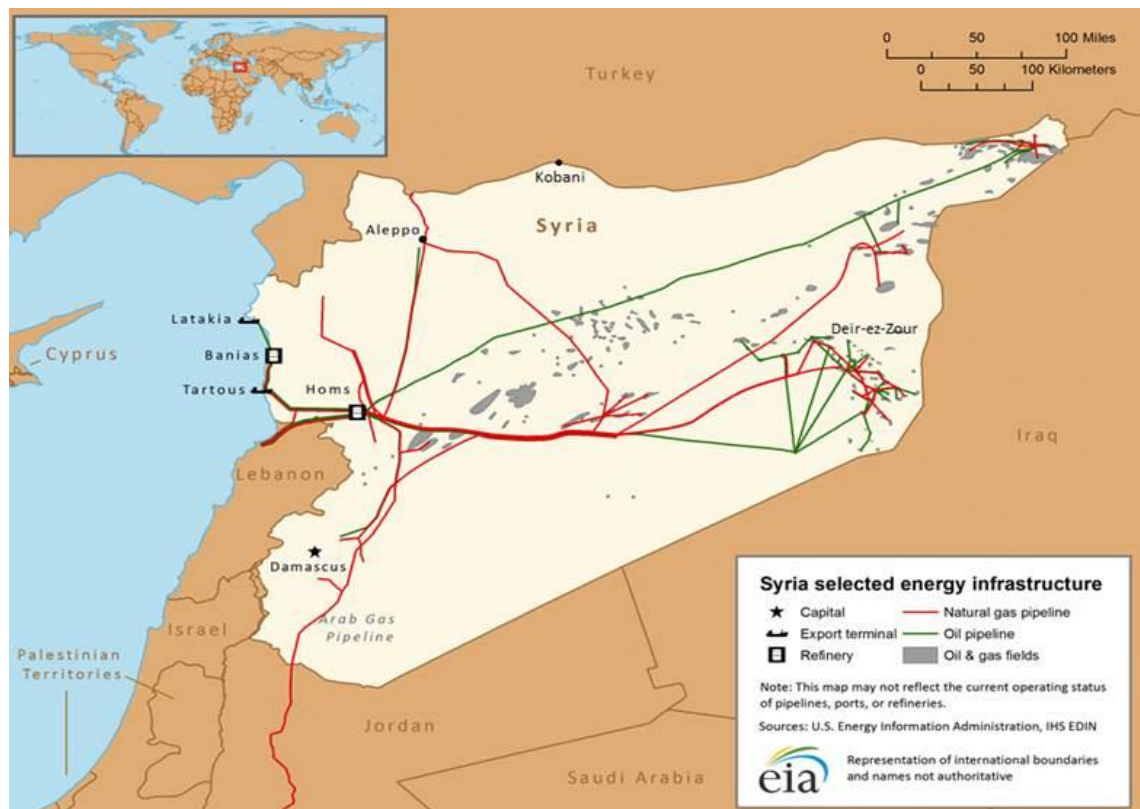


Figure 5: Syria's Oil Fields and Energy Infrastructure⁴⁵

The Kurds in Syria have seized openings generated by the civil war to declare the existence of their autonomous region, Rojava, and they have utilized preexisting

⁴⁵ Map provided by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2015). Accessed August 15, 2016. <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.cfm?iso=SYR>

resources to foster a favorable economic situation. Drought and institutional deadlock were factors that instigated rebellion in Syria's rural communities. Although effected by these factors, the Kurds proved to be resilient because of an immunization gained through years of neglect and marginalization under the Baathist Regime. Maintaining a guarded position towards the Regime at the outset of the civil war has also allowed them to avoid direct conflict with Assad's forces. To truly develop into a maintainable autonomous region, Rojava must use this economic viability as a base to build its internal and external legitimacy. Before taking a deeper look into how the PYD exercises its authority and addresses the deficiencies that face Kurdish political legitimacy, it is critical to define legitimacy. By defining legitimacy, inspecting how it is gained or lost, and identifying how it is expressed, we can begin to apply these theories to the case of the Democratic Union Party. Furthermore, identifying the PYD's biggest challenges to its burgeoning state and the threats to its own political legitimacy we can establish a basis to measure whether or not they are making a serious attempt at addressing these challenges.

C. Building Legitimacy During Conflict

The PYD is currently engaged in a struggle to gain and retain power, authority, and legitimacy in Rojava. These concepts are heavily intertwined and each must be inspected in order to gain a deeper sense of the origins of the PYD's legitimacy. The group's power is mainly derived from its strong military faction, the YPG. This power is expressed through the PYD's ability to control and exert influence over the populations that it governs and repel attacks upon its territory. As mentioned

previously, the group's military strength is unrivaled among other Kurdish political entities.⁴⁶ Authority, or the ability to create and enforce laws (Lacewing & Pascal, 2006), is witnessed through the creation and governing of the self-declared province of Rojava, which was created with the assistance of the PKK and built upon the legacy of their prominent leader, Abdullah Ocalan. However, the concept of political legitimacy is more abstract and is a highly contested subject among scholars (Lacewing & Pascal, 2006; Peter, 2009). Furthermore, how political legitimacy is gained or lost and how it transforms from one entity to another remains underexplored in the field of international relations (Bukovansky, 2009). The volatile political system in Syria and the case of the PYD provide an exceptional example by which to further explore these questions.

The English philosopher John Locke simply regarded legitimacy to be “the consent of the governed.” This view was later reinforced by the works collated by George Sabine (1956) in his book titled *A History of Political Theory*. Another, more nuanced, way of understanding legitimacy is as a set of parameters for acquiring and exercising authority (Bukovansky, 2009). A civic authority acquires the natural rights of the individual, which is relinquished to safe guard those inherent rights (Sabine, 1956). The means by which a civic authority acquires these rights from the individuals under its authority leads to two different types of legitimacy; *de facto* and effective. A legitimate and effective authority should serve those that it governs (Peter, 2009; Raz, 1988). The PYD's unparalleled dominance of Rojava makes it a *de facto* authority, however, if it seeks to maintain its role through the support and provision of services to

⁴⁶ The KNC possess a standing military force known as the *Rojava Pashmerga*, but in no way have they shown themselves to be as an effective fighting unit as the PYD's YPG.

its constituency, the PYD may increase its effective legitimacy. The popular support of its constituency can also be best understood in terms of Kurdish identity and theories related to ethno-nationalist movements. In particular, however, it is legitimacy which is gained during times of turmoil that is most relevant to the PYD case. Establishing legitimacy during conflict is especially difficult due to the dynamic circumstances of a wartime environment (Hironaka, 2009). For a political group to gain legitimacy when so many actors are involved, it must be wary of two coexisting sources of legitimacy, internal and external (Bukovansky, 2009).

The internal and external dimensions of legitimacy are discussed by author Bukovansky (2009), where she states that, “Political legitimacy – or the terms by which people recognize, defend, and accept political authority – is important to international as well as to domestic politics.”⁴⁷ The author continues that international political power is dependent upon domestic legitimacy because a government that is perceived as illegitimate will struggle to secure resources to thrive in competition with other local and international actors. Likewise, political legitimacy depends on external recognition. Only when a government is perceived as legitimate, will other states recognize its sovereignty. This recognition of sovereignty on the international stage is expressed through states engaging in trade, entering into treaties, and making war with a newly declared sovereign state (Bukovansky, 2009). Thus, securing both internal and external legitimacy, begets the sovereignty of a nation. The PYD’s ability to produce and sell goods beyond its borders, as witnessed through the its ability to sell limited amounts of

⁴⁷ Bukovansky, Mlada. *Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Web. p. 2.

foodstuffs and oil to parties outside Rojava, is a testament to the PYD's growing legitimacy. The concept of political legitimacy becomes increasingly more convoluted when examined in the context of conflict.

In conflict, as is the case with the PYD, actors in competition can contest the legitimacy of the opposition (Cook, 2003). Attacking a party's legitimacy becomes a means by which belligerents engaged in conflict with one-another can dissolve the very base of their adversaries' power and authority. This is often witnessed through the politicization or suppression of claims related to human rights abuses – a direct attempt at weakening an opponent's external legitimacy. Furthermore, the use of violence is often claimed to be morally justified by non-state actors, while states use it to defend and maintain their presumptive preexisting legitimacy (Cook, 2003). This struggle for legitimacy between actors in conflict raises important questions related to the transformation or exchange of legitimacy between them. In order to study the PYD and observe how it is either moving towards or away from achieving sovereignty, the obstacles to its internal and external political legitimacy must be identified.

D. Determining Factors for Success or Failure

The history of the Kurds is one marked by internal fragmentation and external manipulation (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Gunter, 2014b). Both of these factors are at play in the current context of Kurdish project in northern Syria, known by the Kurds as Rojava. The PYD enjoys a degree of popular support amongst its Kurdish constituency (Federici, 2015), however, other political entities in northern Syria routinely vie for the PYD's constituents. In addition to wary Kurdish groups such as the KNC, other ethnic

groups such as the Armenians, Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians may pose a challenge to the PYD's future ability to project its authority. If these minorities groups remain marginalized under Kurdish rule they can easily play the role of spoiler to the Kurdish aspirations.

The strong sense of Kurdish nationalism that form the basis of the Rojava project leave little room for other minorities. As mentioned in the historical overview, lands claimed as Kurdish homeland have never been strictly homogeneous (Bruinessen, 2000). A common ethnic identity has always been a powerful source of fuel for Kurdish nationalist movements but it is unknown to what extent the PYD utilizes this rhetoric to garner support (Eppel, 2014b). Furthermore, it is unknown to what extent strong Kurdish ethnic identity and nationalist movements leave room for these minorities. Reports of Arab and Christian militia members fighting alongside the YPG seem to indicate a shared sense of territorial defense against the encroachment of groups such as IS or the al-Nusra Front.⁴⁸ These initial signs of participation from multiple minorities highlights a sense of unity and inclusion, although it falls short of providing definitive evidence beyond the narrative of a few select sources. Furthermore, Kurdish YPG fighters have expressed that they self-identify as Syrian, thus precluding any sense of exclusivity in the newly formed state of Rojava.⁴⁹

Countering this sense of unity, the plethora of Kurdish political parties in Syria, which all possess competing agendas, have a tendency to let political differences

⁴⁸ Views expressed by an alleged Christian militia member in a report by VICE News from northern Syria in 2014. VICE News. "Rojava: Syria's unknown war." Jan 2, 2014. Web.

⁴⁹ Views expressed by a YPG militia member in a report by VICE News from northern Syria in 2014. VICE News. "Rojava: Syria's unknown war." Jan 2, 2014. Web.

override any unity caused by a common Kurdish identity (Caves, 2012; Gunes & Lowe, 2015). The strong divisions between these political parties further captures the legacy of fragmentation that has historically plagued the Kurds and has hindered their ability to forge a nation of their own. Externally the PYD faces a different set of challenges.

The prospect of PYD autonomy is highly dependent upon the consent and support of international powers and regional actors. Turkey in particular plays a seminal role in the sustainment of the Rojava project. In an indirect sense, Rojava's dependence upon Turkey for access to resources, materials, trade, and vital access to the Euphrates, makes Turkey's role indispensable.⁵⁰ However, the PYD's undeniably close partnership with the PKK (Hevian, 2013), an outspoken foe of the Turkish state, makes Turkey's passive consent unlikely. The PYD seems to pander to the regional and global powers by distancing itself from its affiliate in Turkey. The effectiveness of this rhetoric and the PYD's commitment to maintaining this separation is uncertain (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). It remains imperative for the PYD to divorce itself from its PKK roots in order to foster trust from Ankara, which has already revealed its willingness to turn on the PYD if they feel their security or interests in the region are threatened (Federici, 2015). Secession also remains a contentious issue amongst regional actors because few nations would directly benefit from the creation of a Kurdish state (Spyer, 2013b). Thus, the PYD must seek to reassure its neighbors who possess the power to deter Kurdish efforts for self-determination by strictly adhering to non-secessionist discourse.

⁵⁰ Although Turkey may not be directly supporting the PYD, its long border with Rojava provides access points for the flow of resources, material, aid, and fighters.

After reviewing the literature, both historically and since the outset of the Syrian Civil War, four main components are revealed which could potentially undermine the PYD's mission in Syria, including; 1) minority inclusivity, 2) intra-Kurd conflict, 3) affiliations with the PKK, and 4) perceptions of a secessionist agenda. How the PYD aims to address these four main obstacles is highlighted through their political rhetoric. The literature has revealed two key elements required to migrate from a *de facto* state towards a fuller expression of autonomy, internal and external legitimacy. These two elements, if properly addressed, begin to demonstrate how a non-state actor makes the transition to a governing authority.

Content analysis of the PYD's speeches and interviews will provide valuable insight into forging legitimacy in conflict. By breaking the content down in two four main groups based on the literature, the analysis hopes to establish how the PYD intends to overcome obstacles to its autonomy. Going forward, some core questions, as they relate to the identified four main obstacles of the PYD, to keep in mind are; 1) which audiences the PYD focuses on (Kurd or minority, internal or external), 2) how other Kurdish political parties are referenced and if intra-Kurd political unity is mentioned, 3) if ties with the PKK are downplayed and if genuine efforts towards separation are present, and 4) if complete secession from Syria is an objective of the PYD.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A. Linking Legitimacy and Rhetoric

Rhetoric is described as “the art of speech and persuasion” as well as a skill of public argument (Martin, 2014). The examination of political rhetoric is a longstanding tradition which extends back to the era of Aristotle (Charteris-Black, 2011). Although the International Relations and comparative politics fields have often discredited political rhetoric as a phenomenon which is detached from political intent, recent developments in Constructivist theory firmly places it at the heart of the study of political power (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Rhetoric is linked to Constructivist theory because public discourse can be used for the creation of a historical narratives or distinct accounts of actions (Bennett, 1980). These accounts can be used to justify behavior or persuade audiences. Political rhetoric as a tool of persuasion and coercion is an emerging field of study.

Political actors which possess a monopoly on power deploy persuasive rhetoric to reinforce their positions. Acquiring and maintaining power is equally dependent upon both legitimacy and physical power, and legitimacy can be established through rhetoric (Weber, 1954). Through the use of rhetoric, political actors frame their foundations for legitimacy and express their basis of political power (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). For this reason, studying the rhetoric of PYD will reveal how they set the stage for their own legitimacy as the rightful leaders of Rojava. Moreover, through

comparing the PYD's claimed bases of legitimacy against the four challenges to their rule, discovered in the literature, will expose whether the PYD is equipped and prepared to overcome obstacles. Political staying power is reliant upon a group's ability to rise and respond to threats to its authority. As author Bennett (1980) explains, "Since politics is, by definition, a game of conflict, political success or failure depends on the effectiveness of responses to challenges."⁵¹ The importance of public discourse is further shown through the role it plays between political parties and their constituents.

Rhetoric possesses intrinsic importance not only because it is a reflection of the speaker's purpose, but also because it produces benchmarks of accountability. Going back on publicly proclaimed commitments may cost political actors invaluable credibility and trust from their publics (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Because of this, actors are obliged to uphold their rhetorical statements or face backlash from their constituency as well as the international community. In different terms, reneging on stated objectives may carry costs both to internal and external legitimacy. The fact that there are very tangible repercussions to misused, or undelivered, rhetoric reveals that it is not merely a tool for manipulation or posturing but that it carries very real performance implications. In order to understand how the analysis of political rhetoric can be used to better understand the PYD, we must first establish what rhetoric can concretely reveal.

⁵¹ Cited from Bennett, W. L. "The Paradox of Public Discourse: A Framework for the Analysis of Political Accounts." *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1980. p. 793.

B. Content Analysis

The use of content analysis lends itself well to the study of PYD legitimacy and objectives for two reasons; 1) it is unobtrusive in nature and can be used to study social behavior without effecting it, and 2) the current state of conflict in the region makes travel and accessibility to northern Syria severely limited. Therefore, a method which captures direct expressions of political aims and agendas without requiring direct access to the region is well-suited for a study of PYD rhetoric and the bases of its claims to legitimacy. As Babbie (2007) observes, “comparative and historical research is a usually qualitative method, one in which the main resources for observation and analysis are historical records.” Content analysis is also said to be the study of recorded communication. Interviews with Salih Muslim are an example of this communication. How, what, and to what effect this communication is having is an aim of this study.

Scholars and authors of *Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric*, Krebs and Jackson (2007), advise fellow scholars to focus on “what actors say, in what context, and to what audiences” when examining political rhetoric. Thus, content analysis is well suited for the study of political rhetoric. Content analysis is specifically designed to answer the questions of “who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect” (Babbie, 2007). By employing content analysis to the public discourse of the PYD’s leader, Salih Muslim, this study aims to discover which audiences it addresses, how it represents certain challenges to its legitimacy, and what effect it may have. Furthermore, content analysis will unveil how the group postures itself, coerces its audiences, and determines the trajectory for the Rojava project. The analysis will be conducted in context to the four challenges to its legitimacy including;

1) minority inclusivity, 2) intra-Kurd conflict, 3) PKK affiliations, and 4) secessionism. The success or failure of the PYD hinges on its effectiveness in response to these challenges.

C. Results

Content analysis was performed on a total of 12 primary source documents. Of the 12 documents, nine were interviews conducted by a range of local Kurdish and international think-tanks and media sources. The other three documents were political speeches addressed to either the Parliament of the European Union (EU) in Brussels or the United Nations (UN). Both, the interviews and the speeches, were delivered by Salih Muslim, the current co-chair of the PYD. All the text was taken directly from the source without any modifications or alterations and most of the source documents were originally written in English and untranslated.⁵² Furthermore, text that was irrelevant to the study, such as headers, titles, and names, were removed in preparation for the analysis. General statistics about the documents used in this analysis will provide a frame to understand the extent and limitations of the study.

The collated articles amounted to about 1,400 lines of text or roughly 20,000 words. The analyzed material ranged in date from November of 2011, the outset of the Syrian Civil War, until March of 2016. Sentences were used as the unit of analysis, however, percentages were calculated based on the number of characters in the selected text. The analysis of the content was conducted by a single coder using coding

⁵² If interview transcripts were translated, then the translation was performed by the publisher before the transcripts release.

instructions.⁵³ The text under analysis was reviewed a minimum of three times to ensure the accuracy of the coded material. The coder logged direct references to any of the four main topics, including; minority inclusivity, intra-Kurd conflict, PKK affiliation, and secession from Syria. To further ensure the capture of the richly nuanced text, any material that alluded, implied, or insinuated relevance to the topics were also recorded and coded accordingly.

These captured sentences were logged and coded as either having positive or negative connotations as they relate to the four main categories. Furthermore, some of the topics, such as references to minority groups living in Kurdish held areas, benefitted from the mining of keywords such as “Armenian” or “Assyrian.” The presence of these keywords helped identify sections of the text relevant to the topics. Additionally, statistics generated by keyword mining helped establish which groups were most frequently the topic of PYD rhetoric. The category of related to minority references could then be broken down into subcategories based on specific groups. As is the case in this example, the four main obstacles to PYD legitimacy could often be broken down into smaller subcategories. The intra-Kurd conflict, for instance, could be investigated in further detail by identifying not only the frequency of intra-Kurd conflict references but also, more specifically, which groups were mentioned. The documents used for this study possessed consistent themes and Salih Muslim frequently used similar verbiage when describing PYD positions and policies. However, there was a noted difference between the content of the speeches and the interviews.

⁵³ For Coding Instructions used in the analysis see APPENDIX III: Coding Instructions

In the analysis and discussion sections, the interviews and speeches were often separated. This was done because the content, audience, and purpose of the speeches were highly varied. Far fewer references to the four obstacles of PYD legitimacy were made in the political speeches. An analysis of the discourse used in the speeches compliments the findings from the interviews because it provides a different context. The qualitative nature of this study allows for an interpretation of the speeches and interviews as they relate to the PYD's ideologies and objectives. Furthermore, because of the qualitative methodology, a single coder was deemed sufficient and no inter-coder reliability test was performed. Once the text was coded, the data recorded, and the figures analyzed, the interviews and speeches revealed some interesting statistical information.

Of the analyzed text, an overwhelming 24 percent of it either directly or indirectly addressed one or several of the four main obstacles to PYD legitimacy identified in the literature review. In terms of percentages, the majority was related to intra-Kurdish conflicts (8.4%). The other obstacles listed by the amount they were alluded to are; minority inclusivity (7.2%), secession from Syria (5.1%), and, finally, PKK affiliations (3.5%). The two most frequently mentioned obstacles from the speeches and interviews were minority inclusivity (23 times) and intra-Kurdish issues (21 times).⁵⁴ An analysis of the interviews revealed trends over time from 2011 until 2016.

⁵⁴ See Figure 7: Frequency of Coded Elements

In the interviews, intra-Kurdish issues were discussed much more frequently in the earlier cases (specifically, the 2011 and 2012 interviews) tapering significantly by 2016. Minority inclusivity trended in the opposite direction. It was frequently referenced during the entire period under study, perhaps even increasing over time. Issues related to PKK affiliations and secession were consistently mentioned throughout the text.⁵⁵ The content analysis also inspected whether comments made by Salih Muslim could be considered as having an overall net positive impact on overcoming the four obstacles or a negative effect on the PYD's legitimacy.

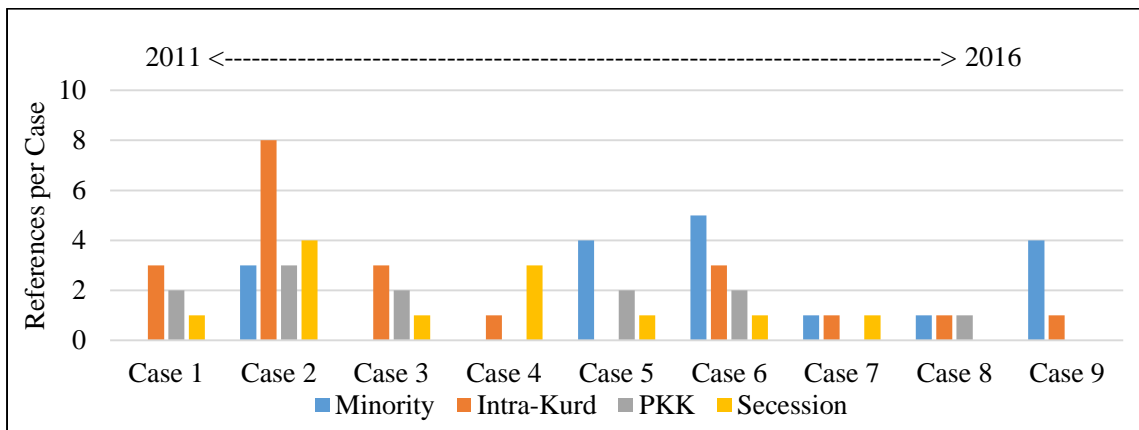


Figure 6: Interviews - Frequency by Case

Whether these topics were discussed in a manner that was conducive or counterproductive to the PYD's internal and external legitimacy is an important component of the study. The percentage and frequency may disclose topics of focus for the PYD, but a deeper investigation provides more comprehensive analysis as to the trajectory of their legitimacy. An inspection of whether these comments are either positive or negative relative to the PYD's agenda reflects the groups commitment to overcoming hurdles or merely perpetuating recognizable issues. In all four identified

⁵⁵ For trends over time see Figure 6: Interviews - Frequency by Case

factors, rhetoric that was conducive to advancing the PYD’s legitimacy outweighed the negative, but only by a slim margin with one exception.⁵⁶ Minority inclusiveness was almost always mentioned in a positive light with only one recorded instance of exclusive language compared to 22 references to inclusion. A further analysis of each the four categories and their specific results from the analysis will be provided in the discussion section.

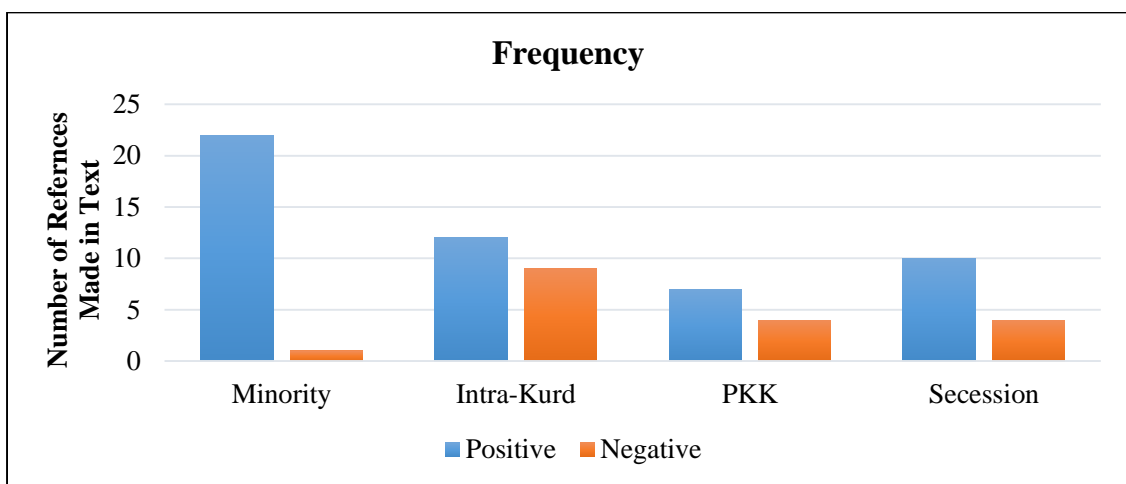


Figure 7: Frequency of Coded Elements

⁵⁶ See Figure 7: Frequency of Coded Elements

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

A. Minority Inclusivity

Minorities living in Kurdish areas were the most frequently addressed of the four obstacles in the interviews and speeches by Salih Muslim. In total, one or all of the minorities living among the Kurds in northern Syria were mentioned in 23 instances. These references were made in six out of the nine interviews and were overwhelmingly positive and inclusive in nature. The single recorded negative reference was made during an interview with the Carnegie Middle East Center (Lund, 2014) in context to the “Arab Belt” policy used by the Baath Party in the 1970s. When asked about how the PYD’s hopes to address the legacy of this destructive policy, Salih Muslim responded, “it’s a real problem that those Arabs were brought to the area, because it left a lot of Kurds without land. Because of that, we need to look for new arrangements.” He goes on further to explain that the group doesn’t want to “send Arabs out” but that past injustices need to be addressed. This comment only carries slight negative connotations but it was classified as exclusive because of the potential for conflict if the PYD forces a solution upon the Arab families that settled in the area several decades earlier. The high frequency and the positivity expressed by Muslim throughout his interviews and speeches appears to indicate that the PYD is aware of this as a potential obstacle to their legitimacy. In a way, he’s calming fears by making an appeal to international and domestic audiences that minority rights will be preserved

under Kurdish rule. This could very well be a ploy to frame itself as a legitimate ruler, but it nonetheless reveals the PYD's willingness to engage and discuss the topic. The PYD's sensitivity and awareness of the topic may be generated by the Kurds own experience as a marginalized minority in Syria. What are some of the positive things that the PYD is saying about its ethnically, historically, and linguistically diverse population dwelling in Rojava?

Several other ethnic groups live among the Kurds in northern Syria. Some of the groups that live in this region include Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Turkmen, and Arabs.⁵⁷ During interviews, Salih Muslim is quick to point out that these groups have been living together in relative harmony for generations. He expresses that the Kurds are more a victim of the formation of the modern nation state and not the result of suppression by one ethnic group in particular. Furthermore, he forms a common identity with other groups that live in the area by pointing to a shared past of oppression and marginalization. In an interview in 2014, Muslim states that a genocide was committed "against the Syriacs and against the Armenians and against the Kurds" (Lund, 2014). He also frequently mentions a common mission among "Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen ... fighting for a democratic and secular state" in northern Syria (Zurutuza, 2016). As observed in this excerpt, he consistently refers to all of the minorities collectively, rather than in general terms as "minorities."

Arabs are central to most of Muslim's discussion about minority inclusivity. Approximately 45 percent of all minority comments are wholly or partly about the

⁵⁷ For a breakdown of the groups by their frequency see Figure 9: References to Minority Groups at the end of this section.

Arabs in Rojava.⁵⁸ This is no surprise because the largest group dwelling in northern Syria, other than the Kurds, are Arabs. Also of importance, is the rocky alliance between the Free Syria Army (FSA), a majority Arab force, and the Kurds. These pleasant references to Arab populations may be a representation of attempts to downplay tensions between these two military forces on the ground in Syria. The YPG also claims to be highly representative of the diverse population in Rojava. Its recruits are claimed to be from every minority group living in northern Syria and the participation of the Arab populations in these militias is of strategic importance to avoid infighting in these regional protection units. Other groups mentioned in the text are Turkmen (17%), Syriac (15%), Assyrian (13%), and Armenian (8%). When it came to coverage of minorities versus discussion focused on Kurds, in terms of keyword presence, the Kurds were mentioned 63 percent of the total. Minority references, on the other hand, constituted the remaining 37 percent. Some important information can be drawn from these numbers.

Although motive cannot be established through the process of content analysis the high frequency of minority references seems to indicate PYD awareness. Excerpts seem to support the idea the Kurds may identify with minorities living among them because of a sense of shared tragedy. References to representative democracy, freedom, and peace are also common themes throughout Muslim's interviews. This at least means that the PYD is able to pay lip service to the idea of living in harmony and a presence of mind to know that this is a concern of the international community. Overall, TEV-DEM's "Democratic Confederalist" model seems well equipped to ensure

⁵⁸ See Figure 9: References to Minority Groups

the equity of minorities and the leadership seems to painting themselves as benevolent towards other ethnic groups. Although well-equipped and aware, these factors alone cannot ensure against the outbreak of ethnic conflict arising in the future.

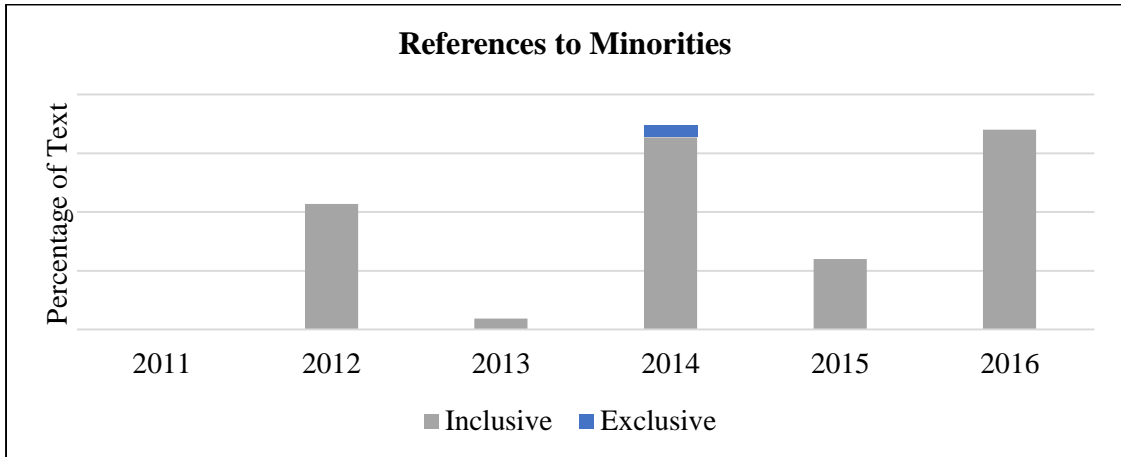


Figure 8: Minorities by Year as Percent

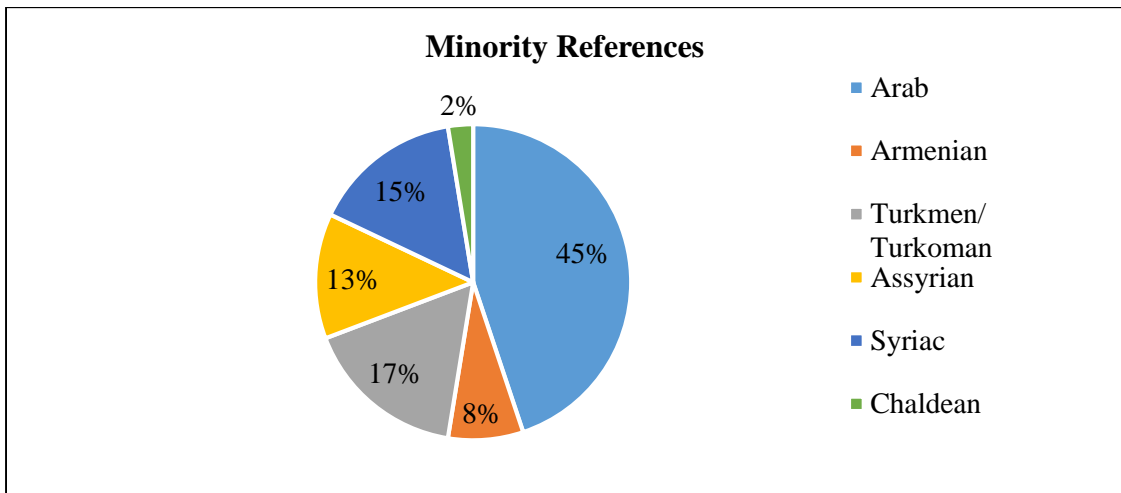


Figure 9: References to Minority Groups

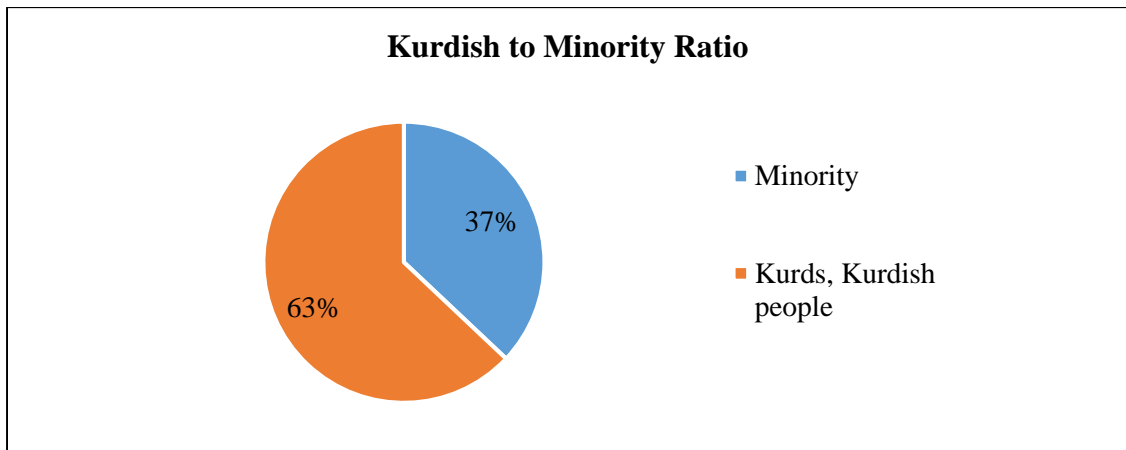


Figure 10: Minority vs. Kurdish References

B. Intra-Kurdish Conflict

Intra-Kurd relations represent the second most frequently mentioned topic from the text (21 times). The topic also merited the largest percentage of coverage in the analyzed documents at 8.4 percent. Of this total, 5.9 percent of the rhetoric expressed unity among Kurdish groups in Syria and in neighboring nations. Discourse that revealed or eluded to negative sentiments or disunity made up 2.5 percent of the total text. The large volume of rhetoric dedicated to the discussion of intra-Kurd relations reveals its pertinence to the development of the Rojava project. The ongoing existence of tensions between Kurdish groups has been traced through Kurdish history in the literature review. It continues to be a relevant issue facing the Kurds in this modern context. Many scholars identified the separation and fragmentation of the Kurdish populations at the beginning of the 20th century as the issue's point of origin. These divisions grew in intensity under the harsh policies of the Baathist regime and was further exacerbated by neighboring countries who implemented policies with similar severity. This study focuses on the relationships between the PYD and two other

Kurdish entities at play in Syria, the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC) and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq.

The KSC is supposedly the highest authority in Rojava and both the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the PYD, as signatories, fall under its influence. The PYD as the single strongest political party operating in northern Syria may take issue with surrendering to this higher authority. Furthermore, the KSC was conceived under the auspices of the KRG. The Kurdish government in Iraq is a group that the PYD has long held in contempt for its observed collaboration with Turkey. The KRG has cooperated with Turkey out of economic necessity rather than ideological alignment. However, this remains an indefensible action for PYD members who view the KRG's connections with Turkey as disloyal to the Kurdish cause and a betrayal of the PKK. The KRG faces difficulties garnering support among Syrian Kurds for what is perceived as a deplorable action. The content analysis performed on intra-Kurd relations focused on the PYD's rhetoric towards the KSC and the KRG because of these factors.

Although not always overwhelmingly positive, the PYD for the most part spoke of unity, submission, and collaboration with the KSC and the KRG. This must be mentioned with the caveat that sentiment is not always easy to determine from the text. Although the PYD spoke of the Kurdish Supreme Council as having the highest authority in Rojava, levels of resentment and power dynamics could not always be determined from this simple analysis of the content. During an interview with *Milliyet* (2013), a news outlet in Turkey, Muslim said, "The [KSC] may of course play a role in the resolution of some of the problems we are having with the KDP and the KRG at this time. If committees are formed, they can serve as mediators and arbiters." This

statement recognizes the role of the KSC as generally being positive, while also hinting at ongoing issues with the KRG. In other cases, when asked out rightly about the hierarchy of Kurdish political structure, Muslim states that the “Supreme Kurdish Committee has the power of decision over the YPG” (Kurdwatch, 2013). He goes further to say that the YPG falls under the command of the KSC, perhaps knowing that if the fighting force is seen as an independent of the PYD that it will be perceived as a more legitimate fighting force, rather than the militia of a single party. In reference to the coalition of other parties countering PYD dominance, the KNC, Muslim says that they have “problems, but we will solve them in the Supreme Kurdish Committee” (Kurdwatch, 2013). In the same interview he expresses a desire to overcome differences between the Kurdish parties. The PYD’s relationship with the KRG is even more complex and expressed more ambiguously.

Shared identity between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds creates areas of common ground. In the political sphere however, were *realpolitik*, power politics, and economic concerns are influential factors in generating political agendas and motives, this common ground becomes less impactful. The KRG’s relationship with the PYD has been rocky because of the influence of these realities. Muslim succinctly reflects these differences in an interview with *The Kurdish Globe* (2012), “So we can have very good relations but we have different conditions and our solution is different from them.” These differences in conditions and solutions carries implications of conflict, at least in political agendas, between the PYD and the KRG. In an interview with the *Kurdish Question* (2015), Muslim expresses a desire to overcome differences,

“We want to build unity even with the KDP. We want to make the dream of Kurds come true. We have no other but our Kurdish people, if we cannot serve our people and our nation we would be ashamed. For this reason, we want to start strong relations with other Kurdish parties based on respect.”

Making the Kurdish “dream” come true cannot be achieved without regional Kurdish unity, Salih Mulsim and the PYD recognizes this. The unity among Kurdish groups is based on the reality that they cannot realize a greater Kurdistan if they first do not overcome internal divisions.

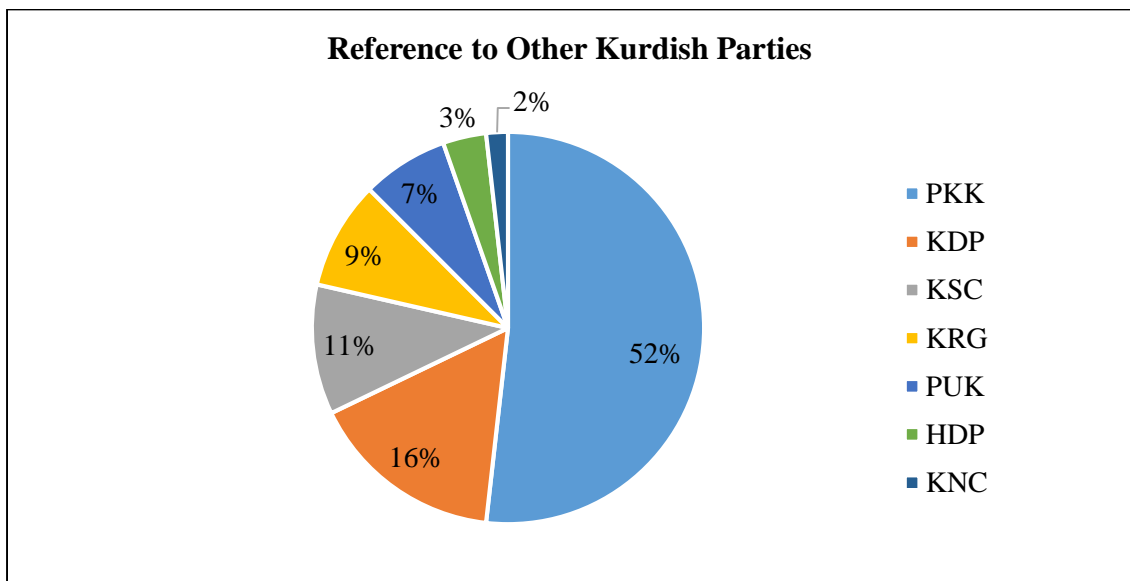


Figure 11: References to Other Parties

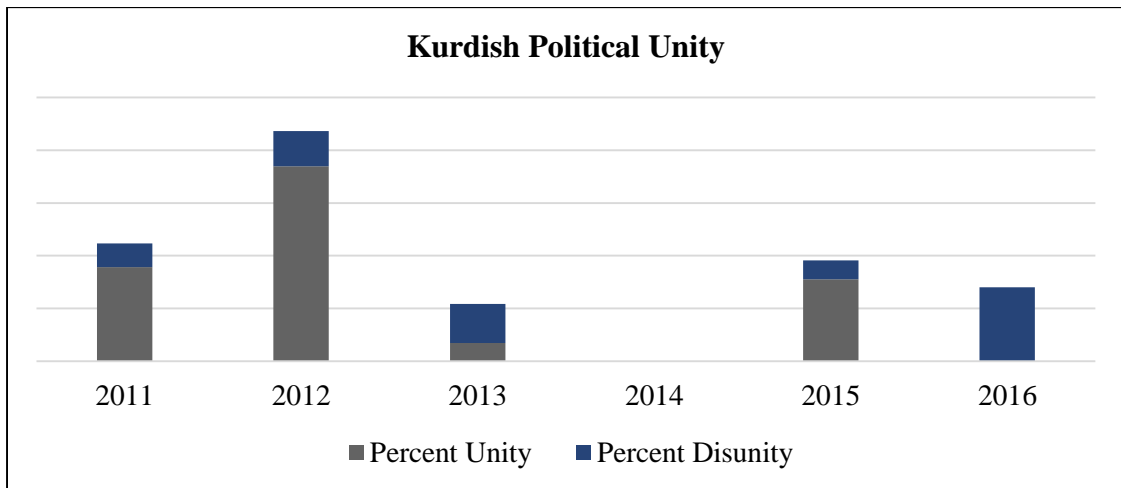


Figure 12: Kurdish Political Unity

C. PKK Affiliation

The PYD has long faced accusations that it is closely affiliated with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PYD's close relationship with the PKK, particularly during its formation in 2003, cannot be denied. Furthermore, as discussed in the literature review, the PKK's role in the training and leading YPG troops remains an ongoing concern and a hurdle to garnering international support for the PYD. The PKK's classification as a terrorist organization, whether political or justified, makes any collaboration with the PYD a sensitive topic. The situation is especially complex due to Turkey's membership to NATO and the Turkish states ongoing struggle against PKK militants. The PKK's relationship with the PYD was mentioned a total of 11 times during Salih Muslim's interviews. Seven of the cases reflected PYD association with the PKK and four attempted to establish disassociation with their Turkish counterpart. None of the text was critical towards the PKK. Instead, there was total of six recorded instances that Muslim came to the defense of the organization.

Salih Muslim's discourse in defense of the PKK may reflect Kurdish cause sympathies towards the PKK struggle in Turkey or it may reflect a deep seated loyalty to the organization. Regardless, he seems to disagree with the PKK's classification as a terrorist organization and implies its more due to the political leveraging on the part of the Turkish state. In an interview with the Carnegie Middle East Center, he expresses disbelief that Western nations would consider the PKK a terrorist organization,

“But hypothetically, let's say that there was a relationship—what has the PKK ever done against the West? Has it kidnapped soldiers from the West? Has it killed anyone from the West? Has it committed terrorist actions in the West? No! It didn't do anything against the Western countries, so why is it considered a terrorist organization? I really cannot understand it.” (Lund, 2014)

These comments seem to imply latent relations, defense of PKK actions, and a blatant omission of the PKK's employment of suicide bombings in the late 1990s. Muslim usually frames the PYD's relationship with the PKK in terms of greater Kurdish unity. In several instances, he portrays a view that the PKK is another Kurdish regional actor comparable to other legitimate parties and that achieving Kurdish aspirations requires collaboration across all Kurdish factions. He says this commitment to cooperation transcends differences and that a common identity inspires “relations with the KDP and the PUK and, as we should, with the PKK” (Kurdish Question, 2015). This lack of disassociation from the PKK may have detrimental impacts on the development of PYD legitimacy.

The PYD and their co-leader, Salih Muslim, have clearly displayed their unwillingness to be critical of the PKK and instead often jumps to their defense. Furthermore, they have failed to establish a convincing separation between their organization and the PKK. The PYD often acknowledges the PKK's influence, its formative role, and the impacts of Ocalan's ideologically teachings. The very lifeblood of Rojava's burgeoning state, "Democratic Confederalism," is a product of Ocalan influence over Syrian Kurdish thought. The legitimacy and popularity that the PYD gains through its connections with Ocalan and the PKK among the Kurds in northern Syria may outweigh the costs its suffers in external legitimacy from international actors. So the rhetoric employed by the PYD towards its partner in Turkey must not be viewed as a zero-sum-game.

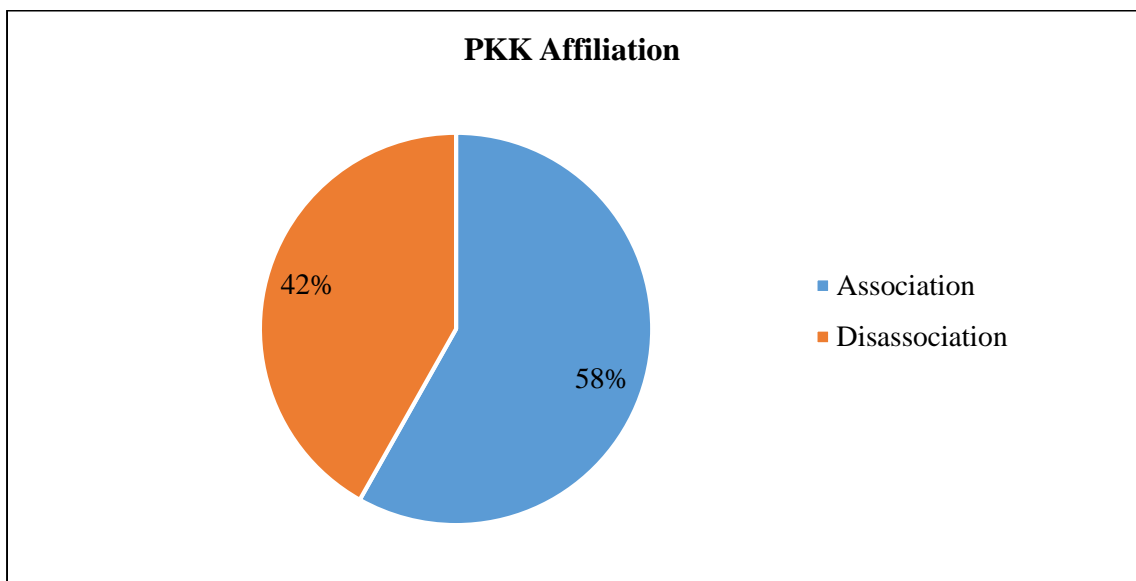


Figure 13: PYD Affiliation to PKK

D. Secession from Syria

Of the four obstacles hindering PYD legitimacy, secession from Syria was the most difficult to evaluate from the text. The PYD seems acutely aware that challenging established state boundaries and threatening Syrian territorial integrity will be counterproductive to its agenda, at least in the short term. Just over 5 percent of the text revolved around the PYD's goals for Rojava's semiautonomous status in Syria. Most frequently, Salih Muslim seemed to frame Rojava's future existence in context to an inclusive and representative Syrian state. This is reflected by 3.9 percent of the text reassuring audiences that the PYD holds no secessionist agenda. The degree to which Rojava would be separate from the Syrian state, however, seemed to exist in a broad spectrum of contradicting statements. At times Muslim would adamantly claim that secession was not a goal, but in the same breath emphasize a desire for greater degrees of separation from the central Syrian state. A review of quotes about the secession of Syrian Kurds reveals a theme of European Union (EU) references.

Muslim often eluded to an EU like system, where national borders had less of a tangible impact on citizens and trade and travel was easily conducted. Middle Eastern borders would "erode" over time as the 27 states that comprise it grow closer together. Under this model, he propositions that a greater Kurdistan may come into existence as a loosely affiliated coalition of several autonomous Kurdish regions. In an interview with *The Kurdish Globe* (2012), Muslim references this agenda that if Middle Eastern states become "united in a democratic confederation, at the same time all of Kurdistan will become united. This is our long-term strategy for the Kurdish people." This stated long-term objective of the PYD downplays complete secession from the Syrian state.

Muslim often states that autonomy from Syria will not advance the Kurdish cause. In an interview with the Kurdish Globe (2012), he frankly states, “We don’t have to draw the border between Syrian Kurdish areas and the Arab areas.” He continues to add that future oil revenues would be surrendered to a central government with the expectation that finances would return to the region for local development and investment. He further denies the claims that the PYD is a separatist organization in an interview with the Carnegie Endowment (2014), “Lots of people say that we are separatists—we are not separatists.” As is the case in in the other three legitimacy obstacles, Muslim emphasizes the PYD’s desires for a free, democratic, and representative form of governance in which the Kurds would have an equal say in the formation of a Syrian state as other ethnic, religious, and political parties. This appeal for democratic values may be a reflection of PYD desires to be accepted by international actors interested in the democratization of the region or a true commitment to the upholding of the values of its founding ideology, “Democratic Confederalism.”

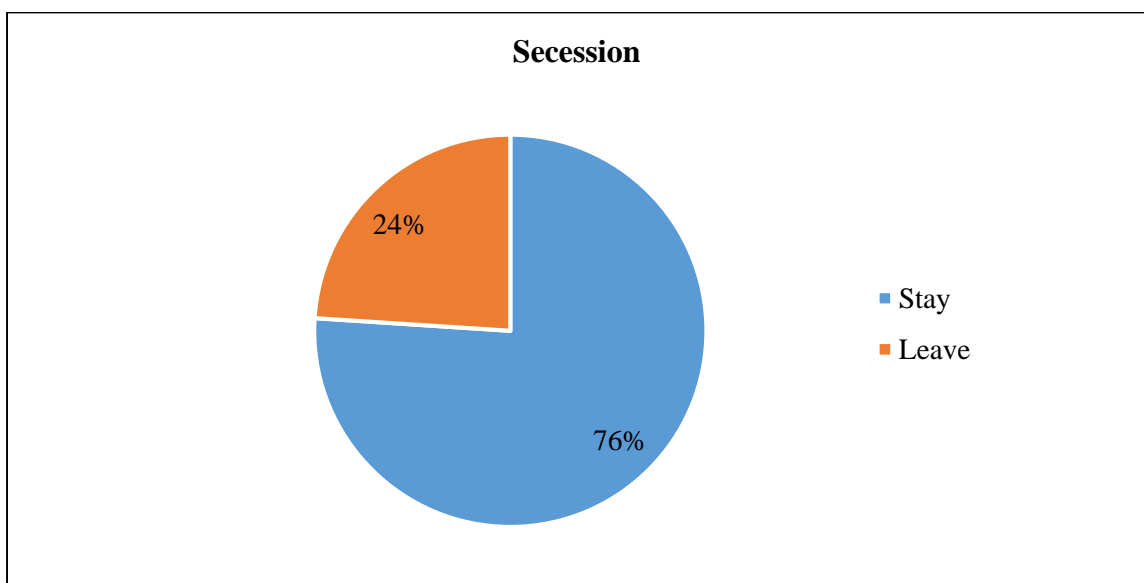


Figure 14: Secession from Syria

CHAPTER V

KURDISH NATIONALISM IN SYRIA: A STOCKTAKING

The roots of Kurdish nationalism extend back several centuries. However, in its modern form, it has only recently emerged. Its advocates harken back to the times of Saladin and reference the early works of author Sharaf Khan Bitlisi and poet Ahmadi Khani to anchor their claims. These works not only establish a historical record of early Kurdish dynasties they foster a sense of common Kurdish identity. The poems of Khani frequently describe the lands claimed by the Kurds. He paints in vivid detail the raw beauty of a Kurdish homeland, which today has been expressed through the concept a unified Kurdish nation. Kurdistan, which exists today more as a concept than a reality, stretches across several modern nation states, to include Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The reasons that the Kurds remain stateless despite the presence of a distinct ethnic identity and claims to a homeland, have been traced back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI.

Kurdish hopes for a nation were at their highest following Woodrow Wilson's declaration of his Fourteen Points. The Points laid out important groundwork for the creation of the League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations, and a provision for self-determination for ethnic groups under Ottoman rule, to include the Kurds. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the subsequent Sevres Treaty of 1920 both supported the idea of a Kurdish state. However, the creation of Kurdistan was sidelined due to pressure from Turkey, the collusion of regional actors, and the underdevelopment

of Kurdish nationalism compared to other ethnic groups. The fate of Kurdish hopes for statehood were sealed in the ratification of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, which finalized post WWI borders and was categorically absent of a Kurdish homeland. The following decades witnessed many of these newly emerged nations host to Kurdish minorities employ tactics of suppression, assimilation, and harsh crackdowns on cultural expression. The perceived threat that the Kurds posed to the territorial integrity of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria led the regimes of these states to attempt to fragment their Kurdish populations and coopt them for their own regional agendas.

In spite of their efforts, these attempts at quelling the Kurdish threat may have fueled the reawakening of Kurdish ethno-nationalism. The Shaykh Said Rebellion and the Mount Ararat Revolt in the 1920s both drew upon Kurdish nationalism as a means for recruitment. Through tapping into Kurdish cynicism, these rebellions instigated a reemergence of a unified Kurdish identity. Although they ultimately failed, their lasting legacy was the creation of a network of transnational Kurdish organizations. Most prominent of these transnational groups was the *Xoybun* League which cultivated a sense of Kurdish identity by producing scholarship, broadcasting Kurdish Media, and modernizing the Kurdish language. The Saadabad Treaty and the Baghdad Pact sought collaboration between Turkey, Iran, and Iraq on the emerging “Kurdish issue” generated by rebellions and the emergence of these transnational actors. Although not a signatory to these treaties, Syria played a silent role in colluding with regional actors against their own Kurdish populations.

The Baathist Regime in Syria used a combination of strategies to quell the Kurdish threat in its northern provinces. These strategies included the “Arab belt”

policy, the outlawing of Kurdish language, a clampdown on Kurdish holidays, and the denial of citizenship to as many as 300,000 Syrian Kurds. The regime in Syria also used the Kurdish cause for their own agenda when it proved advantageous in gaining leverage over their neighbor, Turkey. Embittered by Turkey's damming of the Euphrates River and annexation of Alexandretta, Syria hosted and supported the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). This militarized group had been engaged in armed struggle against the Turkish state since 1984 and used Syrian territory to recruit, train, and launch attacks into Turkey. The group was dispelled from Syrian territory in 1999 but it left a militarized Kurdish element in Syria as a legacy to its presence. These PKK connections in Syria resulted in the formation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in 2003.

The founding of the PYD was soon followed by a Kurdish uprising in Syria in 2004 called the Qamishli Revolt. The PYD played an integral role in the revolt and it continued to be active in coordinating and instigating public unrest towards the regime until the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The YPG, the PYD's military wing, was well positioned at the outset of the war to seize upon the Regime's withdrawal from Kurdish territory in 2012. Since then, Kurdish controlled territory in Syria has continued to expand and their government, TEV-DEM, has pushed for greater degrees of autonomy from the state. The newly formed autonomous region in Syria has been designated Rojava, or Western Kurdistan, by its Kurdish inhabitants. Rojava's viability for sustainment is derived from two key elements, the fertility of its lands and its rich oil reserves. Rojava's consistent over production of agricultural goods has kept local populations well fed and generated income through sales of excess goods to external

markets. Furthermore, oil production, although significantly reduced compared to prewar levels, has produced a thriving local economy, generated income from black-market sales, and provided fuel for energy production, transportation, and the agricultural sector. It is estimated that oil revenues equate to roughly \$288 million annually for the fledgling government. It requires more than economic viability to determine the staying power of the PYD and its experimental Rojava project. The presence of external and internal legitimacy is crucial to extending the lifespan of Rojava beyond the current context of the Syrian crisis.

An investigation of the concept of legitimacy and an exploration of how it is gained and lost revealed two important elements associated with the staying power of an emerging governing body. Internal legitimacy is based on the consent of the governed. This consent however, is derived from a civil authority's ability to govern well through the provision of public goods, services, and security. Furthermore, "traditional legitimacy" is based on a perceived inherent right to govern. The PYD, as the champions of the Syrian Kurdish cause, benefit from this form of legitimacy among its Kurdish constituency. Externally, legitimacy granted by external sources allow it to participate and survive in the international scene. This permits for the ability to engage in trade, bilateral negotiations, and for participation in transnational organizations such as the UN. A review of the literature surrounding the PYD and the Rojava project revealed four important factors with the potential to hinder the development of its internal and external legitimacy; 1) minority exclusion, 2) intra-Kurd conflict, 3) PKK association, and 4) secession from Syria.

Rhetoric has the ability to persuade its audiences and its wielder can project distinct narratives which in turn reinforces its position and authority. The rhetoric of the PYD reveals its ability to respond to threats to its authority and generates performance benchmarks for its internal and external audiences. This study investigated the PYD's ability to build and maintain authority through its public discourse as it related to the four obstacles to its legitimacy. Of the four elements, minority inclusivity and intra-Kurd conflict were the most frequently referenced. An analysis of the specific discourse used when approaching these two factors reflected the PYD's acknowledgment of these affronts to its legitimacy. Minority groups living among Kurdish areas of Syria were always referenced in congenial terms and the PYD's leader, Salih Muslim, ensured these populations of their inclusion in the future of the Rojava project. The PYD's ability to make good on the statements remain to be seen, however, a lack of references to the "other" and the absence of villainizing rhetoric is encouraging. Presently, this fact reflects that the PYD leadership is touting a highly inclusive brand of democratic representation and is not sowing disunity among its populations. Intra-Kurd conflict was mentioned with a higher degree of variation.

The PYD often acknowledged the presence of conflicts with other Kurdish actors in the region. It refrained from using inflammatory rhetoric when discussing these issues and was generally positive while referring to historic adversaries such as the KRG and its Rojava offshoot, the KNC. The Kurdish Supreme Committee includes representation from both the PYD and these political rivals. The KSC is Rojava's highest decision making body and the PYD frequently feigned submission to the committee. The fact that the PYD continues to seek dominance on the Rojava political

scene and it possess control over the burgeoning governments most powerful fighting force, the YPG, reveals the high likelihood of future conflict in the arena. When it came to relations with its cross-border affiliate, the PYD rhetoric showed a high degree of association with the PKK.

The PYD cannot escape the fact that the PKK has played an important role in its genesis. Salih Muslim's rhetoric revealed that the group cannot fully divorce itself from its connections with the PKK. As discovered in the literature review, the PKK continues to play an active role in shaping PYD policy, witnessed through the adoption of Abdullah Ocalan's ideologies. Furthermore, observed military collaborations between the PYD and the PKK militias entrenches these connections, making them difficult to uproot. The challenges posed by the inseparable nature of these groups embodies a foundational obstacle which may prove insurmountable for the PYD. These same PKK connections may also possess quantifiable improvements in internal legitimacy. Because of the PKK status and the love of its leader, Ocalan, these factors are not zero-sum in nature. What may be lost in external legitimacy, could potentially be made up for in internal legitimacy. The YPG, although not entirely separate of the PKK, is a force to be reckoned with in its own right.

The YPG has time and time again shown itself to be a formidable fighting force capable of winning and retaining territory. This has been tacitly, and at times actively, condoned by the international actors interested in defeating ISIL. However, even its currency as a counter ISIL force may quickly evaporate once the extremist elements are extinguished. When ISIL, in its present form, is reduced in its ability to threaten the interests of Western powers, the PYD will have to search for new grounds of legitimacy

on the international stage. Its ability to make this transition is paramount to the survival of the Rojava project. However, as a vestige of stability in a sea of chaos, Rojava may benefit from continued Syrian instability, a status which may not easily be shed. In the analyzed speeches and interviews the PYD publicly states that its agenda's do not include complete secession from Syria.

Rather than seeking complete secession, the PYD's rhetoric often discusses a desire for the "erosion" of regional borders. Muslim's references to the EU discloses the groups desires to see the creation of a Kurdistan existing as a partnership of loosely affiliated autonomous regions. In this model, complete succession from Syria would not be necessary, but it would require representation and fair treatment in the Syrian government. Furthermore, under this proposed system, the Kurds residing in Turkey would need a similar level of autonomy, a status that Turkey is not likely to grant anytime soon. The obstacles that lie in the path to achieving this regional agenda are framed as long-term goals by the PYD. The length of time required to realize these long-term goals pivots more on the actions of actors such as Turkey and Iran, then it does the PYD's own efforts. These aspirations are superfluous in context to autonomy within Syria, which may be achieved regardless.

In summary, the study of the history of Kurds, the emergence of the PYD, and the analysis of their rhetoric has revealed some interesting points to ponder moving forward. Regardless of the outcome of the Rojava project, the means by which a non-state actor can garner and retain legitimacy has been displayed through an inspection of the literature and rhetoric surrounding the PYD. Staying power in this work has been defined as ability to garner and retain legitimacy during conflict. Legitimacy is further

reduced to two components, external and internal. The reduced components are specific to the PYD, however the tactics and processes can be put forth as universal. Future studies could further unravel the links and effects of violence and ethno-nationalism on legitimacy. A further exploration of the effects that a monopoly on violence has on legitimacy and the evolution of a non-state actor would be relevant to the PYD's case. Traditional legitimacy's links to ethno-nationalism could also be further inspected in an attempt to quantify the effects of ethnic centric movements against non-ethnic ones.

The multitude of actors and the complex nature of the circumstances at play in the Syrian Civil War make the study of the Kurds in northern Syria a challenge. This work endeavored to simplify the situation and actors in order establish a basis for analysis and to operationalize factors. A shortcoming of this study lies in its general deficiency in overcoming these complexities and extrapolate core principles for application to broader contexts. General, far-reaching conclusions that possess wide-ranging applicability eludes the study of this specific group, yet when viewed in context to the broader body of work related to the Kurds, legitimacy, and conflict studies it provides tangible reference points for comparison and further study.

In conclusion, the study has established links between the staying power of non-state actors and their legitimacy. As a function of staying power, legitimacy with external and internal actors can be assessed through an inspection of rhetoric. Rhetoric of the PYD reveals its agendas, its strategies for overcoming challenges to its authority, establishes performance benchmarks, and measures its commitment to addressing legitimacy deficiencies. The PYD's commitment to overcoming obstacles to its legitimacy is confirmed through the analysis of their discourse, placing it on a trajectory

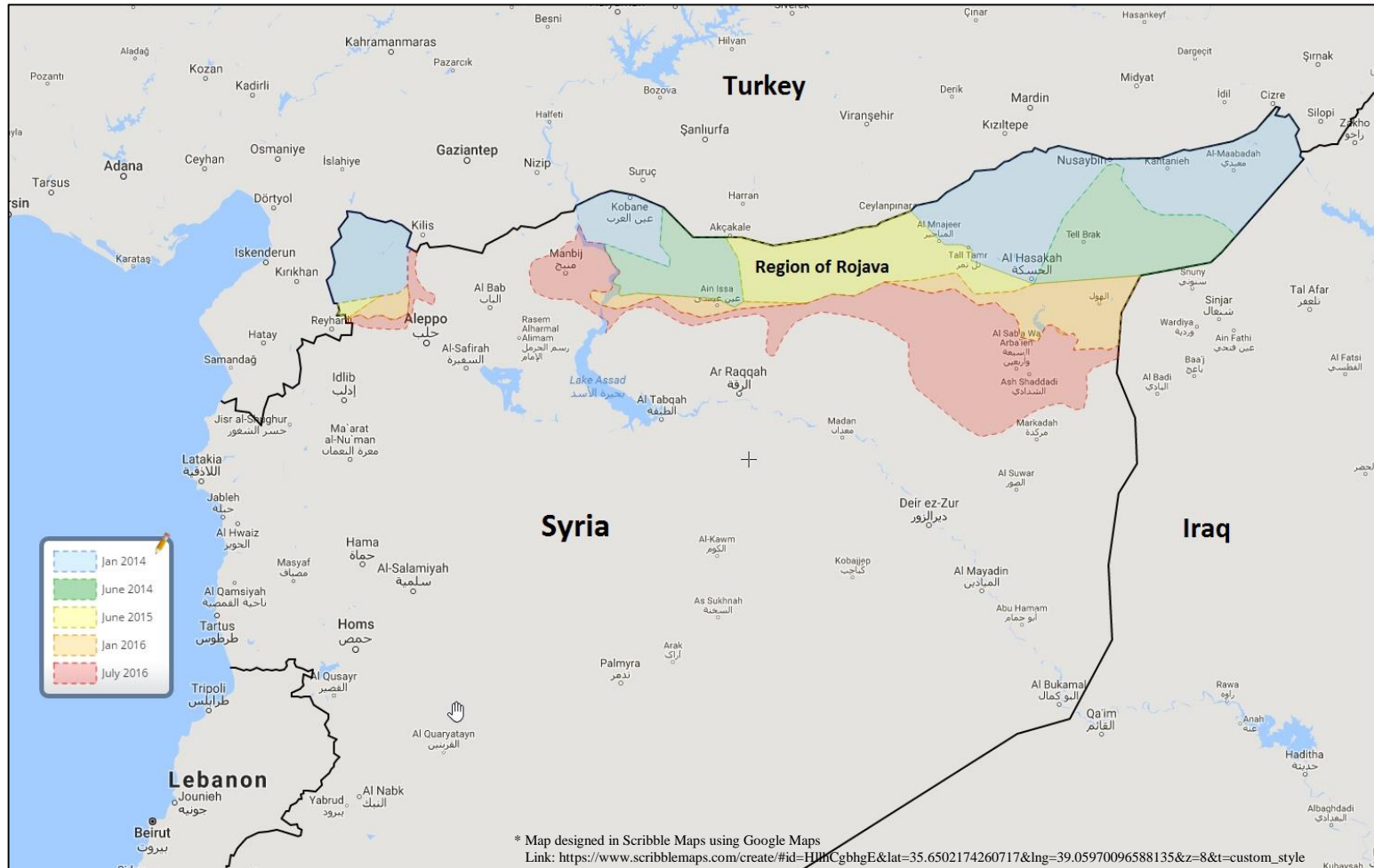
to furthering its autonomous ambitions. Insulated from other factors, the PYD displays the correct ingredients for achieving its mission. However, the complex war system that has emerged in Syria, the competing agendas of regional actors, and the capricious nature of its counter-ISIL legitimacy places this trajectory on unstable footing. It is undeniable that a new Syria will emerge from the ashes of the current conflict and only history will reveal to what degree the PYD was successful in achieving its aspirations.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: Kurdish Political Parties in Syria

- The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (The Party)
- The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (The Party)
- The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria
- The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria
- Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria
- Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria
- Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria (Yekiti)
- Kurdish Union Party in Syria
- Kurdish Left Party in Syria – Congress
- Kurdish Left Party in Syria – Central Committee
- Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party
- Kurdish Popular Union Party in Syria
- Kurdish Future Movement in Syria
- Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria
- Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria
- Democratic Union Party (PYD)
- Kurdistan Democratic Concord Party – Syria
- Kurdistan Union Party in Syria
- Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria – Reform Movement

APPENDIX II: Kurdish Territorial Expansion from 2014 to 2016



APPENDIX III: Coding Instructions

Instructions: *Speeches and interviews are reviewed a minimum of three times. Only sentences directly related to or alluding to one of the four main categories listed below will be highlighted and subsequently logged in the data set. If text appears to be neutral or a bias cannot be determined, then it will not be logged. If text is determined to be wholly or partially part of two different categories, then the text can be logged multiple times for different categories. Citations are tallied based on the number of characters used in the text.*

MINORITY INCLUSIVITY	
Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to representative democracy • Rojava described as place of safe haven for all minorities • Refer to other groups as fighting “together” with the Kurds • Assurance of rights of all minorities and groups in Kurdish territory • Reference partnership between Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities in the area
Exclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represent minority populations as an issue moving forward • Emphasize Kurdish claim to the area

INTRA-KURD RELATIONS	
Unity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhetoric that acknowledges a common Kurdish bond that transcends national boundaries • Reference to the positive influence of other Kurdish parties and groups • Expresses desire to overcome differences and find common ground
Disunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implication of tension, conflict, or fragmentation of Kurdish political parties • Negative reference towards other Kurdish group, entity, or party
KNC/KSC Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to KSC submission • Recognize KSC as positive force
KNC/KSC Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative reference towards the Supreme Committee or the Kurdish National Council
KRI Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express desire to collaborate and work together • Acknowledge shared goals and aspirations for the future of Kurdistan
KRI Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place blame on KRI/KRG for a certain issue • Critical towards KRG policy and effects on Syrian Kurds

PKK ASSOCIATION	
PKK Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments that elude to cross-border collaboration, politically, militarily, or ideologically • Recognition of PKK roots
PKK Disassociation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizes separation from the PKK • Makes claims to have no ties to the PKK
In Defense of PKK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reject claims that PKK is a terrorist organization • Comparison to other Kurdish political parties
Critical of PKK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhetoric that is critical of the PKK, its members, or its agenda

SECESSION FROM SYRIA	
Stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express respect for Syrian territorial integrity • Adherence to current national boundaries • Assurance that Syria will continue to exist as it is • Express willingness or desire to democratically participate in Syrian governance
Leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disregard for current borders • Express more emphasis on autonomy and decentralization of Syrian state

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahams, Fred, and Lama Fakih. *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014. Print.
- Ahmed, Mohammed M. A., and Michael M. Gunter. *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*. no. 7 Vol. Costa Mesa, Calif: Mazda Publishers, 2007. Web.
- . *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*. No. 12 Vol. Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2013. Web.
- Allsopp, Harriet. "The Kurdish Autonomy Bid in Syria: Challenges and Reactions." *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*. Eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter., 2013. 218. Print.
- . *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*. 144 Vol. London: I. B. Tauris, 2014. Web.
- Amnesty International. *Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic One Year After the March 2004 Events*. MDE 24/002/2005 Vol. Amnesty International, 2005. Print.
- Babbie, Earl R. *The Practice of Social Research*. 11th, international student ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2007. Web.
- Baczko, Adam, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesnay. *Building a Syrian State in a Time of Civil War*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013. Print.
- Barfi, Barak. "Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria." 2015. Web.
<<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria>>.

- Bengio, Ofra. *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*. Univ Of Texas Press, 2014. Web.
- Bennett, W. Lance. "The Paradox of Public Discourse: A Framework for the Analysis of Political Accounts." *The Journal of Politics* 42.3 (1980): 792-817. Web.
- Bodnarchuk, Kari. *Kurdistan: Region Under Siege*. Minneapolis, Minn; London: Lerner, 2001. Web.
- Bruinessen, Martin van. *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism Versus Nation-Building States: Collected Articles*. Istanbul: Isis Press, 2000. Web.
- Bukovansky, Mlada. *Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Web.
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "The Kurdish national council in Syria." 2016. Web. <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/48502>>.
- Caves, John. *Backgrounder: Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (Pyd)*. Institute for the Study of War, 2012. Print.
- Charteris-Black, Jonathan. *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Web.
- Colaresi, Michael, and William R. Thompson. "Strategic Rivalries, Protracted Conflict, and Crisis Escalation." *Journal of Peace Research* 39.3 (2002): 263-87. Web.
- Cook, Deborah. "Legitimacy and Political Violence: A Habermasian Perspective." *Social Justice* 30.3 (93) (2003): 108-26. Web.
- Dagher, Sam. "Control of Syrian Oil Fuels War between Kurds and Islamic State; Impoverished Families in Northeast Syria Refine Oil Distributed by the Warring

- Sides to Buy Loyalty--Or Face the Consequences." *Wall Street Journal (Online)* 2014. Web.
- Desai, RM, A. Olofsgard, and TM Yousef. "The Logic of Authoritarian Bargains." *ECONOMICS & POLITICS* 21.1 (2009): 93-125. Web.
- Dettmer, Jamie. *How Long can US Mask Disagreements with Turkey?*. Lanham, United States, Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc., 2016. Print.
- . *Tangled Syrian Conflict Getting Messier, More Sectarian*. Lanham, United States, Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc., 2016. Print.
- Direj, Kovan. "Exclusive Interview with PYD Co-chair Salih Muslim: Rojava Will Establish a New Civilisation." 2015. Web.
<<https://www.kurdishquestion.com/article/3061-exclusive-interview-with-pyd-co-chair-salih-muslim-rojava-will-establish-a-new-civilisation>>.
- Economist Intelligence Inc. "Syria Economy: Quick View - Syrian Kurds Produce 40,000 barrels/day of Crud." *EIU ViewsWire* 2014. Web.
- Egin, Oray. "THE GAME CHANGER: Syria, Iran, and Kurdish Independence." *World Affairs* 176.1 (2013): 64-72. Web.
- Syria Selected Energy Infrastructure. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2015.
- Eppel, Michael. "Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland." Ed. Ofra Benigo. Univ Of Texas Press, 2014. 37. Web.
- Eppel, Michael. *Kurdish Nationalism's Moment of Truth?* 113 Vol. Philadelphia: Current History, Inc, 2014. Web.
- Federici, Vittoria. "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35.2 (2015): 81. Web.

- Finlayson, Alan. "From Beliefs to Arguments: Interpretive Methodology and Rhetorical Political Analysis." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9.4 (2007): 545-63. Web.
- Fragiskatos, Peter. "The Stateless Kurds in Syria: Problems and Prospects for the Ajanib and Maktumin Kurds." *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 21.1-2 (2007): 109. Web.
- Gee, James Paul, and Michael Handford. *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge, 2012; 2013. Web.
- Gunes, Cengiz, and Robert Lowe. *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*. London: Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015. Print.
- Gunes, Cengiz. *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*. New York: Routledge, 2012; 2013; 2011. Web.
- Gunter, Michael M. *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*. no. 1 Vol. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004. Web.
- . "Iraq, Syria, Isis and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey." *Middle East Policy* 22.1 (2015): 102-11. Web.
- . *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; 2008. Web.
- . "The Syrian Kurds: Out of Nowhere to Where?" *Turkish Review* 4.1 (2014): 16. Web.
- . "Unrecognized De Facto States in World Politics: The Kurds." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20.2 (2014): 161. Web.

- Hevian, Rodi. "The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: A Research Guide." *MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17.2 (2013): 94-5. Web.
- . "The Resurrection of Syrian Kurdish Politics." *MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17.3 (2013): 45-56. Web.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond A., et al. *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*. Boulder, CO: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2011. Web.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond A., Soren Schmidt, and University of St. Andrews. Centre for Syrian Studies. *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria*. Fife, Scotland: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2009. Web.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond A., et al. *Syria from Reform to Revolt*. First ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2015. Web.
- Hironaka, Ann. *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009. Web.
- Houston, Christopher. *Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves*. Oxford: Berg, 2008. Web.
- HRW. *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*. New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2009. Print.
- Jones, Dorian. *Turkish President Condemns US Forces Wearing of Syrian Kurdish Insignia*. Lanham, United States, Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc., 2016. Print.
- Jones, Lewis. "Intelwatch - march/april 2016." *Jane's Intelligence Review* 28.5 (2016): n/a. Print.

- Kajjo, Sirwan. *Payoffs, Creativity Keep Syrian Kurdish Market Stocked*. Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc, 2015. Web.
- . "United States/Syria: US-backed Kurdish Forces Benefiting from Oil in Syria." 2016. Web. <<http://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-backed-kurdish-forces-benefiting-from-oil-syria/3427566.html>>.
- Krajeski, Jenna. "What the Kurds Want." *Virginia Quarterly Review: a national journal of literature and discussion* 91.4 (2015): 86. Web.
- Krebs, Ronald R., and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. "Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric." *European Journal of International Relations* 13.1 (2007): 35-66. Web.
- Kreyenbroek, Philip G., and Stefan Sperl. *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*. London: Routledge, 1992; 2005; 1991. Web.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. 3rd ed. London; Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013. Web.
- Lacewing, Michael, and Jean-Marc Pascal. *Revise Philosophy for AS Level*. 1st ed. New York; London: Routledge, 2006. Web.
- "Leader of Syrian Kurdish Party Discusses Ties with Turkey, Iran." *BBC Monitoring European* 2013. Web.
- Lowe, Robert. "Kurdish Nationalism in Syria." *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*. Eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter., 2007. 287. Print.
- Lund, Aron. "Knocking on Every Door: An Interview with Saleh Muslim, Part II." 2014. Web. <<http://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/54693>>.

- . "The People's Rule: An Interview with Saleh Muslim, Part I." 2014. Web.
<<http://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/54675>>.
- Martin, James. *Politics and Rhetoric: A Critical Introduction*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014. Web.
- McDowall, David. *The Kurds*. Rev. 6th ed. London: Minority Rights Group, 1991. Web.
- . *A Modern History of the Kurds*. 3rd rev. and updat ed. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004; 2003; 2014. Web.
- . *A Modern History of the Kurds*. 2nd rev. and updat ed. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000. Web.
- Meho, Lokman I. *The Kurds and Kurdistan: A Selective and Annotated Bibliography*. 46 Vol. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997. Web.
- "MIDDLE EAST: Realpolitik may Scupper Kurdish Statehood." *OxResearch Daily Brief Service*: 1. 2014. Web.
- Minahan, James. *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations: Ethnic and National Groups Around the World, Volume II D-K*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002. Web.
- Natali, Denise. *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2005. Web.
- Noi, Aylin Unver. "The Arab Spring, its Effects on the Kurds, and the Approaches of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq on the Kurdish Issue." *MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs* 16.2 (2012): 15. Web.
- O'Shea, Maria T. *Trapped between the Map and Reality: Geography and Perceptions in Kurdistan*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. Print.

- Paasche, Till F. "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation." *Middle East Policy* 22.1 (2015): 77-88. Web.
- Penrose, Edith Tilton, and E. F. (Ernest Francis) Penrose. *Iraq: International Relations and National Development*. London: Ernest Benn, 1978. Web.
- Perry, Tom. "Syrian Kurds now say they now control territory the size of Qatar and Kuwait combined." 2015. Web. <<http://www.businessinsider.com/syrian-kurds-now-say-they-now-control-territory-the-size-of-qatar-and-kuwait-combined-2015-8?IR=T>>.
- Peter, Fabienne. *Democratic Legitimacy*. 62 Vol. Taylor and Francis, 2009. Web.
- Phillips, David L. (David Lawrence), and Bernard Kouchner. *The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015. Web.
- Raz, Joseph. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. Web.
- Rear, Michael. *Intervention, Ethnic Conflict and State-Building in Iraq: A Paradigm for the Post-Colonial State*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2008. Web.
- Richani, Nazih. "The Political Economy and Complex Interdependency of the War System in Syria." *Civil Wars* 18.1 (2016): 45-68. Web.
- . "The Political Economy and Complex Interdependency of the War System in Syria." *Civil Wars* 18.1 (2016): 45-68. Web.
- Romano, David. "The "Arab Spring's" Effect on Kurdish Political Fortunes." *Insight Turkey* 17.3 (2015): 53. Web.
- Romano, David, and Mehmet Gurses. *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria*. First ed. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Web.

- Rothstein, B. "Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy Versus Quality of Government." *The American behavioral scientist (Beverly Hills)* 53.3 (2009): 311; 311,330; 330. Print.
- Sabine, George Holland. *A History of Political Theory*. Rev. ed. New York: Holt, 1956. Web.
- Sarigil, Zeki, and Omer Fazlioglu. "Exploring the Roots and Dynamics of Kurdish ethno-nationalism in Turkey." *Nations and Nationalism* 20.3 (2014): 436-58. Web.
- Savelsberg, Eva, and Jordi Tejel. "The Syrian Kurds in "Transition to Somewhere"." *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*. Eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter., 2013. 189. Print.
- Sheyholislami, Jaffer. "Identity, Discourse, and the Media: The Case of the Kurds." Ph.D. Carleton University (Canada), 2008. Print. Canada.
- Solomon, Erika, Guy Chazan and Sam Jones. "Isis Inc: How Oil Fuels the Jihadi Terrorists." *FT.com* 2015. Web.
- Spyer, Jonathan. "Fragmented Syria: The Balance of Forces as of Late 2013." *Middle East Review of International Affairs (Online)* 17.3 (2013): 9. Web.
- Spyer, Jonathan. "The Islamic State Vs. the Kurdish YPG in Northern-Central Syria: An Eyewitness Account." *MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs* 18.4 (2014): 50. Web.
- . "No Solution without the Kurds." *Jerusalem Post* 2013. Web.
- Spyer, Jonathan. "No Solution without the Kurds. the 'Post' Interviews the Leader of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria, Saleh Muslim." *Jerusalem Post* 2013. Web.

- Stephens, Michael. "YPG - the Islamic State's worst enemy." 12 September 2014 2014. Web. <<http://www.janes.com/article/43030/analysis-ypg-the-islamic-state-s-worst-enemy>>.
- Tejel, Jordi. *Syria's Kurds*. Routledge, 2008. Web.
- . "Syria's Kurds: History, Politics, and Society." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 34.2 (2012): 136. Web.
- Tezcür, Güneş Murat. "Kurdish Nationalism and Identity in Turkey: A Conceptual Reinterpretation." (2009) Web.
- The Economist. "Striking Out on their Own: Syria's Kurdish Areas." *The Economist (Online)* 2014. Web.
- VICE News. "Rojava: Syria's unknown war." Jan 2, 2014. Web. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2zx1FQxkQ4>>.
- Walker, Bethany J., and University of Chicago. Center for Middle Eastern Studies. *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages: Transformation of the Mamluk Frontier*. Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2011. Web.
- Washington Kurdish Institute. "Interview with Mr. Salih Muslim, Chairman of Democratic Union Party (PYD)." 2015. Web. <<http://dckurd.org/2015/09/02/interview-with-mr-salih-muslim-chairman-of-democratic-union-party-pyd/>>.
- Weber, Max. *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society*. 6 Vol. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954. Web.
- Wolfrum, Rudiger. *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*. Eds. Oxford University Press and Max-Planck-Institut für Ausländisches Öffentliches Recht und Völkerrecht. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010. Web.

Yildiz, Kerim, and Kurdish Human Rights Project. *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*. London: Pluto Press, 2005. Web.

Zaman, Amberin. "PYD leader: Russia will stop Turkey from intervening in Syria ." 2015. Web. <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2015/10/turkey-syria-russia-pyd-leader-muslim-moscow-prevent-ankara.html>>.

Zurutuza, Karlos. "Salih Muslim: Time has Proved Us Right." 2016. Web. <<http://kurdistantribune.com/2016/salih-muslim-time-has-proved-us-right/>>.

