The Kurdish factor in the Syrian revolution

Eva Savelsberg

When the Syrian revolution started in Spring 2011, many observers believed that the Kurds would play a key role in the uprising. Though divided into more than a dozen different political parties, the Kurds were still the best-organized Syrian opposition group. Indeed, the population, Arabs and Kurds alike, as well as the regime had vivid memories of the mass protests in 2004.1 However, until recently, the Kurds have not played any significant role in overturning the regime. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to analyze the political strategies and failures of the different Kurdish actors, e.g. youth groups, the Kurdish political parties—particularly those organized in the Kurdish National Council (KNC)—and the Kurdish Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Much like in 2004, it was above all young people who started to participate in the revolution, not the Kurdish political parties. Interestingly, there were no organizational links between those young people who participated in the 2004/2005 demonstrations and those organizing protest in Spring 2011. Instead, the Local Coordination Committees in the Kurdish regions have been modeled on the example of their Arab counterparts.2 In the beginning, they discussed and shared the weekly slogans of the Friday demonstrations with these groups.3 However, at the end of March 2012, Kurdish activists started to display their own slogans, often related to the Kurdish issue.4 Another controversial subject has been the inclusion of religious mottoes—the Kurdish faction has been critical of the Islamic content of increasingly more and more of the slogans.5 However, as will be shown below, the “Kurdification” of the discourse—also exemplified by the progressive disappearance of the Syrian independence flag of 1948 (e.g., the flag of the Syrian revolution) at demonstrations in cities such as al-Qamishli over the months—was also a consequence of the growing influence of the Kurdish parties on these youth groups.

Whilst Local Coordination Committees and local youth groups attracted many young people at the beginning of the revolution in 2011, two years later, they no longer have much influence. This is, at least partly, due to a lack of funds, external support and organizational knowledge, making it impossible to maintain a high level of activities underway. More important, however, seems to be that the youth groups have started to act more and more like the Kurdish political parties. Many of the first established youth groups have now dissolved; others have split, merged and split again.6 Only a few independent groups are left, and most are linked to one of the Kurdish political parties and rather work with this party than with one another.7 Indeed, when Kurdish party leaders realized that the youth groups were attracting many followers, they founded their own groups and included youth activists (as well as independent personalities and women’s activists) in the Kurdish National Council (KNC).

The KNC, a coalition of fifteen political parties, was founded in 2011 to unite the Kurdish parties,8 to politically profit from the popularity of youth groups,9 and to more effectively voice Kurdish demands. However, this approach was not successful. The KNC is deeply divided between those political parties aiming to more openly support the Syrian revolution and those hesitating to do so. As a consequence, the KNC never became a member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), nor did it join the National Coalition, founded in November 11, 2012 and currently the most important Syrian opposition group—even though it was invited to do so and even though its requests concerning the Kurdish issue have been accepted by the National Coalition’s chairman, Moaz Ahmad al-Khatib.10

The only Kurdish political party that joined the Coalition is the Kurdish Future Movement—this party also was the only one to decide early in the revolution to side with the protesters.11 At that time, representatives of other parties criticized that in 2005 “the Arabs” had left the Kurds alone and not supported their struggle against the regime. Consequently, they argued, there was no need to support the
“Arab revolution” now—they even occasionally tried to deter demonstrations. However, deep-rooted fear of the regime’s revenge and a tradition of rather dissimulating the existence of a conflict than openly calling a dissent a dissent were, in 2011, the main reasons for not supporting the revolution. Today, the situation is different:

According to Faisal Yusuf, the current Chairman of the KNC, the KNC only wants to join the Coalition in the name of the Supreme Kurdish Committee—the body it has established together with the People’s Council of West Kurdistan. The People’s Council is a PKK body in which the PYD is also represented. To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to analyze why power relations in the Kurdish areas have significantly shifted in favor of the PYD/PKK.

The PYD and its military force, the People's Defense Units (YPG), currently exercise state-like power in the Kurdish regions of Syria. The PYD controls large parts of the border region between the Kurdish areas of Syria and Turkey as well as Iraq, and has established numerous checkpoints. It imposes taxes on petrol and collects border fees. Moreover—and this is an ongoing process—the Syrian regime has handed over the administration of an increasing number of cities and villages to the PYD. The fact that all cities were taken over without any significant fighting—no dead or injured were reported—indicates that all this was a deal—be it officially negotiated or not—between the regime and the PYD/PKK. There are several reasons for the regime’s cooperation with the PYD: First of all, the PYD has, particularly in the second half of 2011 and the first half of 2012, violently suppressed dissident demonstrations, for example in `Afrin. Until today, activists are too frightened to organize anti-regime demonstration there. The situation is similar in other cities where the PYD has a strong presence, for example in al-Malikiyah (Dérîk).

Secondly, since the Free Syrian Army has also started to operate in the Kurdish areas, handing over control to the PYD means that the YPG—not the Syrian Army—are fighting the armed opposition, for example most recently in Ra’s al-`Ayn. However, since some of the groups fighting in Ra’s al-`Ayn were radical Islamists, the PYD was not criticized for fighting against the revolution, but instead winning sympathies.

Last but not least, Syria is—once again—playing its “Kurdish” card against Turkey. As early as summer 2011, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) deeply annoyed the Syrian regime by siding with the opposition. Like his father, Bashar al-Assad has used the PKK/PYD to apply pressure against Turkey. The AKP government cannot afford—politically or militarily—for the PKK/PYD to establish a major stronghold in Syria. At the same time, it is not in its interest to solve the problem militarily—a Turkish intervention would bring the PYD and their Syrian critics closer together. The PYD has been denying any co-operation with the Syrian regime. Indeed, it has to do so; otherwise it would lose its support among Syrian Kurds, who mostly feel little sympathy for the ruling powers. At the same time, the PYD also has to deny the fact that it is a branch of the PKK. Since the PKK is labeled in many countries as either “criminal” or “terrorist,” the PYD can only hope to gain international recognition by disclaiming this connection.

There is strong evidence that the PYD regularly threatens, kidnap and murders activists of other parties—lately members of Mustafa Jum’a’s Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Azadi) and `Abdulhakim Bashar’s Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî). Currently, these acts of violence are not (at least anymore) committed to satisfy the regime, but rather to consolidate the PYD’s supremacy. The PYD/PKK is a totalitarian organization and does not share power when it is strong. Even though a number of other Syrian Kurdish political parties have started to maintain armed units—apart from the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîti), `Abdulhakim Bashar’s el-Partî and the two branches of the Azadi—and even though the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq is militarily training Kurdish refugees from Syria, this supremacy is not seriously challenged. As long as Barzani’s Syrian-
Kurdish “Peshmerga forces” remain in Iraqi-Kurdistan, the YPG are by far the strongest militia in the Kurdish area of Syria, and therefore able to dictate the rules of the game. The “strategy” of the parties affiliated in the KNC’s towards the PYD/PKK is very similar to its long-lasting policy towards the regime. They fear the PYD, and they disseminate the existence of a political conflict. Currently, the only chance to significantly diminish the PYD’s power in Syria may lay in the AKP’s initiative to settle the Turkish-Kurdish conflict by including PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in the peace negotiations. However, the question remains: how far is the military leadership in the Qandil mountains willing to follow Öcalan in the case he actually attempts to end the armed struggle? And if it does so: Will a possible disarming of PKK-fighters effectively include the Syrian-Kurdish regions?

To conclude: In the beginning of the revolution, Kurdish youth has played a relevant role in the setting of an agenda in which “democracy” and “dignity” became keywords. However, traditional political parties and forces (e.g., the PYD/PKK and the KNC) currently dominate the political scene. Whilst the KNC has been successful in assimilating independent youth activists to their own political agenda, the PYD and their militias dominate the KNC. Both the KNC and PYD have acted as obstacles rather than as driving forces for democratization. Five decades of Ba’thist rule obviously undermined the significance of the Kurdish political parties as an alternative to the existing political system. Thus far, neither PYD nor KNC has developed a meaningful agenda for the Syrian Kurds after the revolution.

Eva Savelsberg holds an MA in Philosophy, Sociology and German Literature. She is co-founder, president, researcher and project-coordinator at the European Center for Kurdish Studies (ECKS) in Berlin. Since 2009, she has worked as a web journalist for the Center’s website www.kurdwatch.org, which documents the Kurds’ situation in Syria. Since 2005, she has been responsible for the implementation of civil society and democracy projects of the ECKS inside Syria. Since 2000, Eva Savelsberg has served as an official expert for courts concerning the human-rights situation in Iraq and Syria. She is co-editor of the book series Kurdologie and the periodical Kurdische Studien and published numerous articles on the Kurdish question.

2 Interview with ‘Abdussalam ʿUthman, politician and activist, January 10, 2013.
8 There have been several short-lived associations of Kurdish political parties before, starting with the Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria, established in 1994.
9 How far youth activists have been assimilated and are indeed manipulated by the political parties became clear during the preparations for the Youth Conference—the body to elect the youth representatives for the KNC—at the beginning of February 2013. The conference was not organized by youth activists, but by a committee made up of the old guard of Kurdish politicians. Not surprisingly, all
those elected were close to political parties. Telephone conversation with an activist from al-Qamishli, February 4, 2013.


The consequence was a severe split between the Future Movement and the other Kurdish political parties. Until today, the Future Movement is not part of the KNC.


The fact that the PYD’s YPG are fighting the FSA in Ra`s al-`Ayn does not hinder it from requesting cooperation between the YPG and the FSA on other occasions.


By October 2012, these forces were allegedly at 1,200. Ibid, pp. 3-4.