

# Remembering the 'Forgotten' Kurds in Syria

Written by Yasin Duman

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YASIN DUMAN, OCT 31 2014

### Before Kobanî

Before ISIS began its attack on Kobanî, one of the Rojava cantons in Northern Syria, [1] Syrian Kurds had never received much attention from the international media and its governments. Similar to Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, they have been suppressed and discriminated for the past 70 years. The Ba'ath Party in Syria did not recognize Kurdish identity and cultural rights, and their attempts to participate in the political struggle for recognition of identity were never legalized. Despite the political restrictions, imprisonment, torture, and enforced disappearances, Rojava Kurds never considered the concept of armed struggle until 2012, hoping that the ongoing Syrian conflict would be resolved through democratic and peaceful means (Bingöl, 2007).

Some of the reasons for the current conflict in Syria and Rojava stem from suppressive and discriminative policies of the government, and unsatisfied needs of the Kurdish minority. Yıldız (2005) argues that, in 1962, the regime stripped all civic rights of some 200,000 Kurds in Heseke (al-Hasakah). [2] They did not have the right to education, health care, social support, travel, or private property. Contrary to Assyrian and Syriac minorities, who have been awarded some social and cultural rights thanks to the international agreements and pressure on the Syrian government, the Kurds of Syria never enjoyed such status.

The invasion of Iraq by the U.S., and the birth of the Federal Kurdistan Region in 2002, is often seen as assisting the rebirth of nationalism in both the Kurds and Sunni Arabs, which eventually led to the 2004 Qamişlo Unrest. During a football match between a Kurdish and an Arab team in Qamişlo, nationalist Arabs from Deir ez-Zour started attacking Kurds with the stones they carried in vacuum flasks, leaving 30 Kurdish unarmed civilians dead. After the match was canceled, Kurds took the streets, not only in Kurdish populated regions, but also in populous Syrian cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. President Bashar al-Assad, for the first time, invited all Kurdish parties to negotiate the problems, and publicly stressed on Al-Jazeera that Kurds are one of the basic constituents of Syria and would soon be granted full civic rights (*Amude*, 2004). However, as was Assad's want, nothing changed for the Kurds except for the release of some of the youths who were arrested during the civil unrest. Despite the conflict between the government and Kurds during the Qamişlo Unrest, it did not cause hatred and polarization among grassroots Kurdish movements. Social relations were affected by the tension, yet it did not turn into a real conflict between the communities and, as such, the uprising should be seen an explosion of frustration against the Syrian government's approach towards 'forgotten' and discriminated Kurds, and not inherent Kurdish hatred of Arabs.

Kurds, after protracted issues under the Assad regime, emerged to become one of the most independent, unified, and powerful movements amidst the chaos of the Syrian civil war. They created their own armed organizations called YPG (People's Defense Units) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units) that, starting from 19 July 2012 in Kobanî, upon the withdrawal of Assad's forces, began taking control of the cities and cantons of Rojava. The attempted opposition assembly, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), attempted to formulate unity, but failed because the SNC was unwilling to agree on an autonomous region in Rojava; instead, they insisted on negotiating the status of the Kurds after the seemingly inevitable removal of Assad. Distrusting both the SNC and Assad, the PYD, the most popular party affiliated with the PKK leadership, and other Kurdish parties [3] favored self-administration and, as such, decided to not be a part of the SNC, but instead began the process of establishing their own autonomous institutions. Turkey was strongly against Kurdish self-administration in Syria for two important reasons. One, Kurdish political and

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social autonomy was, more or less, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's proposal for the Kurdish Question in Turkey and, if it became successful, there would be a stronger political and social demand for the same model in Turkey. [4] Two, Turkey supported the SNC (and its armed force the Free Syrian Army, or FSA) to fight against Assad and wanted the Kurds to join the FSA in the fight against his forces. For a long time, Turkey insisted on the same strategy, even though most international observers, with the notable exception of Turkey itself, recognized that it has failed in undermining Assad (*Todays Turk*, 2013).

## Autonomy in Rojava

International attempts to 'solve' the conflict in Syria have ended with failures. The Geneva I and II Conferences, hosted by Russia and the U.S., were based around SNC and government delegates being invited to attend meetings to reach a political agreement. As they were not asked to participate, the Kurds were not available to offer their views at the negotiating table. Kurdish politicians in Rojava urged the parties in Geneva I that there will be no solution without Kurds, and any decision made without their approval would not be accepted and implemented by the Kurdish people. At the end of the process, the parties returned from Geneva I with empty hands. Kurds, to respond to the approach of Russia and the U.S., and to convey a message to the parties from Syria, proclaimed autonomous cantons ahead of Geneva II. This had three important implications. First, the Kurds showed, in practice, that they neither support Assad nor the SNC. Second, that despite Turkey's attempts and threats to prevent it, Kurds were determined to fight for self-determination. Third, that in addition to the struggle between Assad and the SNC, the international community would have to deal with another 'problem': de-facto Kurdish autonomy.

The autonomy project was initially proposed by Kurdish parties and movements affiliated with the PKK, and they extended this ideal to Arabs, Assyrians, Chechens, and Armenians living in Rojava. Even though some of the Kurdish parties expressed their dissatisfaction with autonomy, (Zenklo 2014) recently all the parties and administrative bodies of autonomy signed an agreement under the supervision of KRG President Massoud Barzani ensuring Kurdish unity and recognition of autonomy in Rojava (*DIHA* 2014). In addition to its diplomatic success among the Kurdish parties, it has also had some socio-economic benefits. Rojava has been under a severe embargo from all sides for three years, and it is hoped that the recent unity agreement will help mitigate financial problems in Jazeera Canton because the only way for trading is via the Sêmalka border to KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq). The other routes are closed by Turkey (from the north) and ISIS (from south and west). Also, the agreement will provide YPG forces with arms and aid, as has been the case in the Kobanî canton in the fight against ISIS.

## How Autonomy in Rojava Works

The canton system is not a new phenomenon in politics; yet, it has mostly been practiced in a select few western democracies. As an administrative model, this system aims for de-centralization, empowerment of local authorities, power sharing, deliberative and consociational democracy, and political participation that helps ensure human rights. Despite the ongoing war in the region, the cantons were declared with similar aims. Rojava Autonomy has both common and unique characteristics. Denying the need for a monolithic Kurdish nation state, this model finds democracy and freedom in joint administration of peoples, group equality, cooperation between Rojava constituents, and liberation of women to include full gender rights. To achieve these aims, it was established through local assemblies of neighborhoods, towns, and cities, in which members of the society are encouraged to be involved in decision-making processes. There is a 40% female quota in the parliament, and all the official bodies have co-presidents, one male and one female. As one of the most-used strategies in consociational approaches, people from different ethnic and political backgrounds were assigned to administrative bodies. The President of the Foreign Affairs Body, for instance, is a Kurd and his deputies are Assyrian and Kurdish, while the President of Economy Body is an Assyrian and her deputies are Kurdish. The co-Presidents of Jazeera Canton are Arab and Kurdish. Arabic, Kurdish, and Assyrian are all official languages.

The assembly of Jazeera Canton has 91 members who are members of parties and NGOs. Each party or NGO chooses its own delegates. The laws are made by ministries and approved or rejected by this assembly. The Assyrians, Chechens, and Arabs have their own rights to veto. Assyrians, for example, opposed the idea of naming the canton 'Rojava', since they believe that Rojava is Kurdish and does not represent all the identities. They, instead,

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suggested 'Jazeera', representing both a name of the region and a word used by all ethnic groups in the canton. If a proposal is not accepted by any group, it would need amendment till every group is satisfied with it. Cultural values of non-Kurdish groups are never degraded, and autonomy encourages them to use their national and cultural symbols and co-exist with Kurds in solidarity and respect.

## Conclusion

Communities in Syria were often segmented based on their ethnic, religious, and political background, and suffered under the authoritarian Assad regime of Syria. What autonomy appears to be achieving is a process of reconciliation in spite of the ongoing war in and around the cantons. The basic principles of this process are equality, justice, recognition, respect, and solidarity that are already well-practiced through autonomy. Despite the embargo, exclusive policies of the regional and international powers, and attacks from ISIS, Rojava could go a long way towards guaranteeing a joint-administration of peoples. Some may argue that such autonomous regions are temporary and another party either during (i.e. ISIS) or after (i.e. Assad government) the conflict will completely end such a de-facto administration. Yet, what the resistance and international support to Kobanî shows is that Kurds, and all peoples in Rojava, will never accept a radical Islamic or authoritarian power imposed on them. It also indicates that they are ready to cooperate with any honest party that supports them in their goal of protecting the coexistence of peoples through the maintenance of autonomous administrations. Mobilization of Kurdish people around the world, and in North Kurdistan (east and southeast Turkey) in particular, urged the coalition forces led by the U.S. to change their approach and respond to calls for preventing a genocide in Kobanî. Thousands of people from Turkey and North Kurdistan moved to the Kobanî border to cross into the city and join YPG, preclude any ISIS mobility at the border, force Turkey to open a corridor for the treatment of YPG fighters, settle the refugees, and provide arms and aid to Kobanî. The vigil at the border still goes on.

It is hard to predict what will happen in the coming days, weeks, and months in Rojava, Syria, and Iraq. Recent rapprochement between Kurdish parties in Rojava and the KRG may help them to formulate a better administration and advance diplomatic relations with each other, regional, and international powers. Reestablishing cordial relations among Kurds is not the only factor that could lead to a positive outcome. Airstrikes by the U.S. and coalition members against ISIS in Kobanî appear to have played an important role in stopping its attacks. Yet, as Öcalan previously warned, this war is unlikely to end any time soon and the people of Rojava may well have to get used to living under war conditions (Kaplan 2014). The FSA's willingness to cooperate with the YPG against ISIS may also help them establish closer relations which will not only strengthen them in terms of defense, but also provide a good opportunity to further develop diplomatic and political relations between the Rojava cantons and the wider Syrian opposition. The likelihood of success will be further improved if opposition unity takes place under the rubric of a reformulated SNC that allows for autonomous decision-making of all groups in the anti-Assad/anti-ISIS camps. Whether this will happen or not remains an open question.

## Notes

[1] Rojava means 'west' in Kurdish and is used by Kurds to refer to West Kurdistan. In January last year, peoples in Rojava declared three autonomous cantons: Efrîn (Afrin), Kobanî (Ayn al-Arab), and Cezîre (Jazeera). Kobanî is in the middle and is the smallest canton. By targeting Kobanî, ISIS aimed to break the limited connection of the other cantons, destroy all attempts of Kurds for self-determination, and strengthen its positions on Turkey's border to more easily recruit new militants and manage logistics.

[2] There were two categories of those citizens: the 'foreigners' around 150,000 and 'unregistered' up to 70,000. To the Assad regime, the second group came from Turkey (North Kurdistan) and has no affiliation with Syria.

[3] Although the pro-Barzani parties in ENKS (Syrian Kurdish National Assembly) did not welcome autonomy led by PYD (Democratic Union Party), currently all the Syrian Kurdish parties declared their support to it. The KRG President called on the international community to support Kobanî and other cantons. The KRG parliament already started sending humanitarian and armed support to Rojava.

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[4] Autonomy has been on the agenda of the Kurds since 2004, when the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan offered a political self-administration as solution of the Kurdish question and undemocratic nature of the Turkish governance. It has also been the most prominent solution offered by Öcalan in the negotiations restarted with the government in 2012. Despite the positive outcomes of the model in Rojava, Turkey does not show any sympathy to grant similar autonomy to its Kurds.

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