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**Intra-Kurdish Fragmentation?  
The Case of the Syrian Kurds**

Diplomová práce

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## **Annotation**

The discussion on the Kurdish question has often connected the Kurdish struggle to the idea of an independent Kurdish state. While there are significant external factors that inhibit the possibility of establishment of a common (pan)Kurdish political project, within this thesis I focus on the internal inhibitors - specifically, on intra-Kurdish fragmentation, with a focus on the case of the Syrian Kurds. The work presents three main aspects of Kurdish fragmentation - political, territorial, and cultural/linguistic. This fragmentation, as presented in the thesis, is a product of competing identities, interests, and future goals of various Kurdish actors. The purpose of the thesis is to offer a detailed and comprehensive analysis of disunity and existing cleavages within the Syrian Kurdish national movement. The thesis asserts that Kurdish infighting, rivalries, and competing parochial interests present a significant obstacle to the creation of a (pan)Kurdish national movement and, therefore, also to the goal of the establishment of an independent Kurdish political entity.

## **Anotace**

Téma kurdskej otázky býva často spájaná s možnosťou (ne)vytvorenia samostatného kurdskeho štátu. Existuje množstvo externých faktorov, ktoré sťažujú vznik a existenciu zjednoteného (pan)kurdskeho politického projektu; táto práca sa však sústreďuje na interné inhibítory, ktoré ovplyvňujú kurdske národné hnutie. Konkrétne sa jedná o otázku kurdskej vnútornej fragmentácie, znázornenej na prípade sýrskych Kurdov. Práca prezentuje tri hlavné aspekty vnútorného rozdelenia - politický aspekt, teritoriálny aspekt, a kultúrny/jazykový aspekt. Táto vnútorná fragmentácia je produktom konkurenčných identít, záujmov a cieľov medzi rôznymi kurdskými aktérmi. Zámerom tejto práce je poskytnutie komplexnej analýzy nejednoty a štiepenia v rámci sýrsko-kurdskeho národného hnutia. Práca konštatuje, že vnútro-kurdske konflikty, vzájomná rivalita, a konkurenčné záujmy predstavujú významnú prekážku na ceste k vytvoreniu (pan)kurdskeho národného hnutia a tým pádom aj na ceste k samostatnému kurdskému štátu.

## **Klíčová slova**

Kurdi, Sýrie, syrští Kurdi, fragmentace, kurdský nacionalismus, kurdská národní identita

## **Keywords**

Kurds, Syria, Syrian Kurds, fragmentation, Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish national identity

## **Název práce**

Fragmentace kurdské identity? Příklad syrských Kurdů.

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# 1. Introduction

The connection between what we can call the ‘Kurdish struggle’ is seldom disconnected from the topic of Kurdistan – an independent Kurdish state and the possibility of its future establishment. Rarely can we find a work on the topics that does not emphasize that, counting approximately 30 million and spread across the Middle Eastern region, the Kurds are the largest nation without its own state. With this claim come many questions but among them the central one – why is this so? This thesis aims to make a contribution in the study of Kurdish nationalism, national identity, and the intra-Kurdish fragmentation that greatly influences the Kurdish national project. Its main premise is finding the (in)validity in the proposed argument that the (Syrian) Kurds are so internally fragmented that the proposition of establishing an independent Kurdistan in the region is highly unlikely or even impossible at this point in time and the near future.

When looking from afar, there is a tendency to talk of the Kurds as a homogenous group with a collective goal to establish its own Kurdish state (Tugdar and Al 2018, 16). It will, hopefully, become evident throughout this thesis that this is far from the Kurdish reality on the ground. Not many studies focus specifically on the ‘domestic’ relationships within the Kurdish group or on the conflicts between various Kurdish ‘subgroups’, different articulations of ‘the’ Kurdish identity, and actors’ interests. This is especially true for the case of the Syrian Kurds that will be the focus of this thesis. Although the interest in the Kurds of Syria rose significantly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – notably after the beginning of the Syrian revolution and civil war in 2011 – the quantity of works available still lags behind other counterparts like the Kurdish minorities in Iraq or Turkey that have been studied for decades. The gradual surge in interest can be explained by the ‘awakening’ of the Syrian Kurds and the subsequent formation of a more visible and active Kurdish nationalist movement within the country; additionally, their pivotal role in the fight against the Islamic State brought the group international attention and support.

There are several reasons for the choosing of this topic – the perceived gap in literature on the topic is one of them, whether it concerns the Syrian Kurds or intra-Kurdish fragmentation. Secondly, the Syrian case is also interesting in that it combines elements from other internal conflicts and divergences, especially from Turkey and Syria – in this way, it serves as a smaller microcosm of the broader Kurdish issue. Thirdly, its relevance also lies in its connection to the ongoing Syrian civil war and the IS onslaught, both of which have been closely studied since their beginnings. Kurds have played a significant role in in the region and especially in the fight against the IS. Their relevance and visibility was also increased when they established a Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Syria, commonly called Rojava.

The thesis proposes 3 main lines of fragmentation that will serve as analytical categories for empirical data from the distant and recent history of the Kurdish nationalist movement(s) in Syria. They include political, territorial, and cultural and linguistic fragmentation – the focus will be mainly on the political fragmentation, as this category deeply influences the other categories as well. These concepts are introduced in the theoretical part of the thesis, together with essential theoretical background on Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish national identity. In the second part, empirical data and a general historical context will be provided with a focus on national identity and intra-Kurdish fragmentation. The main actors of the Kurdish political landscape are also introduced in this section. The following chapter offers an analysis of the collected empirical data and draws main conclusions from information provided in the previous chapters. This analysis is split into the 3 aforementioned categories. The thesis concludes with a summary of the main findings and names the most significant obstacles to intra-Kurdish unity.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Within this thesis, I would like to address the topic of Kurdistan, Kurdish identity and nationalism, especially with a focus on the case of the Kurds within Syria. While academic research on all things Kurdish has enjoyed significant attention from scholars of IR, several aspects remain, in my opinion, understudied – and among them is also the study of internal relationships and diversity within the Kurdish community which will be the focus of this thesis. Naturally, the study of ‘domestic’, internal relations of a group of people, their identity and the development of nationalism within such a group is not the topic most typical of international relations. However, I do believe that the Kurdish case has significant implications beyond its ‘domestic’ sphere for several reasons. Firstly, it shows the importance of understanding intra-group dynamics and their impact on their surroundings, whether they are local, regional, or even global. Secondly, the Kurdish case stands in the middle of a deeply complex region, crisscrossed by conflict and a multitude of varying agendas that have a serious impact on regional stability and global international arena. Thirdly, the ongoing Syrian civil war remains one of the most scrutinized conflicts which involves global and regional superpowers; despite this, the case of the Kurds – although still talked about – has often remained an afterthought in a broader IR analysis. This could be also said for the wider Middle Eastern region which continues to play a significant role in the realm of IR and remains a stage of volatility and constant change. Fourthly, the Kurdish case crosses several borders and states which inherently gives the issue a transnational aspect and highlights the importance of understanding the parts of the whole. Finally, the Kurdish nationalism’s claim to an independent Kurdish state has implications for the region and the international arena because such a development would fundamentally change the nature of current reality of IR – not only is it transformative of this reality, but it largely hinges on regional and international actors and the current context of the IR.

Although quality, in-depth literature on the topic of the Syrian Kurds and their identity exists, much of it pre-dates the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011. From among these academic works we can point out the comprehensive book of Jordi Tejel (2009) on the topic of history, politics and society of Syria's Kurds; Kerim Yildiz's 2005 book about 'the forgotten people' which offers a complex look at the positioning of the Syrian Kurds within the broader Kurdish community and an overview of their political and cultural rights within Syria; David Romano's 2006 book on the topic of the Kurdish nationalist movement; Jaffer Sheyholislami's book *Kurdish identity and its formation by the new media* was published in 2011. Highlights of the books published on the topic post-2011 include Harriet Allsopp's 2015 book that focuses largely on Kurdish and Syrian Kurdish political parties; Gunter's 2014 book presenting a holistic look at the past and the present realities of the Kurds in Syria; or Schmidinger's 2018 book which remains the most up-to-date examination of the standing of the Syrian Kurds in conflict and in peace.

The studies concerning the formation, development, and current state of Kurdish identity often focus on a particular state in which the Kurds constitute a minority population – most importantly Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Studies on the identity of Syrian Kurds are fewer than in the case of its counterparts; this remains true also in a broader sense of Kurdish studies as the Syrian Kurds were neglected in academic research in comparison with the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq, and even Iran. This development can be attributed mostly to the fact that the Kurds in Syria were forcefully assimilated into the majority society in the regime's pursuit of a "united" Syrian Arab Republic. The Syrian Kurds were also the ones without major mobilization and resistance to the regime because of their geographical fragmentation, lack of material or non-material resources, proper political representation, and strict assimilation policies put into force by the Syrian Ba'ath government from the 1960s onwards.

The study on the topic of Syrian Kurds evolved more in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the topic has come into global spotlight in 2004 after the Qamishli revolt and even more so after the Arab Spring uprisings in Syria in 2011 and subsequent start of the civil war which lasts until today. It is within these events that the Kurds of Syria have been able to find political outlets and win back some of their relinquished rights, including the right to a Kurdish government and autonomy in the northeast of Syria.

It can be argued that this civil conflict has constituted a seismic event for Syria and the Middle Eastern region which has resulted in many significant and previously unexpected changes for the Kurdish community within Syria and beyond. The mushrooming of literature on the topic of Syrian Kurds post-2011 seems to confirm this assertion; this thesis hopes to join in on the renewed interest in the topic and provide a more detailed and focused work on the topic of internal fragmentation within the Kurdish community in Syria. Additionally, the civil war presents a new set of challenges to the Syrian Kurdish community. As Bozarslan (2018, 8) writes, the place that the Kurds occupy and the problems they have to face in 2010s is much different from the issues of the 1980s or the 1990s. In spite of the many changes and the growth of pan-Kurdish sentiments, internal fragmentation continues to be a constant in the topic of Kurdish identity and remains a central point around which the developments of the Kurdish question occur.

## **2.1. Methodology**

The thesis' aim is to track and analyze intra-Kurdish fragmentation on the case of the Syrian Kurds. For this purpose, the text will focus on the topic of fragmentation, division, and cleavages within the Kurdish movement in Syria. Because of the involvement of other Kurdish groups in Syria (most prominently the Turkish and the Iraqi Kurds), the findings on Syrian Kurds can be illuminating even in connection with the broader, cross-border Kurdish

movement(s). There are 3 main theoretical categories that will be employed in the empirical part to structure the analysis of fragmentation into smaller and more comprehensible parts. The 3 categories are political, territorial, and cultural and linguistic fragmentation and are addressed in the theoretical part and then in the last chapter of the thesis.

The empirical information on the topic will be introduced throughout the empirical section and will be used as the source of analysis and inference. This thesis will utilize the case study method as its basis for the empirical and analytical part. This method allows a precise tailoring of the data collection and the design of the study so as to best fit the topic at hand; this is relevant because the topic of Kurdish fragmentation seldom stands at the center of the existing research on Kurds. In this way, the case study method allows us to holistically explore little-studied processes and offer possible answers to *how* or *why* questions (Meyer 2001, 330). Apart from this aspect, the studied case also fulfills other case study requirements: the inability to manipulate actors involved in the research, the case cannot be separated from its context because the context is relevant to the research, and the boundaries between context and the studied phenomenon are not clear (Baxter and Jack 2008, 545).

A case study is valuable in that it focuses on rigorous qualitative research and can enable us to ‘deconstruct’ and ‘reconstruct’ studied phenomena (Baxter and Jack 2008, 544). Because a case study is deeply rooted in the context of the studied topic, the empirical part of this thesis offers historical and contemporary context of the state of intra-Kurdish fragmentation. The empirical data was gathered mostly from secondary sources which included academic books, journals, but also articles reporting on significant events. The goal was to acquire information from as many sources on the topic as possible, so as to provide as objective, detailed and factual data and increase the credibility of the data. From this data, relevant information on fragmentation was filtered out and studied within a broader historical context. Firstly, the data gathering focused on the period after WW1, when the Syrian-Kurdish nationalism started to

form. This information provided historical context for further study of the post-2000 until 2018 period which presents the focal point of the thesis.

The case selected for this thesis is the case of the Syrian Kurds and their internal fragmentation. This selection reflected the lack of literature on the topic (especially in comparison with the Kurds of Iraq or Turkey), the contemporaneous nature of the issue, but also a certain specificity of the Syrian-Kurdish case which includes not only Syrian-Kurdish actors, but also features prominently the Kurdish movements from Turkey or Iraq. Furthermore, by studying the specific case of the Syrian Kurds, the gathered information and results of the analysis offer us an understanding of broader intra-Kurdish fragmentation. The thesis also points out several specificities of the Syrian case as they are rooted in the Syrian domestic context. However, it is important to note that while some of the findings can be applied to other Kurdish national movements, a study of one case will not allow for broad generalizability of the thesis' results (Meyer 2001, 333).

Needless to say, internal fragmentation is not the only explanation of the nonexistence of a unified Kurdish national movement and a possible common state project. It is not the aim of this thesis to assert that internal fragmentation and division is the be-all and end-all explanation for the continued fissures in the Kurdish national movement(s). The experiences of Kurds are also determined by other regional and international actors, regional and global context, geopolitical situation of the Kurdistan region, and many other factors. The purpose of this work is to elucidate intra-Kurdish relationships and identify whether existing fissures and cleavages present an obstacle to a united cooperation in pursuit of greater self-rule and autonomy.

## **2.2. Theories of nationalism**

The most well-known approaches to the study of nationalism can be split into three major groups – primordialist, ethnicist and constructivist. The primordialist approach to ethnicity stresses that distinct groups of people that share their culture, values, and history will naturally arrive at a “corresponding group consciousness” or a group identity which usually manifests itself in a “nationalist desire for a state” (Romano 2006, 5). Primordialist authors posit that nations can trace their existence back to pre-modern times and can thus claim that these nations are ahistorical and of an ancient origin (Popplewell 2017, 12). It can be argued that primordialism has lost influence in nationalist debates and is, nowadays, mainly used by nationalists themselves (ibid., 13).

The constructivist view of nationalism does not view the concept as objective – rather, they argue that it is an “imagined identity” that is typically formulated by political elites of the group in order to “further their instrumental goals” (ibid., 6). The constructivists do not offer clear definitions and who and what constitutes a nation; rather their focus is on the construction of such an “imagined political community” and creation of processes that are meant to mobilize and unite populations (Kaya 2012, 33). According to constructivist like Gellner or Hobsbawm, modern nations are constructed through processes that react to the advancements of Industrial Revolution (Popplewell 2017, 16). This is not to say that a nation couldn’t have existed in pre-modern times, but, in the minds of constructivists, this is not a necessary condition for a nation to develop. Connected to the ideas proposed by aforementioned constructivists is Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities in which he describes nations as imagined political sovereign communities (ibid., 20). The main difference lies in the different view on existence of such group identity – while primordialist believe that ethnicity is ancient, historically given and static to a large extent, constructivists disagree and postulate that this ethnic identity is created within a broader context and is subject to changes and different interpretations.

A subtler approach to nationalism that still retains some of primordialist claims is ethnicism or ethno-symbolism (Popplewell 2017, 14) which accepts references to history and to pre-modern origins of nations, but posits that nationalism in the sense we know it today is an invention of modernity. This third approach lies somewhere in between the two aforementioned theoretical approaches; while it takes into account the existence of objective factors, such as common language, culture, territory or others, it agrees that these ‘objective’ factors can be interpreted and constructed into a national identity differently by different people or within different contexts. This approach, therefore, lies somewhere in between the ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ views on ethnic identity presented by primordialists and instrumentalists, respectively.

In most approaches to the study of nationalism, there are several key dimensions mentioned: ethnicity, language, culture, territory, and religion are the most significant and numerous in their use (Kaya 2012, 34). Within this thesis, I understand Kurdish nationalism from the modernist perspective – therefore, I see Kurdish nation as a result of construction of a national identity by political elites and Kurdish nationalists.

### **2.2.1. Ethnicity and nationalism**

Ethnicity and nationalism are two concepts that are very closely related; both of these concepts are also contested and loaded with political and emotional meanings that further complicates our understanding of their interrelated relationship. In this thesis, I understand ethnic groups are groups of people connected to each other by a complex web of common traditions, historical descent and origin, territory, language, culture, or shared values – not all of these factors have to be present in all case and some may be more relevant than others in different contexts (Romano 2006, 5). Common perceptions of history – or founding myths – can be real or imagined; the key to their relevance is whether or not a group of people agree on and believe in them. Ethnicity is then very mythic and symbolic in character (O’Shea 2012, 36).

The ties between ethnicity and nationalism differ according to different authors. The main difference between ethnicities and nations, in the words of Calhoun (1993, 229), in “that the latter are envisioned as intrinsically political communities, as sources of sovereignty, while this is not the central definition of ethnicities.” Subsequently, he goes on to write that, “Perhaps most distinctively, nationalists commonly claim that that national identities ‘trump’ other personal or group identities.” (ibid.) Similarly, as it would be a great theoretical folly to equate nationalism with ethnicity, it is also imperative to recognize that ethnicity cannot be separated from nationalism, and vice versa (ibid., 235). Of course, it is important to note that this is a very simplified look at the relationship. However, for the purposes of the thesis, it will suffice.

## **2.3. Kurdish national identity**

### **2.3.1. Identity and the Self/Other dichotomy**

The self/other theoretical concept that is a firm part of constructivism in IR could be paraphrased into a simpler binary of ‘us versus them’. In the past decades, the concepts of identity, identity formation, and identity politics have all entered the IR field and have received considerable attention, especially from constructivist scholars (Bucher and Jasper 2016, 392). It is generally understood that identity of an actor is not fixed but is rather subject to continuous changes; it can also be articulated by different actors and contexts which further contributes to the flux of identity. Identity is, therefore, related to and formed on the basis of real-life practices (e.g. verbal or discursive) through which attitudes and outlooks on these “Others” are influenced.

This self/other concept is related to the process of identity formation through which in-group members differentiate and delineate their own identity in contrast to the perceived identity of the out-group. The construction of a national identity is intertwined with the establishment and articulation of differences between the group in question and other groups

with which it comes into contact; the “construction and articulation” of “Otherness” is a crucial part of national identity (Sheyholislami 2011, 71-72). In the case of the Kurds, one of these ‘Others’ is usually the dominant state in question with its restrictions and suppression of Kurdishness<sup>1</sup>, past or present. However, this identity construction usually entails multiple ‘Others’ – these include relations with other minorities or actors.

### **2.3.2. Kurdish national identity**

Much of the literature written on the Kurdish issue has been centered around the idea of a Kurdish identity and Kurdish nationalism, its creation and development. By Kurdish nationalism I understand the politics of the affirmation of Kurdish national identity (Vali 1998, 83). Although there exist primordialist views on Kurdish ethnic identity among Kurdish nationalists, I understand Kurdish nationalism as a product of modernity and a result of its construction by political elites in the environment of creation of new nation-states in the world in late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and its subsequent development in these nation states.

Kurdish nationalism, in the modern sense of the word, appeared for the first time in the beginning of the 20th century, most prominently after the First World War, mainly due to the emergence of new states in the region and the prominence of nationalisms and state-building at this point in time. At the root of this phenomenon, together with the ongoing European nation-building processes, was also the opposition of the Kurdish people to be incorporated and assimilated into other nations (Sheyholislami 2011, 53). In the post-war world, nation-state was accepted as the new political norm and after a surge of new nation-states being created, popular nationalist movements emerged. This happened even in cases where ‘proper’ state institutions didn’t exist among sub-state nationalists – according to Kaya (2012, 37) this would

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<sup>1</sup> When talking of ‘Kurdishness’ within this thesis, I am referencing Kurdish national identity which relates to the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the existence of a Kurdish people.

qualify such cases as the Kurdish case to be studied with the help of the theoretical lens of ‘nationalism’.

As is the case with nationalist discourses, the making of Kurdish identity is tightly connected to the history of the Kurds and the historical region of Kurdistan. Within these studies, Kurdish identity is seen through “a shared culture, language, territory, set of symbols, memory and experience, and future political aspirations” (Sheyholislami 2011, 47). This can also be seen in the many historical accounts of the Kurdish struggle, mainly analyzing the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. As was pointed out by Sheyholislami (ibid.), nationalist narratives have a tendency to historicize the Kurdish nation.

The Kurds, numbering around 35 million worldwide, are the largest minority within the Middle East that does not have its own state (MacDonald 2007, 5). This ethnic group has been at the center of conflict for hundreds of years, between empires, states, and other ethnic groups – and remains in this position until this day (ibid., 3). As writes Tezur (2019, 1), “the concept of defeat was central to Kurdish political and literary imaginations throughout the twentieth century.” Apart from the 4 states most closely associated with the Kurdish people – Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey – there are also pockets of Kurds in what is called the Greater Kurdistan region which includes also Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, as well as other diasporas in Europe, Russia, Lebanon, or North America.

A significant amount of the identity-making of the Kurdish people has relied on myth-making (Sheyholislami 2011, 48). The most popular myth, on which many accounts of Kurdish identity are based on, was that of belonging to an ancient people, the Medes and their Median Empire; after its fall, the Kurds became parts of other empires and political structures within the region, most notably the Arab Caliphate from 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century and the Mongol Empire, from 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century (Sheyholislami 2011, 48). Afterward, the Kurdish people were under the rule of the Ottomans and Persians – and while the Kurdish people enjoyed autonomy, this

never materialized into an independent Kurdistan being formed (ibid., 50). After the First World War, the Kurdistan region was meant to gain independence according to the Treaty of Sevres in 1920; however, the revised Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 didn't include such a provision and rather split the region among several countries – Iraq and Syria (both under mandatory rule), Turkey, Iran, and, partially, also the USSR (ibid.). While the Kurdish people were divided in their past and ruled by non-Kurdish authorities, this split resulted in creating a big gap between each Kurdish 'subgroup' – be it politically, linguistically, territorially, or culturally (ibid.).

The different experience of Kurdish people in different nations states greatly influenced the development of Kurdish nationalism(s) which developed at different pace, in different conditions, under the influence of different actors. This diversity of the "Other" has influenced the fragmented national identity of the Kurds which was underscored by the transnational character of the Kurdish struggle (Vali 1998, 83). Both of these factors served as roadblocks to the establishment of a truly common and unifying Kurdish national movement. In the words of Vali (ibid.), "Deprived of its structural, political and cultural unity it [the Kurdish national movement] is reduced to local autonomist movements driven with parochial interests and clientelist relations." For Vali, this weakness lies in the absence of a mature Kurdish civil society which is further undermined by the political parties that profit from this weakness of the civil society (ibid., 84).

Although the question of the creation of a common Kurdish state has been a common thread in discourses by Kurdish nationalist, a "Kurdistan" as an independent state in the modern sense of the word has never existed. First, it was divided by the Ottoman empire, then the Persian empire; after WW1 Kurdistan was split into several mandate areas administered by the League of Nations. At the same time, new states were being formed in the region post-WW1, Kurdish nationalism was still in its nascence. In the atmosphere after WW1 when new nation states emerged in the Kurdistan region and beyond - together with the French and British

mandates – their existence relied on the uniformity of identity in the state which was presumed in their respective constitutions which necessarily implied the assertion of this uniform identity on the populations within the new states (Vali 1998, 87). This assertion of a unified identity often took form of political violence against parts of the population that did not fit this presumption; its result was also marginalization of other ethnicities which often relied on tradition in opposition to modernity that is connected with the modern nation state (ibid., 88). Unless members of different ethnicities and culture renounced these identities, they were excluded from the political and civic life. What followed – and what furthered the development of nationalism among Kurds – were struggles between the newly-formed states that were dominated by Arab, Persian and Turkish ethnic group and the minority Kurdish populations (Tezcur 2019, 1). This struggle remains to this day a central part of Kurdish nationalism and can be seen as detrimental to the shaping of Kurdish identity. As Vali (1998, 83) asserts, it was precisely this denial of Kurdish ethnic identity by its “Others” (in this case, the dominant states) that helped shape the processes by which Kurdish nationalism was born and constructed. However, the official nationalist discourses of the majority population towards the Kurds varied in each of the countries which contributed to the fragmentation of the Kurdish national discourses and therefore also the Kurdish national identity (ibid.).

Furthermore, as was mentioned previously, ethnicity is far from the only factor that determines a person’s identity – usually, people will have more identities of varying intensity depending on their class, occupation, religion, or place of living. However, when ethnicity is strongly politicized, it can dominate the other identities in a way that makes them secondary to ethnicity (Romano 2006, 8). The relationship between various identities is also interactive and dynamic, and these identities can mold each other continuously (Tezcur 2009, 8). In each of us there is a multitude of identities - thus, the Kurdish identity has had to compete with other tribal, religious, or class identities (Romano 2006, 101) which is also exacerbated by the existing

fragmentation of the Kurdish group. Furthermore, assimilation into respective dominant cultures was also a possibility. Even though there was a sense of belonging among the Kurdish people (most significantly, the Kurdish elites) that we could find evidence for as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot talk of a “politicized ethnic” identity or a “pan-Kurdish” identity until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ibid., 102). This politicized ethnicity developed together with modernization and urbanization that allowed for a quicker and more efficient communication that also reached ‘average’ Kurds, rather than just the elites; repression, attempts at assimilation, and conflicts between the Kurds and their ‘Others’ also moved the Kurdish people to possess a more politicized ethnic identity (Romano 2006, 117). It is always important to understand ethnic identity in its historical context and accept that it is dynamic and thus, susceptible to change. It is also necessary to point out that just because a person identifies as Kurdish, this does not mean that they are a nationalist – however, in the Kurdish political arena, the question of self-determination has been a central point that has undoubtedly become a significant part of the Kurdish identity (O’Shea 2012, 128-129).

### **2.3.3. Kurdistan and its role in Kurdish national identity**

Undoubtedly, national identity is inseparably linked with territory or a ‘homeland’. The connection between Kurdish nationalism and the creation of an independent Kurdish state has been made almost automatically when talking of the Kurdish issue. This is not only because such territorial claims and a subsequent redrawing of maps are the most visible aspects of Kurdish nationalism; but also, because many Kurdish nationalists often make the connection between the Kurdistan territory – its historical significance, its mountains, its cultural importance – and the Kurdish way of life and therefore connect this territory to the nation-state ideal of one nation – one state (Kaya 2012, 26). Even in spite of the many social and political changes that have occurred within the region, it seems that, among the Kurdish nationalists, the spatial understanding of Kurdistan remains fixed (O’Shea 2012, 7). Nevertheless, Kurdistan

remains “the most obvious and important aspect of Kurdish nationalism” (Kaya 2012, 104). Three general assumptions underlie the nationalist relationship to Kurdistan – the population living in the Kurdish region is overwhelmingly Kurdish; that the geographical region of Kurdistan is clearly defined; and that Kurdistan was once united in history and it’s the nationalists’ goal to renew this unity (ibid., 105).

The Kurdistan region lies at the heart of an important but divided and complex area in the broader Middle East region; it is ethnically and geographically divided between 4 states and has served as a buffer zone between them and other regional powers (O’Shea 2012, 9). The idea of the creation of an independent Kurdistan the way it is claimed by Kurdish nationalists seems, at this point in time at least, almost outrageous. However, its importance and significance in how the Kurds view and define themselves remains; although it may be more of a “cultural abstract rather than a political state”, the idea of an independent Kurdish state is important in the mythology of Kurdish nationalism (O’Shea 2012, 11). The idea of Kurdistan serves to further distinguish the Kurdish people from their surrounding neighbors – and further resist possible assimilation into the majority societies of the region by creating a separate identity underscored by a separate geographical region. Additionally, Kurdistan occupies several peripheral regions that are heavily economically dependent on outside help; this opposition to Kurdish marginalization (now not only political, social, and cultural, but also geographic and economic) further fuels the Kurdish liberation struggle (O’Shea 2012, 20). While Kurdistan’s position at the margins of other states but also at frontiers to other regions remains an important part of the identity-building for the Kurdish people and likely, its biggest obstacle as well.

#### **2.4. Fragmentation of Kurdish identity**

While common history and common myths are extremely important to nationalist movements, it is also imperative that these movements look to the future in a hope of realizing

a ‘utopist’ vision. In this utopist vision of a nation, internal differences are often – understandably – downplayed while external differences with other groups or the group’s ‘Others’ are amplified (O’Shea 2012, 140). Of course, internal differences between a people are to be presupposed and must be seen as a natural occurrence – because of the multiplicity of identities each person contains, it is virtually impossible to find a truly internally homogenous and undifferentiated group. However, I argue in this thesis that the internal differences between the Kurdish community are too significant for a successful nationalist, truly cross-border and pan-Kurdish movement to surface any time soon.

National identity is in great part built on the dialectic of differences between the nation and its Others; it is always in flux and open to interpretation from within or from outside of the group (Vali 1998, 85). These “Others” varied considerably in each of the Arab-majority countries which contain Kurdish minorities which, in turn, influenced the Kurdish nationalism(s) and its development(s) differently in each country (Vali 1998, 83). At the same time, however, this diversity of “Others” further highlights the transnational character of the Kurdish struggle – in the face of favorable regional conditions, this transnationality and the importance of resistance to the Other – wherever it may be – may eclipse the political and cultural fragmentation (ibid.) We’ve seen this possibility several times; most recently, in the military cooperation between KDP and PKK to liberate the city of Sinjar and its Yazidi population. However, such action is only a glimpse into the possible future and the creation of a cohesive pan-Kurdish identity remains more of a theoretical possibility than a realistic plan for the future (Vali 1998, 83).

Vali (ibid.) sees several limitations to such a transnational development, namely in the underdeveloped social structure, relative weakness of the higher urban class, and the power of tribalism in rural regions. Because of these factors, and the realities described in the previous paragraph, what could be a pan-Kurdish transnational movement remains local and divided

political movements that follow their own partial and clientelist interests (Vali 1998, 83). For Vali, the main reason behind the inability of Kurdish national movements to overcome these limitations is the weakness of Kurdish civil society that is unable to create a nationalist culture that would be able to withstand the dominating force of the other, Arab-majority nationalisms (ibid.). Vali defines an active civil society as the “condition of possibility” in creating and advocating for national sovereignty; however, the respective nationalist movements among Kurds are unable and unwilling to support such developments (ibid.). Rather, their actions and self-interest only further affirms the fragmented nature of the Kurdish identity. In this way, they can be then used by other regimes and political elites that exploit this fragmentation, either as a tool to combat other national governments or the unity of the Kurdish people itself (ibid., 84). The internal structures of movements also have impact on how states in question treat these movements; especially internal divisions have an impact what concessions governments make (Cunningham 2011, 275). Because internally fragmented movements struggle with presenting a unified, cohesive strategy, states often exploit these fragmentations in “divide and conquer” strategies (ibid.). Movements that are internally divided thus usually do not present as significant challenge to the governments in question like united movements that are able to capitalize on their collective strength and power (ibid, 276). Furthermore, such fragmented movements will have an issue with credibility because of their inability to speak on behalf of the group as a whole (ibid., 277). Furthermore, the political elites of Kurdish autonomist/secessionist movements often create alliances with other states in pursuit of legitimization and furthering of their personal goals, even if creating such an alliance further impedes the enhancement of a wider pan-Kurdish identity and a chance for an independent Kurdistan to be created (Freij 1998, 20). Additionally, these weaknesses can be exploited by other Kurdish parties as well, only further affirming the fragmented nature of the Kurdish nationalist movement. These developments are not new; rather they present a continuation of a

historical ethos of the Kurdish people – fragmented and standing in the face of a stronger opponent (ibid., 85).

In the next sub-chapters, I explore the topic of fragmented Kurdish identity. I focus on the main points of division and present the general contentious areas that contribute to the internal fragmentation of the Kurdish community. This fragmentation occurs across several lines. It can refer to the territory of Kurdistan which spans 4 states – Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria (not including the numerous diasporas spread all over the world), or linguistic and religious internal differences, or the division between numerous Kurdish political parties and the Kurdish political elites. While the arguments for the creation of Kurdistan have been ongoing for decades, we can argue that such a development is impossible without the existence of a strong pan-Kurdish identity which would act as a glue between the segmented Kurdish population spread across 4 independent states. While authors concerning themselves with the topic of Kurdish nationalism are divided in many respects, the majority of them agrees that the Kurdish identity is deeply fragmented (Sheyholislami 2011, 55).

Of course, it is very necessary to point out that there is a multiplicity of reasons that impede the creation of a pan-Kurdish identity and furthermore, the creation of an independent Kurdish state. The study of internal fragmentation within the Kurdish group is just a small piece of the overall puzzle. Even if such fragmentation never existed there is a multitude of other hurdles that the Kurdish community would have to face: the geopolitics of the region, the standing of the international community on the issue, the domestic situation and political makeup within the respective states' regimes, ongoing conflicts – domestic or international, the recognition and establishment of state institutions in an oppressive regime, and many other factors.

#### **2.4.1. Political Fragmentation.**

As Romano (2006, 103) writes, “the issue of linguistic, religious, and cultural divisions amongst the Kurds is extremely political.” Similarly, O’Shea (2012, 131) writes, “the political is rarely separated from the cultural in the Kurdish worldview.” Additionally, the lack of a pan-

Kurdish sentiment until the 1980s/1990s and continues partisan infighting contributed to further fragmentation of the group. Nationalist discourses that tend to overlook the internal differences within the group may also contribute to its further fragmentation as they do not acknowledge the important differences within the Kurds themselves.

The lack of unity among Kurds is not a new phenomenon. For example, in 1933, the absence of internal unity within the Kurdish people was used as a reason for Iraq to step back from a plan that granted the Iraqi Kurds autonomy (Sheyholislami 2011, 65). The Iraqi Kurds are also the prime example of Kurdish infighting – so much so, that the two leading political parties, KDP and PUK, waged a civil war against each other in the 1990s. These internal splits result from different visions of the Kurdish future and ideologies, and are further exacerbated by tribalism, factionalism, class differences or regional differences (ibid.). Underlying these issues is the absence of cross-border pan-Kurdish identity which in turn creates factionalist divides between the political elites.

One of the biggest and most significant instances of intra-Kurdish rivalry could be seen in the strained relationship between two Iraqi political organizations, the KDP and the PUK, with power struggles ongoing since the 1960s (Tezcur 2019, 4). This relationship has sometimes even erupted into armed clashes, most prominently seen in the civil war in the mid-1990s. Even though a tacit alliance of mutual co-existence and respect has been in place, the ongoing rivalry could be once again seen in the unsuccessful 2017 independence referendum in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. After a successful takeover of several Iraqi cities in 2014, in the face of a crumbling Iraqi army, the emboldened Masoud Barzani, KDP's leader, decided to call for an independence referendum (Tezcur 2019, 5). The views of other Iraqi Kurdish politicians on this move varied – especially within the PUK party where many disagreed with the vision of independent Kurdistan because of the possibly unstable future this could bring to the state (ibid.). The central position of Kirkuk – a town conquered in 2014 – was lost due to an

agreement between PUK officers and Iraqi security forces and in result, the independence referendum was jeopardized. This example was used to illustrate the breadth of the divide between some Kurdish political parties and showcases that, even after an armed conflict in its past, the two most important Iraqi-Kurdish parties are still unable to coexist in a mutually non-disruptive way and be able to share power in a sensible way. Kurdish political parties have often viewed each other as rivals that are not to be trusted; the main challenge to a pan-Kurdish movement is not only the different interpretations of how a Kurdistan should look like but also power struggles to see who comes out on top as the leading party of such a movement.

Another significant roadblock to unity within the Kurdish nationalist movements is the distrustful and rivalrous relationship between two of the most politically active Kurdish subgroups – the Turkish and the Iraqi Kurds, and their respective parties, the PKK and the aforementioned KDP and PUK. This cleavage is best visualized by their two leaders, the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, and the KDP leader Massoud Barzani. However, behind these two leaders are many tribes, clans, and their leaders who all have a stake in the political outcomes to the Kurdish question. This fragmentation can be best seen along these clan lines. However, while there are many politically active and influential tribes in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, Syria's tribes are not as numerous or active in the political landscape. Nevertheless, the support of tribes is crucial to political parties and their leaders because they still possess power, connections, and respect of the members of their respective tribe. One of the most illustrious cases of tribal fragmentation can be seen in the Iraqi Kurdistan, between the Barzani (KDP) and the Talabani (PUK) clans. The existence of numerous clans also contributes not only to political fragmentation (as tribal leaders choose who they and their tribe want to support) but also to cultural, linguistic, and territorial fragmentation as they separate the Kurdish people into smaller 'pockets' that differentiate them from other tribes and clans. This fragmentation can concern not only their political opinions, but also the style of dress, religious belonging,

customs and traditions, as well as territorial delineation of the tribes' borders. This further separates the Kurdish people as a whole into smaller, autonomous components which complicate further integration into a united Kurdish national movement.

The two abovementioned parties (KDP and PUK) promote different ideologies and different interpretations of Kurdish identity. While the PKK focuses on the establishment of “democratic confederalism”, a non-statist ideology that promotes grassroots democracy, the Iraqi Kurds present a more traditional statist ideology that promotes federalization and, eventually, the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. These ideologies are also highly influential on the whole of Kurdish population. One of the best examples where this influence can be seen – Syria – will be analyzed in this thesis as it presents a sort of a ‘battleground’ between these two Kurdish camps. The common history of PKK and KDP begins in Iraqi Kurdistan where the PKK was founded; however, the relationship between the two parties started deteriorating in the 1980s and strained relations continue to this day (Tezcur 2019, 5). The power struggle between them “demonstrates how strategic organizational interests typically prevail over common ethnic identity” (ibid.). Main points of contention – apart from the aforementioned ideologies – are centered around the parties’ relationship to the Turkish government – while the PKK is engaged in an open conflict with the regime, the Iraqi Kurdistan has generally been trying to stay on the good side of the Turks. Coupled with this conflict is also a fight for the leadership of the Kurdish people. This further illustrates the fact that intra-Kurdish rivalries have been much more common than cooperation based on common ethnic identity or Kurdish nationalism (ibid.).

Furthermore, the development of a modern pan-Kurdish nationalist movement is impeded by the importance of traditional power structures, such as tribalism and landlordism. Tribal structure of the society among Kurds is very much tied to the Kurdistan territory and has played a role in creating a common sense of belonging between Kurds, long before Kurdish

nationalism emerged (Kaya 2012, 106). Although there have been manifestations of unity and of the strengthening of pan-Kurdish identity, family and tribe are still strong – and for many, especially in the rural regions, still remain the primary source of identity (Freij 1998, 21). However, in general, we can say that tribal divisions are much weaker now due to centralized government control of the territory, land reforms, urbanization, and immigration, although some urban/rural sentiments are still present in the Kurdish society (Kaya 2012, 106).

#### **2.4.2. Territorial Fragmentation.**

Previously, I have mentioned the importance of territoriality – or the ‘homeland’ – to nationalist movements. This is no different in the Kurdish case which is centered around the idea of creating a common independent state that would enable the Kurds to live emancipated lives as rightful citizens in their own country. This common territory does not only present a historical right of the Kurds but also a construction which produces common solidarity and unity, all the while connecting the people with the homeland (Zeynep 2012, 26). In this way, the map of Kurdistan serves less as a realistic, achievable goal and more as a tool of Kurdish nationalism to garner support and sympathy for the Kurdish struggle.

As was mentioned previously, the Kurdistan region is territorially fragmented. This is not only because of the post-1923 split into newly-formed countries, but also by the landlocked, mountainous region that the Kurds inhabit. The Kurdish people have a strong connection to this terrain as is evident by the Kurdish proverb, “the Kurds have no friends but the mountains” (Gunter 2004, 197). The mountains have played a significant part in the creation of a common Kurdish culture but at the same time they are seen as a geographic limitation to Kurdish unity – with a terrain so rugged, “pockets” of people tend to form that are, to a large extent, isolated from each by these natural barriers. In this way, the mountains complicate communication between the Kurds and contribute to forming smaller groups of people all with differing

dialects, culture, and religions (Sheyholislami 2011, 56). Furthermore, in addition to the natural barriers, the Kurds encounter man-made borders which also impede the creation of a broader, cross-border identity.

The Kurdistan region that Kurdish nationalists lays claim to is, naturally, important not only to the Kurds but also to the states which share this territory with the Kurds; not only do they act as a natural protective barrier in the chaotic region filled with mutual animosity, they also occupy territory that is rich in oil. Furthermore, the 4 mentioned states also view the borders as existentially important and the potential loss of the Kurdish areas is seen as attacking the foundations and ‘spatial identity’ of the states in question (Sheyholislami 2011, 56).

#### **2.4.3. Cultural and Linguistic Fragmentation.**

The cultural fragmentation of the Kurdish people has both internal and external sources. While previously I talked of territorial fragmentation – which significantly contributes to the fragmentation of the Kurdish culture as well – the position and policies of the 4 dominant states have also hugely contributed to the different developments of each subgroup’s culture (Sheyholislami 2011, 57). This latter point is evident in the arguments of Abbas Vali (1998), who claims that the Kurdish identity is always relational and has developed only in relation to its Other – in this case, the dominant state culture. Since the Other is in the case of the Kurdish issue always different in each dominant country, it goes without saying that the relevant Kurdish cultures have been changed in different ways.

One of the most prominent signs of cultural fragmentation is the high number of different religions practiced by the Kurds and the religious sects that have been formed throughout history. Majority of the Kurdish people – around 85% - are Sunni Muslim with most of these believers believing in Sufism. There are Shi’a Muslims, predominantly in Iran and Iraq and also a number of Christians, Jews, and Kurd-specific religions like Yezidism or Yarsanism (O’Shea 2012, 136). Additionally, there exists a number of sects that are of Kurdish origin

(O'Shea 2012, 22-29). For example, an internal conflict between the majority Sunni and minority Shi'ite Kurds has resulted in a sort of 'schism' within the Kurdish group – rather than support a majority Sunni Kurdish movement, the majority of Shi'ite Kurds has rather decided to side with the Shi'ite Iranian government (Sheyholislami 2011, 58). It is evident from this example that the internal differences within the group do not represent only 'diversity' (which is to be expected within any other communities, to different extents) but disagreement on the most basic level that creates a cleavage within the group that inhibits any sort of unity or further development of a pan-Kurdish identity. However, it is important to note that while religious differences do exist within the Kurdish people, they are usually not detrimental enough in the Kurdish nationalist struggle which is very secular. While religion is important to many Kurds and sheiks of various branches of faith have played important roles in the Kurdish struggle, Kurds pride themselves on being able to claim an identity that is religiously tolerant and is able to transcend religion in this way (O'Shea 2012, 136).

The Kurdish language has stood at the forefront of many discussions on the topic of Kurdish identity and it has also been the reason for many arguments. Many theorists of nationalism (e.g. Smith or Anderson) prescribe a very important role to language – it is often viewed as the basis of the nation, going as far as to claim that “nation is conceived by language and not by blood” (O'Shea 2012, 133). This position is also related to a narrative of “one nation, one language”; in this vein, some Kurdish nationalists claim that the Kurdish speak with only one language and refuse to acknowledge possible linguistic fragmentation. If these nationalists do admit to existence of a variety of Kurdish languages, they often claim they are mutually intelligible, further fueling the conversation on Kurdish language(s) and widening the divide already present (O'Shea 2012, 134).

However, others claim that the fragmentation of the language is easily evident (Sheyholislami 2011, 60). There are two main languages used by the Kurds – Sorani and Kurmanji, and in addition, there is a plethora of regional dialects, many of which aren't mutually intelligible. Sheyholislami (ibid.) presents two cleavages within the language – firstly, different dialects and speech groups and secondly, different written scripts. While many of the dialects can be understood by speakers of other dialects, there are also cases where the language is not mutually intelligible (as is the case with Sorani and Kurmanji, the two most widely-used languages); similarly, not all of the languages and dialects are standardized which further impedes unity on the linguistic front (ibid.).

Not only is linguistic fragmentation evident in the existence of several languages/dialects, it can also be seen in the social and political arena. As an example, Sorani has been the main language taught to Kurds, even in regions where Kurmanji has had a long tradition (O'Shea 2012, 134). Furthermore, this linguistic divide has also translated into the political scene – most Kurmanji speakers tend to support Barzani's KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party), while most Sorani speakers are supporters of the late Talabani's PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) (ibid.).

#### **2.4.4. Strengthening of a Pan-Kurdish Identity?**

Some authors have suggested that, in spite of the previously described fragmentation, a stronger pan-Kurdish identity has begun to emerge from the mid-1990s onwards (Sheyholislami 2011, 68). One of the first, big signs of such a sentiment showed in 1999, after the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Abudallah Öcalan was kidnapped. Demonstrations against this action shortly occurred not only in Turkey, but also in Iraq, Iran, and Syria; such collective action was previously extremely rare. Similar occurrences have happened since; for example, on the day that Masoud Barzani, a prominent Iraqi Kurdish politician, was named president of Kurdistan in Iraq (Sheyholislami 2011, 69).

Similarly, a rare coordination between the KDP and the PKK could be seen in the wake of the Islamic State and, particularly, the mass killings and enslavement of a Kurdish religious group, the Yazidis. This coordination could be best seen in their military cooperation with the support of the US during the liberation of the city of Sinjar in December 2014 and November 2015 (Tezcur 2019, 4). Even though this cooperation was short-lived and limited to the liberating military campaign, it showed the possibility and ability of the two biggest inter-Kurdish rivals to co-operate in face of what is perceived a common threat. The pan-Kurdish sentiment could also be seen in the fact that a Turkish and an Iraqi Kurdish organization came together to fight for Syrian Kurds.

What is to be seen behind such an outburst of pan-Kurdish sentiments? Sheyholislami (2011, 69-70) claims that, apart from the development of new communication technologies, it was the ‘awakening’ of the Syrian Kurds in the early 2000s and the cost of conflict (human or otherwise) the Kurds waged against the respective governments that enabled and supported the growing contact and solidarity within the Kurdish people. Together with the advancement of new media, such as satellite television, the Internet and the relatively recent rise of social media, many authors find it possible to argue that the Kurdish people are becoming more aware of their pan-Kurdish identity.

### **3. Kurdish Nationalism and the Syrian Kurds**

While the study of the Kurdish people has been extensive, it is the case of the Syrian Kurds that has suffered the most in the number of publications or general interest especially in comparison to Kurdish minorities in Iraq, Turkey, or even Iran. Historically, the research on the Kurds in Syria has enjoyed more attention from the academic community since the 1990s and particularly since the 2004 Qamishli uprising that shone a spotlight on the standing of the Kurds in Syria and highlighted the questions about the Kurdish issue in Syria and the broader region (Tejel 2009, 1). There are several reasons for this ‘inattention’ – the population of Syrian Kurds was either thought to be marginal or one that could easily assimilate into its Arab surroundings without developing a stronger sense of nationalism; at the same time, many scholars studying Syria or the broader region often overlooked the position of the Kurds in these parts of the region because of their position on the margins of the more visible issues within Middle Eastern Studies (ibid., 2). Another reason why Kurdish studies<sup>2</sup> have been marginalized can be found in the strong opposition of the states in question (Turkey, Syria, Iran, and throughout history, also Iraq) to Kurds and their distinctive identity being viewed as legitimate topic for scholarly inquiry (Klein 2010, 231). Hence, the collection of primary data for research on the ground has been complicated. Together with the unwillingness of the authorities, conflicts also impede the collection of relevant and timely data – this is especially true for Syria which has been involved in multiple violent conflicts with multiple opponents. Additionally, the Kurdish people in Syria often weren’t recognized as a distinct ethnicity – rather, they were blended in with the general Syrian population as a result of the Syrian regime’s campaign

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<sup>2</sup> Kurdish studies refers to a multidisciplinary academic field that concerns itself with studying ‘Kurdishness’ and the historical evolution of a distinctive nationalism among Kurds. In effect, the existence of a scholarly field has, in a way, legitimized Kurdish nationalism by studying the Kurds as a people, the possibility of an independent Kurdish state and Kurdish ‘statelessness’, or relationship between the state and the Kurds as an ethnic minority (Klein 2010 231).

against *fitna*<sup>3</sup> that stripped thousands of Kurds of citizenship in 1962 or forcefully Arabized the Kurdish regions of Syria in an effort to create a unitary Syrian nation state (Tejel 2009, 2).

Within this thesis, I will study the fragmentation of the Kurdish population within Syria and analyze these findings to assess whether the results could be applicable to the broader Kurdish issue. The Syrian Kurdish case can also be seen as a ‘microcosm’ of the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East as the two main opponents – the Turkish (PKK) and the Iraqi (KDP, PUK) Kurds – play significant roles in influencing the lives and the political landscape of Syrian Kurds. In the first part, I introduced the theoretical background and methodology, as well as a brief context on Kurdish fragmentation as studied by other authors. A classification of four types of fragmentation was introduced, which will be addressed in the empirical analysis.

The following part will take a more specific form and focus on the study of Kurds in Syria. It will present a condensed historical context of Kurds in Syria and the evolution of Kurdish nationalism within this group, together with the establishment and development of political movements and parties. This part will also present the main political parties that played a significant role in the formation of Kurdish national identity in Syria. Afterward, I present a more detailed timeline of events starting from the Qamishli uprising of 2004 up until 2018 during which I focus on the main points of cleavage, growing fragmentation of the Syrian-Kurdish political landscape and fundamental differences between these actors.

It is important to note that while this thesis refers to fragmentation and internal division within the Kurdish groups with a focus on Kurds in Syria, this does not mean that all differences are meant to signify division and inability to co-operate – after all, it would be impossible to find a similar group that would be truly homogenous. The Kurdish people are a heterogeneous

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<sup>3</sup> *Fitna* – This term comes from Islam and has many meanings – unrest, rebellion, division, and others. Within this context the term *fitna* is understood as ‘division of the society’ of which the Kurds were often accused by the Syrian regime, mainly because of their claim to a national distinctiveness that distinguished them from the majority Arab society. For most of independent Syria’s history, it was the goal of the ruling regime to establish a strong nation-state that gradually relied more and more on (pan)Arabism as a source of its unity.

group which includes a number of dialects, religions, and identities. It is the aim of this thesis to study whether these existing differences within the group are significant enough so as to be understood as a reason for the group's inability to establish an independent Kurdish state.

The proposed thesis makes references to Kurdistan, or an independent Kurdish state, and tries to answer whether such entity could be established in the context of historical and contemporary context. However, it is very important to point out that while the thesis talks of an independent Kurdistan, this does not mean that all of the actors studied in this analysis proclaim the desire or the goal of independence through a classical 'state' model. Specifically, this point relates to the Turkish PKK, the Syrian PYD, and other PKK-affiliated groups that, instead of independence, call for a "democratic confederation" to be created that does not involve secessionist claims (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Within this thesis, Kurdistan is studied as a possibility of future development in the Kurdish question – in whatever form it could take - and one that has been in the center of the conversation on Kurdish self-governance.

Furthermore, it is crucial to stress that the proposed thesis is not to be seen as the ultimate answer to the question of Kurdistan and its establishment. While significant fragmentation plays an important role in the inability to create a common pan-Kurdish national identity and develop a common entity based on Kurdish self-rule, other significant factors are also at play. There is a myriad of realities, actors, and relations between them that all significantly influence the position and state of Kurds in the broader international arena. Internal fragmentation is an important but only a partial aspect impacting the outcome(s) of the 'Kurdish question' and it is not the goal of this thesis to claim otherwise. Although this thesis concerns itself with the study of intra-Kurdish differences, it is important to highlight that the

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<sup>4</sup> While in the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK waged a 'national liberation struggle' in an effort to establish an independent Turkish state within the framework of Marxism, it changed its ideology after the capture of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, to a project of 'radical democracy' (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 1-2). Democratic confederalism, a crucial concept of 'radical democracy', refers to a bottom-up, grassroots democracy which, in theory, grants its citizens the power to rule themselves. 'Radical democracy' is posited as a non-statist ideology that rejects the ideals of sovereignty, nation state, or national borders (ibid.).

majority of these differences are set within particular contexts that, in reality, cannot be separated from one another. These include geopolitical realities, relationships between various involved actors that have been shaped through their interactions throughout history, exclusion from international institutions and the wider international arena, lack of significant support from relevant international actors, and others.

### **3.1. Historical background**

#### **3.1.1. The French Mandate**

After WW1, the Kurdish people within what is now Syria were under the mandate administration of the French which lasted until 1943 (with the last French troops leaving the country in 1946) when an independent Syria and Lebanon were created. According to the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, an autonomous Kurdistan was to be established in the aftermath of WW1 – nonetheless, this changed in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 when the borders of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq were delineated to separate the Kurdish population into several new nation states to be created. Many Kurdish nationalists still see this as a significant slight against the Kurdish people and “accuses the West of having prevented the formation of a Kurdish state” (Schmidinger 2019, 38). Furthermore, it is also evident that the Kurds were thought of as a distinct ethnic group to be separated from its neighbors through the creation of a Kurdish state which can be seen as a legitimization of the idea of a Kurdish state. However, it must be said that the idea of Kurdistan was, at the time, in its infancy and the possibility of its creation was more of an intellectual project of a select few of the Kurdish elite and wasn’t supported by a broader popular nationalist movement (Schmidinger 2018, 38).

The French Mandate, created to ease transitions after the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, was supposed to be an interim governance structure that was intended to enable the development of an independent Syrian state, its institutions and political elites under the

protection of the League of Nations that was meant to spread Western ideals and standards (Tejel 2009, 15-16). In essence, France acted as a ‘custodian’ until the country in question was able to govern itself independently. In the case of minorities – Kurds included – it used a divide-and-rule strategy because of the high number of minorities present in Syria (including, apart from the Kurds, also Alawites, Druzes, Christians, Jews, Yezidis, but also Armenians, Turkmen, or Chechens and others) and the perceived need to protect them from domination of the Sunni majority (ibid.). Five quasi-states were established in the French Mandate – the Alawais, the Druze, and the Christians all had their own “states” while the Kurds, located mostly in the Jazira region, became a part of the Aleppo “state”, dominated by Sunni Arabs, without any autonomy (Schmidinger 2018, 41). The first claim for autonomy originated because of the lack of an autonomous Kurdish region in the Mandate – in 1924, a Kurdish representative from Kurd Dagh, advocated the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous “state” in Northern Syria, along the border with Turkey; another request came from the Kurds of Kobani that pushed for autonomy in the Kobani region (ibid., 42). Apart from these instances, the Kurds co-operated with the French power in place during the Mandate, mostly because they were more fearful of the Arab nationalists in Damascus (ibid.).

During this first 50 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Syrian Kurds were territorially fragmented into three separate regions that weren’t connected to each other: the cities of Jazira, Efrin (together with Arab-majority Aleppo in the Kurd Dagh region), and Kobani were the centers of these regions. Both Efrin and Kobani were established in the beginning of the French Mandate (Schmidinger 2018, 36). In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century another significant change also occurred – while Kurds lived predominantly nomadic lives following tribal authorities up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, permanent settlements became the new living standard and the power of tribes and tribal leaders slowly dwindled (ibid., 37). However, these Kurdish regions were scattered in Northern Syria along the lengthy Turkish border and didn’t

constitute a common Kurdish region because of the territorial fragmentation of the Kurds in these regions. This showcases that territorial fragmentation was historically present among the Syrian Kurds. The language used predominantly by Kurds in these regions is Kurmanci, the main variety of Kurdish. However, there are also families who speak Zazaki (spoken in Turkey) and Sorani (spoken in Iraq).<sup>5</sup> While linguistic fragmentation exists in Syrian-Kurdish regions, it is widely accepted that Kurmanci is ‘the’ Kurdish language in Syria as it is the most widely used and taught.

Talking of a common Kurdish identity under the French Mandate would be extremely premature (Tejel 2009, 8-9). While the Kurds did recognize that they weren’t a part of the majority Arab population, their primary identity was mainly constituted in regard to their tribe, family, and/or geographic region (ibid.). Furthermore, because of the large and mountainous region and the lack of modern communication technologies together with multiple other minorities living in regions with high Kurdish population, the creation of a common Kurdish identity within Syria was severely inhibited. This inhibition was also supported by the aforementioned divide-and-rule policies of the French Mandate which contributed to the further fragmentation of the Kurdish minority among newly-created quasi-states that were dominated either by the Arab majority or other Syrian minorities.

The path to a common Kurdish identity was further complicated by the ruling Arab elites that were in place during the French Mandate. They resisted any Kurdish claims to autonomy as such a development could, in their view, jeopardize the project of building an independent Syrian state that was built around Arab identity (Tejel 2009, 13). This is not to say that these roadblocks, shared to varying degrees by Kurds in other countries, managed to prohibit the development of a common identity. On the contrary, it was also through countering

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<sup>5</sup> The Kurdish regions also contain multiple ethnic minorities that use different languages like Arabic, Aramaic (Western Neo-Aramaic and two Eastern Aramaic varieties), or Armenian (Schmidinger 2018, 14-16). The presence of these ethnic (but also religious) minorities is another point of contention between Syrian Kurds which will be later expanded on in the text.

and interacting with these ‘Others’ that Kurdish identity has been shaped. Kurdish nationalism was influenced by the ‘Others’ the Kurds were engaging with and since these “Others” differed in each of the nation state with a significant Kurdish population, the Kurdish ‘subgroups’ developed their own specific strain of Kurdish national which, in a large part, revolved around resistance to these dominating social and political structures (ibid.).

One of the first signs of Kurdish nationalism developing in Syria occurred in 1927 when the Khoybun League (or the Independence League) was founded by Kurdish intellectuals and elites (among them Syrians) in exile among which Kurdish nationalist sentiments could be found first. The Koybun League can be seen as one of the first and most successful transnational and pan-Kurdish political movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gunter 2018, 179). Because of their higher-class background, the Khoybun League and its members were able to establish unofficial diplomatic contacts with countries such as the UK, the USSR, Italy, or Iran (Tejel 2009, 17-18). The League targeted mainly Turkish Kurds but made attempts to also reach Kurds outside of Turkey, too (ibid.). The actions of the group reached a peak in the coordination of the Ararat Revolution in Turkey<sup>6</sup>. In the case of Syria, the Syrian-Kurdish nationalists did not perceive the Arabs as their enemy, in contrast to the Khoybun League – not yet (Tejel 2009., 19). While the Khoybun League and its message of Kurdish emancipation reached mainly the elites and intellectuals of the Syrian Kurds, its main significance laid in the conceptualization of modern Kurdish nationalism and its influence on later development of this nationalism (ibid. 17). In contrast to the Khoybun League, the cultural revolution of the 1920s and 1930s had a more widespread reach that promoted and emphasized the role of Kurdish language, education in Kurdish language, and Kurdish literature as a unifying aspect among the wider Kurdish population (ibid. 21-22). It was led by the Badirkhan brothers that, with the support of the Khoybun League, helped to establish a philanthropic network that created charities, Kurdish

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<sup>6</sup> The Ararat Revolution was an unsuccessful uprising of predominantly Turkish Kurds against the Kurdish government that occurred in 1927-1930 and was instigated by the Khoybun League (Gunter 2018, 44).

journals, distributed classic Kurdish literary works, broadcasted radio shows, or organized conferences and evening classes (ibid., 21-23). The Kurdish language was the main tool through which a common Kurdish identity began to form. The role of Kurdish language remains very important as a tool and a sign of a common Kurdish identity, but also contested. To this day because of the multiplicity of languages and dialects used – however, there is no doubt that Kurdish literature has played a vital role in the construction of Kurdish nationalism.

One of the first calls for greater autonomy of the Syrian Kurds came in 1928 from the resettled Turkish Kurds from Istanbul. Backed by a large part of Kurdish tribes of Syria, the group submitted a memorandum to the Mandate authorities asking for education in Kurdish language, self-government within the region by Kurds, Kurdish border force, and aid to help Kurdish refugees (Tejel 2009, 28). Although the memorandum was rejected it shows how early some of the first nationalist demands occurred.

Another significant autonomist group, which included Kurds and Christians (sometimes referred to as the Kurdish-Christian bloc), emerged in 1936 in the Jazira region (one of the 3 Kurdish regions in Syria) which, once again, called for greater autonomy, cultural reform and education in Kurdish language, local Kurdish administrative officials, help with economic marginalization or guaranteed security in the case of Syrian independence (ibid., 32-33). In essence, the Jazira Kurds and Christians demanded the same status (and the autonomy that came with it) like the Druzes or Alawites. In the 1936, the autonomist coalition from Jazira won all the available seats in the region, while the National Bloc (a political party fighting for Syrian independence) won in the rest of the country (ibid., 35). After the election, the National Bloc followed a repressive campaign against autonomist movements like the Jazira one – this further contributed to heightened tensions between ‘autonomists’ and ‘nationalists’ (ibid.) The Jazira coalition was ultimately unsuccessful in reaching its goals. Rather, it highlighted the internal differences and goals between the two camps and the Kurdish infighting because of the

association with the Christians and the delicate and controversial position towards Arabs living in Kurdish-majority regions of Syria. While Christians feared overly trusting the Muslims, some Kurds supported claims for autonomy, others wanted to join with the Arabs and instead, fight the French who they saw as colonial Christian occupiers (Schmidinger 2018, 46). Supporters of the National Bloc were also visible, especially in the creation of “an anti-Christian alliance between pro-Arab Kurds and some Sunni Arab-nationalist groups in Jazira” that culminated in the organization of a Christian pogrom in the small town of Amude (ibid.). The coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups was revealed to be not idyllic and fraught with many points of contention. All of this was later set in the context of the French preparing to leave the country as the country was heavily strained by the war effort during ongoing WW2. Conflictual relationships and intra-Kurd tensions could be seen even then, in this case mainly in the question of coexistence of Kurds with other minorities present in the Kurdish regions. Subsequently, it pointed to intra-Kurdish differences in the view of religious minorities, especially the Christians and the Sunni Muslims and their difference of opinion when it came to autonomist claims. Furthermore, the internal fragmentation within the Kurdish community in Jazira resulted in break-up of a coalition that could have helped the Kurds reach autonomy. This also points to the fundamental fragmentation between Kurds who favored greater self-rule versus Kurds who supported the National Bloc and the creation of an independent and Arab-majority Syria.

### **3.1.2. Transition and independent Syria.**

After the exit of the French troops out of Syria in 1946, the country fell into a chaotic period filled with coups and social and economic upheaval which significantly touched on the lives of Kurds. The region of Jazira and its typical agricultural fields enjoyed revitalization and modernization; Qamishli’s population boomed thanks to a new railway station; urbanization increased (Tejel 2009, 38-39). After the end of the French Mandate and WW2, Syrian Kurds

could be classified into three main political groups: Arab/Syrian nationalists, communists, and Kurdish nationalists.<sup>7</sup> Kurdish nationalists, the most significant group for the topic of this thesis, were active during the WW2 – unfortunately, they remained left out of the UN and important conversations at the international level and, therefore, couldn't significantly influence the international agenda of post-war order (ibid., 42).

The new fragile Syrian state increasingly relied on creating unity within the country through the lens of (pan)Arabism which meant further marginalization and assimilation of other minorities which didn't fit this paradigm. The most significant for the existence of minorities was the short rule of colonel al-Shishakli (1953-1954) who started the forceful integration, or 'Arabization', of the minorities into the majority society, sometimes even resorting to violence (Tejel 2009, 41). For example, this led to the Kurdish deputies in the Syrian Parliament to abandon their autonomist claims; furthermore, the repression resulted in a leaderless Kurdish movement without any significant plan on how to unite the fragmented – and at this point, barely existent - Kurdish political landscape (ibid., 42). The main political body in which the Kurds were active was the aforementioned Syrian Communist Party (ibid.). There were also several important political figures of Kurdish origin active in the Syrian regime (be it in the higher echelons of political elites or in the military) – however, their success hinged on loyalty to the Syrian government, which meant the suppression of their 'Kurdishness'.

After the integration of Syria into Egypt and the creation of the short-lived United Arab Republic in 1958, harsh repression of the Kurds and other minorities continued in the pan-Arab republic. However, they were no longer without a political party. In 1957 – or 1956, depending on what source is consulted (Schmidinger 2018, 51) - the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) was established under the influence of a well-known Iraqi Kurd seeking refuge in Syria

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<sup>7</sup> The Communist Party in Syria was supported by many Kurds in the 1940s and 1950s because of its disassociation from Arab nationalism and its focus on economic and social questions which were the most important to the marginalized Kurds (Schmidinger 2019, 49).

– Jalal Talabani, member of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) (Tejel 2009, 48). Several years later, the KDPS even renamed itself to the Democratic Party of Syrian Kurdistan, a controversial name at the time that hinted at autonomous or secessionist claims by putting a reference to ‘Kurdistan’ in its name (Schmidinger 2018, 51). The KDPS, although the founding Syrian-Kurdish party, proved to be relatively weak and prone to many ideological or generational splits from the party (ibid., 87). It later produced many offshoot parties that were the result of party infighting between the right and the left, the conservative and progressive wings, the KDP and PUK supporters (ibid.). These developments left the Kurdish political scene weak, fragmented, and ineffective, and consequently allowed the PKK ‘takeover’ of the Syrian Kurds in the 1980s and their co-optation for its fight in Turkey. However, majority of the ‘offshoots’ from the KDPS still exist to this day, although the amount of their influence could be argued (Schmidinger 2018, 51). In spite of its historical significance, the KDPS was never legalized and thus, could not participate in Syrian elections and legitimately represent the Kurdish minority within Syria; they remained in illegality and underground (ibid.). For the first time, we can see the influence of the Iraqi Kurds on the domestic politics of Syrian Kurds which can still be felt to this day. The creation of this party was a result of a multitude of domestic reasons, too – the state repression of the Kurds, the lack of political representation for the Kurds, or the disillusionment of the Kurdish members of the Syrian Communist Party with its lack of representation of the Kurds in the wider Syrian political arena (Tejel 2009, 48).

Syria reclaimed its independence from the United Arab Republic in 1961 and returned to its pre-1958 policies and stance towards the Kurds who were once again left out of the state-building enterprise (Tejel 2009, 50). Syria officially became an Arab republic and for the first-time, the Kurds faced official repression that was built into Syrian laws (ibid.). After a state-wide census in 1962, more than 120,000 Kurds were stripped of their citizenship because they weren’t perceived as ‘true Syrians’; those who did not take part in the census disappeared from

official records and, in essence, stopped existing for the regime (ibid.). The census was issued in a wider context of the Kurdish struggle – in 1962, Iraqi Kurds revolted and managed to conquer large parts of territory in Northern Iraq; fearing similar developments in Syria because of the close geographic proximity of the two Kurdish groups and the Iraqi-Kurdish influence on Kurdish politics, Damascus decided to take action against its Kurdish minority (Schmidinger 2018, 60-61). The Kurds were viewed as a foreign security threat and as a treacherous “Trojan Horse” of foreign agents that aimed to disrupt Syrian unity, or commit *fitna* (ibid.); those who identified as Kurds in the census became ‘*ajanib*’ (foreigners) and those who didn’t participate became ‘*maktumiin*’ (unregistered) (Allsopp 2015, 21). Because statelessness of Kurdish parents transferred to their children, too, the number of ‘non-existent’ Kurds increased in the following decades. It was estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 300,000 stateless Kurds (Allsopp 2015, 20). The census had debilitating consequences for the Syrian Kurds; they were essentially erased from Syrian political, social, and economic life – and the repercussion can be felt by the Kurdish minority to this day as many that were stripped of citizenship (and their families) still haven’t regained it.

In 1963, Ba’athists came to power in Syria; infighting within this group continued with a series of coups that ended in 1970 when Hafiz al-Assad came to power. At the heart of Ba’athism stands (pan)Arab nationalism which in practice means exclusion of non-Arab minorities and designates them as its ‘Others’. Not only did Arab nationalism become the official ideology of the ruling party, it was also written into the new constitution of 1973. However, rather than a constant source of repression, the oppressive policies against the Kurds came in waves and remained socially acceptable and yet served as a periodical reminder to Kurds not to get too complacent or demanding (Tejel 2009, 62). Adding to this point, the Syrian Kurds weren’t as organized or as strong as Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, or Iran – hence, violence wasn’t utilized by the Kurds as they did not have enough resources or ‘room’ to mobilize; the

main tool of oppression was slow Arabization of the Kurdish minority and its assimilation into the majority society, especially through schools and public institutions (ibid., 63).

In 1965, the Syrian government started planning the construction of a 350 km long and 10-15 km wide ‘Arab Belt’ along the Turko-Syrian border that was meant to Arabize the Kurdish population. The plan became a reality after al-Assad’s accession to power and started being implemented in 1973; dozens of new villages meant for Arabs were constructed, Kurdish towns and villages were given new Arabic names, and thousands of Arabs were resettled in the Arab Belt and given previously Kurdish-owned land (Gunter 2014, 21). Furthermore, strict land reforms were put into existence that transferred the Kurdish land to the new Arab settlers which had further negative impact on the economic inclusion of the Kurdish minority (Allsop 2015, 21). The issue of these resettled Arabs and what position to take on this topic remains a problem to this day and the proposed approach on how to treat this Arab minority in the now-autonomous region is one of the many cleavages found in the contemporary Kurdish national movement. While a portion of the population has favored co-operation and co-existence with these new settlers, the other portion would like to see the Kurdish regions without this minority because they view it as a potentially dangerous or treacherous ally of the Syrian regime. Once again, the cleavage within Syrian-Kurdish population in relation to dealing with other non-Kurdish minorities has existed for decades and is loaded with emotions on both sides.

Because the Syrian government recognized that it could not ignore the Kurdish minority forever, it decided to establish connections with some of the Kurdish representatives – these Kurdish parties weren’t officially incorporated into the system but the regime was in contact with them through publicized meetings (Tejel 2009, 89). The goal of this strategy was to maintain stability in the country and also keep tabs on the Kurdish political parties. This “introduced a new divisive element to the movement”, not only because Kurdish parties had different opinions on co-operation with the Syrian regime but also because many Kurdish

leaders wanted to posit themselves as the leaders of the Syrian-Kurdish movement (ibid.). In this way, the Ba'ath regime contributed to further Kurdish infighting which prevented the Kurds from posing a significant threat to the regime that would be possible only if the Syrian Kurds cooperated. This is something that we can also see in the broader pan-Kurdish struggle – different leaders with different visions fail to find common ground that would enable the creation of a stronger cross-border Kurdish identity and, instead, they pursue their own partial goals and strategies in lieu of creating a platform of unity and cooperation. While the Kurds didn't have any *legal* parties, the regime allowed the Kurdish political parties to exist underground and in illegality (Schmidinger 2018, 68). However, they were infiltrated by the secret services that kept a close eye on the developments and potential revolutionary plans (ibid.). These parties were allowed to exist if they remained covert, did not voice support for a Kurdish state or any sort of regime change, or managed to mobilize large parts of the Syrian population (Allsopp 2015, 24). However, the 'red lines' within which the Syrian Kurds were meant to stay changed throughout the years and the Kurds were subjected to sudden changes in the regime behavior towards the Kurds and their political representatives.

When talking about political parties of the Syrian Kurds, it is necessary to mention the dynamic context in which they originated and developed – at a time of the inception of an independent Syria and the development of a Syrian Kurdish polity, tribal and familial affiliations were still significant aspects of Kurdish identity, although their significance was gradually being eroded; this process of political awakening was also strongly influenced by the fact that 'Kurdishness' was criminalized, and in itself, politicized (Allsop 2015, 2). Further, economic and social development has occurred at different rates in different Kurdish-majority regions in Syria creating regional differences (ibid., 3). This was further coupled with the existing territorial fragmentation of the Kurdish regions and contributed to the weakening of a common Kurdish identity in Syria. Additionally, Kurdish culture and Kurdish identity in

themselves have been criminalized and seen as threats to the very existence of the Syrian republic. During the Ba'athist rule, the use and teaching of Kurdish were criminalized, Kurdish location and business names were Arabized, singing of Kurdish songs and other public uses of the Kurdish language were prohibited (Schmidinger 2018, 67).

What follows is a brief overview of the PKK, a Turko-Kurdish party that played a significant role in the lives of Syrian Kurds throughout the 1980s until 1998 when the Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria was signed. Consequently, the influence of the Iraqi Kurds through their political parties, KRG and PUK, is expanded upon, as well as their influence on the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria and its offshoots. Consequently, the Yekiti party and the PYD are also presented as they constitute significant political actors in the more recent history of Syrian Kurds.

### **3.1.3. The Turkish Kurds in Syria: The PKK years**

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the most prominent Kurdish force in Syria was the Turkish PKK party. Its leader, Abudullah Ocalan, fled to Syria in 1980, fearing a coup in Turkey that could put him and the functioning of his party in danger. And thus began a long affair of the Syrian regime with the PKK leader who was co-opted by the regime as a weapon in a fight over water resources and further animosities<sup>8</sup> between Syria and Turkey in exchange for a safe haven and a relatively unchecked room to continue carrying out its activities. This showcases another trend in the analysis of the Kurdish political scene – the Kurdish people have been often used as pawns in games between various states or personal conflicts for political gain (Tejel 2009, 70).

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<sup>8</sup> Syria and Turkey have had a complicated relationship. A historical dispute over the Hatay province in the north of Syria and south of Turkey has been a conflict since Syrian independence. Syria believes that this province was illegally seceded to Turkey by the French during the French Mandate and both countries still retain their claims to this territory. Furthermore, at the time of Ocalan's arrival, Syria and Turkey stood on the opposite sides of the Cold War. The mentioned conflict over water resources refers to the Southeast Anatolia Project through which Turkey built multiple dams and hydroelectric plants on the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, two of the most vital water resources for Syria (Schmidinger 2018, 69).

In its earlier years, and during the time PKK based most of its operations out of Syria, the ultimate goal of the party was to establish a “socialist Kurdistan through revolutionary activity” through overcoming Kurdish “deep-rooted disunity” which stood as the primary reason for Kurdish “degeneration” (Gunes 2009, 258). PKK’s interpretation of Kurdish identity used mainly the suffering and marginalization of Kurds, using Kurdish national myths that articulated the Kurdish claim to nationhood (ibid.). In Ocalan’s texts written from prison, PKK’s goals changed to a vision of a ‘radical democracy’ and ‘democratic confederalism’ through which he proposed “to build self-governing bodies throughout Kurdistan” that would act as the “main mechanism for the unification of Kurdistan and Kurds” (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012). The project of ‘democratic confederalism’ is based on the power of the Kurdish people and exclusion of state and nation as categories employed to define this project (ibid.). This ideology is shared by the KCK, an umbrella organization which groups together PKK-affiliated parties, including the Syrian PYD which will be introduced shortly.

Furthermore, the support of the PKK from the Syrian regime helped it control its own Syrian Kurdish minority – the Syrian Kurds had a political outlet and were free to join the PKK; at the same time, the PKK’s leader had many reasons to stay on the good side of the Syrian government as it was offering him safe refuge and room to manoeuvre. It is estimated that as many as 10,000 Syrian Kurds fought against the Turkish army in the PKK’s fight for a pan-Kurdish state; and the PKK provided a political outlet for Syrian Kurds who were frustrated with the inactivity of their own Kurdish parties (Gunter 2014, 40). At the same time, the PKK sponsored various literacy programs and played a role in a revival of a public Kurdish culture, for example by openly celebrating the Newroz festival which celebrates the Persian New Year, one of the most significant holidays in Kurdish culture (Tejel 2009, 104). In this way, ‘Kurdishness’ became a politicized ethnic identity as the PKK emphasized the cultural identity and distinctiveness of the Kurds in contrast to other minorities.

Ocalan even went as far as to say that Syrian Kurds, in essence, didn't exist – he claimed that they were refugees and descendants of Turkish Kurds (Tejel 2009, 78). Furthermore, he also downplayed problems faced by the Kurds in Syria and invited them to join the PKK instead (ibid.) It could be argued that, to a degree, this is true – many Turkish Kurds have fled to Syria after Kurdish rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s fearing the Turkish government's repercussions and, historically, the Turko-Syrian border has been very porous which was supported by the traditional nomadic way of life up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The lives of the Turkish and Syrian Kurds have been intertwined and developments in each country had significant impact on the lives of the Kurds (Gunter 2014, 9); however, Ocalan's statement greatly reduces the complexity of the Kurdish issue and denies Syrian Kurds their historical experiences and specific identity. Additionally, this statement came in the 1990s when criticism of the PKK's ideology and tactics was growing among Syria's Kurds; although the PKK maintained some support among the wider populace, all of the Syrian political parties publicly disassociated themselves from Ocalan's party after these statements (Allsopp 2015, 34). Popular support for the PKK was transferred to Syrian-Kurdish parties that embraced similar ideology and inner workings as their predecessor (ibid.).

Ocalan and his party enjoyed a relatively unchecked ability to grow and organize operations on Syrian soil for almost two decades. While it could be seen that the Syrian Kurds were in part erased from their own, Syria-specific struggle, the ability to be politically active as 'Kurds' endowed them with self-confidence and a stronger perceived common identity, or 'Kurdishness' (Schmidinger 2018, 71). The decisive year in which this covert support of Syrian regime stopped was in 1998 when tensions between Turkey and Syria reached a peak and Turkey threatened Syria with war over the PKK issue (Gunter 2014, 41). On the basis of the Adana Agreement, signed by the two countries in 1998, Ocalan was deported from Syria and PKK camps were closed (Cengiz 2019). Subsequently, after what was dubbed an 'odyssey',

Ocalan was captured by Turkey and imprisoned for life. After Ocalan's capture, the PKK changed its goals from the establishment of a Marxist Kurdish state to the current goal of creating a decentralized "democratic confederation" that does not involve secession from Turkey (Gunter 2014, 61-62). Additionally, this signing of the Adana Agreement meant that Syria joined Turkey in recognizing the PKK as a terrorist group and refused to support its existence anymore on its own territory. This further complicated the position of the Syrian Kurds as their main political outlet was once again illegalized and Syrian Kurdish parties couldn't develop because they had been overshadowed by the strength of the PKK. Although the Adana Agreement is over 20 years old, it still remains significant as the PKK-affiliated Syrian-Kurdish party, PYD, is arguably the most powerful actor in the now-autonomous Kurdish region within Syria.

#### **3.1.3.1. The Yekiti Party**

In the time when PKK monopolized the Kurdish struggle and was co-opted by the Syrian government to divert the attention of Syrian Kurds to Turkey, a new party emerged that focused heavily on the development of a campaign focused specifically on Syrian Kurds (Allsopp 2015, 86). The Yekiti Party was created in 1992 and presented a new and 'young' party of diverse origins that stood in opposition to the 'traditional' Kurdish political parties that it saw as ineffective and corrupt. The party included both leftists and Kurdish nationalists, both younger and older generations from various parts of the society (Tejel 2009, 111). It aimed to disrupt the regular mode of action of Kurdish parties and proposed a broader program that did not focus only on the political landscape but also included the civil society and culture of Syrian Kurds – referencing the importance of Kurdish language or the Newroz festival (ibid.). This party also referenced a "Syrian Kurdistan", a move that other parties were very hesitant to make and made reference to very active tools to increase the visibility of the Kurdish issue in Syria (ibid., 112).

The Yekiti leaders also wanted to fill in the gap after the PKK and held the first Kurdish demonstrations in 2002 on the International Human Rights Day, after more than 25 years which were targeted at the persistent discrimination of the minority (ibid., 113), with other demonstrations happening in 2003 and 2004. In this way, the Yekiti party has awakened the Kurds and prepared the ground for the outbreak of the Qamishli uprising in 2004 which will be analyzed in the following part of the thesis.

### **3.1.3.2. PYD**

The PYD is a PKK-affiliated party that was established in 2003, currently led by Salih Muslim who was previously a KDPS member but quit in 2003 (Tejel 2009, 105). Even though the party often rejects affiliation with the PKK, it shares the same ideology and is seen by academics and experts as a successor to the party who was officially ousted from the country in 1998 after the signing of the Adana Agreement. Additionally, it is also a member of the Koma Civaken Kurdistan (KCK), a union similar to the KNC but meant for PKK-affiliated parties that was established in 2005 (Gunter 2014, 42). In 2004, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Concord Party (SKDCP or Wifaq) splintered away from the main group, but this party hasn't managed to challenge the PYD in a significant way (Tejel 2009, 79). To this day, and in spite of some fluctuations in its power, the PYD remains the strongest political party in the Kurdish autonomous region since the outbreak of the political turmoil in Syria in 2011. The PYD describes itself as a “democratic self-governing collective self-administration from below” which, in effect, rules the Rojava region through various local and regional committees in their realization of the concept of ‘democratic confederalism’ (Romano and Gurses 2014, 101). In contrast to the other parties, it claims to be a decentralized political party while the rest of the parties have a more classic party hierarchy (Allsopp 2015, 25).

The PYD also has a significant military wing, the YPG (People's Protection Unit) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units), which have been detrimental to the security and control of

the new autonomous region, Rojava. The party was the first to militarize the Kurdish struggle in Syria in this way, as the remaining parties didn't have their own, independent militias (Romano and Gurses 2014, 229). Furthermore, the YPG has enjoyed the financial backing, military training, and arm supplies from its well-experienced sibling, the PKK which enabled the PYD/YPG to gain overwhelming control of the Rojava territory and thus, marginalize its political opponents with much smaller or non-existent militia (ibid.). These tensions are most prominent between the PYD and the KNC coalition – this relationship will be further explored in the thesis. Furthermore, the sufficient amount of resources available to the party have enabled it to attract and recruit more supporters and potential members than its political opponents – it is estimated that the PYD has between 10 to 20 thousand members (ibid., 99).

It is also rumored that PYD, as a PKK affiliate, enjoys a relationship with the Assad regime<sup>9</sup>. Just like Hafaz, Bashar al-Assad acknowledges the importance of supporting the PKK and its affiliates in its regional standoff against Turkey (Romano and Gurses 2014, 99). Furthermore, it may be possible that the Syrian regime subscribes to the idea of 'keeping your friends close, but your enemies closer' and sees in PYD a temporary custodian of Syrian territory that can be regained after the end of the civil war (ibid.). Accusations of co-operation with the regime are mutual and contribute to mutual distrust between the parties as a hot-issue topic that enhances fragmentation of the political scene

#### **3.1.4. The Iraqi Kurds in Syria: The KDP and PUK**

The Iraqi Kurds and their political parties present another side to the Turkey/Iraq cleavage when it comes to the Syrian Kurds. Even though the Iraqi-linked Kurdish parties in

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<sup>9</sup> Most recently, this cooperation took place during a series of negotiations between the PYD and the Assad regime where the Kurds aimed to gain some concessions from the regime for the safekeeping and protection of northern Syrian regions; however, these negotiations failed, mainly because the regime was unwilling to grant the Kurds any semblance of officially-recognized autonomy (Tsurkov 2018). The cooperation also concerned military operations when the two sides shared a common enemy, most notably in the fight for Aleppo. Furthermore, the two actors have made sure to stay out of each other's way, most visibly seen in the tacit and unofficial acceptance of Kurdish self-rule in the north by the Assad regime (Reuters 2019).

Syria – grouped together in the Kurdish National Council in 2011 - suffer from cleavages, chaos, and often, irrelevance, because of their link to Iraqi Kurdistan and their parties, they maintain a sense of legitimacy, a source of financing, and possible access to militants (Gunter 2014, 43). The same could be said for PKK-linked parties in Syria. This cleavage could be seen in the veneration of the respective party leaders – Mustafa Barzani (and his son Massoud, although to a lesser extent) and Abudllah Ocalan – both of whom enjoy considerable respect among the Syrian Kurds and are often visualized in their heroic portraits hanging in many homes and offices of the Syrian Kurds (ibid.).

The Iraqi-Kurdish influence could be seen since a common Kurdish identity started forming in Syria. This influence manifested itself not only in ‘spillovers’ of the Kurdish fight for acceptance and recognition within Iraq (which directly influenced the Syrian government’s policies towards Syria’s Kurds or raised awareness of a cross-border belonging among the Kurdish people) or in the presence and influence of a then-member of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq, Jalal Talabani on the establishment of a first Kurdish party in Syria since the inception of an independent Syrian state. Jalal Talabani even established his PUK party from Syria in 1974, an offshoot political party from Barzani’s KDP after Talabani’s faction got into conflict with the Barzani faction.<sup>10</sup> The influence of both of these Iraqi parties on Syrian Kurds and their politics is interesting also because the KDP and PUK parties posit another point of fragmentation in the political landscape of Syrian Kurds – while they share very similar goals, their relationship has been fraught with rivalry, mistrust, and even a civil war between the two Kurdish parties.<sup>11</sup> This intra-Kurdish differences also translated into Syria when various new

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<sup>10</sup> The PUK party presented an alternative to the ‘traditional’ KDP and its strong ties with tribal and religious leaders by representing the “urban-led intelligentsia”; the conflict embodied “a contest between the religious and the secular, the primordial and the nationalist, tradition versus atheist Marxism” (Chorev 2007, 4).

<sup>11</sup> The relations between the KDP and the PUK have been rocky for most of their co-existence, even erupting into a civil war between the two sides in the mid-1990s. This conflict lasted for 4 years and mainly concerned the power struggle for the control of Iraqi Kurdistan that had just recently gained autonomy in 1991. Both the KDP and the PUK enjoyed success – while the KDP won in the west of Kurdistan, the PUK took the east and thus a mutual competition for hegemony over the KRG started.

parties split from the original KDPS because of the ongoing rift between Barzani's and Talabani's parties. Both of the parties still maintain official offices in Syria (Allsopp 2015, 35). Furthermore, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) – in charge of administering the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq – serves as a successful example of Kurdish self-rule that functions as a de-facto independent state that could be seen as a future prospect to be imitated or maybe even joined (Gunter 2014, 55).

The KDPS, a Syrian-Kurdish political party greatly influenced by the Iraqi-Kurdish political parties, is introduced in the following section.

### **3.1.5. KDPS**

The KDPS is the first Syrian-Kurdish party which was established in 1957. An important role in the establishment of the party was played by Jalal Talabani, then a member of the Iraqi KDP and later known as the leader of the PUK party which split from the KDP in 1974. The KDPS served as a propaganda platform for Mustafa Barzani's KDP party in the time of its establishment (Gunter 2014, 26). Among its early program was allegedly also a request of "freedom and unity for Kurdistan" which points to early understanding of the Kurds not only as a minority but as an independent nation which was addressed in the party's ideology (Allsopp 2015, 63). The party based its program very vaguely around the idea of Kurdish emancipation so it could attract as many supporters and members as possible. Its broad program was contradictory in many cases which further contributed to the party's later splintering – the common thread of the KDPS program was Kurdish nationalism understood as an ideology intended to promote the fight for the rights of the Kurdish people (ibid., 64). At its height, the party's members numbered 30,000 with many more thousands of supporters from across the Kurdistan region (ibid.). However, it is necessary to note that further splits in the political landscape were also because of the different understanding of the Kurds as a group – while one

camp understood the Kurds to be a nation, the other saw them as a minority within Syria. This would be a conflictual point that would stay relevant for the decades to come.

The KDPS was established as a mass, catch-all party with a broad political program that would encounter many splits in its future. To this day, the political scene of the Kurds within Syria remains deeply fragmented among a large number of parties – many of which originated as offshoots of the original KDPS. The first splits of the KDPS happened in 1965 and 1970, mainly between the right and left wings within the party and between supporters of the two Iraqi Kurdish leaders, Barzani and Talabani (Gunter 2014, 26). The splits in KDPS mirrored the split in KDP as Talabani decided to leave its ranks and create the PUK party (Allsopp 2015, 66). As of 2014, more than 10 parties claimed to be the descendants of the original KDPS (ibid., 27). There are many more that have a murky historical origin and use similar names to the KDPS and its offshoots which contributes to the confusion and chaos of the political party scene in Syria (ibid.).

Currently, the main party affiliated with the Barzani's KDP is the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) with Abdul Hajim Bashar as its leader; there is also Abdul Hamid Darwish's Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (a sister party to the Iraqi PUK party of Talabani), both of which show that Iraqi-Kurdish parties maintain their influence on the politics of the Syrian Kurds (Gunter 2014, 44). The KDPS is also known as 'el-Parti' or 'the Party' claiming its direct descent from the original KDPS – however, several political parties make this claim also (ibid.). Additionally, these parties belong in the Kurdish National Council, a federation of several Iraq-affiliated Kurdish parties (and also protest youth movements) which was founded in October 2011 with the goal of unifying the fragmented political landscape among the Kurds (Romano and Gurses 2014, 94). Although it still exists, it played a more significant role (albeit, still relatively small) in the beginning of the Syrian civil war –

throughout the course of the conflict, several parties have left the KNC ranks and its efficiency in representing Kurdish demands can be doubted.

### **3.2. Nationalism of the Syrian Kurds and its fragmentation**

Nationalism has been quite slow to develop among Syria's Kurds – this can be attributed to reasons mentioned above: territorial fragmentation between the three main Kurdish regions and Kurdish minorities in bigger cities like Aleppo or Damascus, lack of communication technologies, but most importantly because their primary identities related to tribes, clans, families rather than to 'Kurdishness'. Additionally, there were significant differences between the urban/rural populations and higher/lower class gaps also played a role in further fragmentation of the Kurds as a whole (Gunter 2014, 10). In the words of Tejel (2009, 82), "Although ethnic awareness is an important feature among Kurds in Syria, the translocal identities have not traditionally been conducive to a nationalist mobilization."

During the existence of the French Mandate, there wasn't a well-defined Kurdish national movement in Syria (Tejel 2009, 82). Although some semblance of Kurdish nationalism developed among the higher circles and the intelligentsia of the Syrian Kurds, it didn't manage to become a truly popular movement. The first autonomy demands came from the Kurdish elite in the 1920s, most of them living outside of Kurdistan (Schmidinger 2018, 39). Kurdish nationalism hadn't developed yet and most demands of Syrian Kurds were centered around local spaces rather than around posing national demands; many Syrian Kurds were either opposed or indifferent to a state-building Kurdish nationalism (ibid.).<sup>12</sup> A more common tool of articulating Kurdish identity that has penetrated into the lower classes through the Kurdish

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<sup>12</sup> This was also supported by traditional tribal and clan authorities. While their influence was not as strong as in the times of the Ottoman Empire, they still constituted a significant and important authority that was opposed to state centralization or a state-building enterprise (Schmidinger 2018, 39). Rather than supporting Kurdish nationalism, these tribal authorities favored self-defense and opposition to the state in a bid to retain their relevance in the Syrian-Kurdish political landscape (ibid.).

language, literature, radio, or cultural celebrations. These nationalist works were the product of the cultural revolution of the 1920s and 1930s which succeeded in spreading the idea of Kurdish identity in the wiser population, although their reach was still limited by literacy or access to sources of cultural works.

The underdevelopment of Kurdish nationalism was later further underscored by state repression within an independent Syria – first, unofficial and then, under UAR and subsequently under Ba’athist rule as an official doctrine of the (pan)Arab republics which were based on the exclusion and/or assimilation of non-Arab minorities. Furthermore, the Kurdish minority in Syria was further suppressed by the construction of the ‘Arab Belt’ or by taking away of citizenship from thousands of Kurds. ‘Kurdishness’ was to be erased through Arabized education and school curriculums and limitations on the use of Kurdish language(s) which served as one of the major tools for spreading Kurdish collective self-awareness (Gunter 2014, 21).

Gunter (2014, 25) also argues that one of the possible reason why this oppression was so long-lived was also the fragmentation of the party system among the Syrian Kurds and their inability to unify behind a single agenda and therefore, make use of the numerical strength of the minority. The Kurdish people in Syria had essentially no representative that would fight for the rights of the group on the national stage. Even with the development of the KDPS, mentioned above, the party’s program was very vague and didn’t call for greater autonomy and self-rule of the Syrian Kurds; its political toolkit by which to gain concessions from the regime was severely limited (Gunter 2014, 25). The Kurdish parties of Syria were significantly more restrained in their activities than their counterparts in Iraq, Iran, or Turkey that weren’t significantly troubled by the fear of their government’s response to calls for autonomy or even independence (ibid.). Tejel (2009, 85) claims that this is one of the reasons why the Syrian Kurds didn’t manage to be taken more seriously by the regime – Kurdish parties in the

remaining countries were able to present themselves as legitimate actors and start negotiations with the government after a period of violent conflict. The Syrian Kurds and their political parties were essentially never in open violent conflict with the Syrian government as opposed to their neighboring counterparts and often rather chose the middle way, between conflict and assimilation, in regard to their relationship with the Syrian regime. This further shows that the developments in each country determined the positions, goals, and strategies of Kurdish groups across the 4 countries and, therefore, cannot be talked about as a truly homogenous group. Furthermore, Kurdish parties from other countries, mainly Turkey and Iraq, have also maintained strong presence in Syria and contributed to party factionalism in their own way – while they played the role of dominant Kurdish party influences, they inhibited the development of a Syria-specific political scene by overshadowing the issues specific to Syrian Kurds with issues of their own (Allsopp 2015, 35).

What further complicated the development of Syrian Kurdish nationalism was the transnational nature of the Kurdish issue and the complicated reality of a nation split into 4 states which enhanced fragmentation. Together with the slow development of Syrian nationalism, Syrian Kurds were often manipulated for the benefit of other Kurdish movements – either in Turkey or Iraq. These links to other Kurdish parties outside of Syria – as well as other affiliations and identifications - contributed to the political disunity. Furthermore, the complexity of the political landscape among Syrian Kurds contributed to the fragmentation because of ideological and tactical differences between the parties (Gunter 2014, 27). While the moderate/rightist parties tended to support co-operation and negotiations with the regime, the more radical/leftist parties turned to demonstrations and activism; furthermore, the parties that had links to the Syrian regime were seen as divisive and alienated from the general Kurdish movement (ibid.).

The main voice of Kurdish nationalism are the Syrian-Kurdish parties, all of which focus mainly on cultural issues and basic human rights with the goal of reproducing this culture and national identity among the Kurdish populace while stopping the decades-long Arabization and marginalization of the Kurdish culture and politics (Allsopp 2015, 25). Such demands point to a broader political reform in Syria although no party has called for an armed revolution within Syria (ibid.). The main rallying points of these Syrian-Kurdish parties are various nationalist concepts related to symbols, the language (Kurmanji), common culture and historical experiences (ibid., 83). When talking about the topic of Syrian Kurds, it is nearly impossible to do so without mentioning the political parties; as was mentioned previously, Kurdish society in Syria – its culture, language, or religion - is highly politicized as the political parties often supplement the role of an existing and functioning civic society – not only do they control politics, the parties play a vital role in education, provision of social services, organization of festivals and celebrations, mobilization of the populace, and overall cultural framing of what it means to be Kurdish (Allsopp 2015, 83). At the same time, the parties have taken on the roles of the more traditional Kurdish actors (e.g. tribal leaders); in these examples, we see the complexity of the political landscape which mirrors the complexity of the Kurdish issue in Syria (Allsopp 2015, 100). Abbas Vali's study on the Kurdish nationalism also highlights the aspect of a missing and functioning civil society in Syria which, in his argument, has led to the fragmentation of the Syrian Kurdish and pan-Kurdish movements (Vali 1998).

The more right-wing parties focused on reaching at least minimal rights and didn't focus much on the issue of pan-Kurdish identity while the leftist focus more on the transnational nature of the Kurdish struggle and the primordialist definitions of 'Kurdishness' (ibid., 26). While none of the parties has called for the creation of Kurdistan, "individuals commonly express a desire for a Kurdish state" (ibid.). However, the common link between these parties was that, before the establishment of Rojava, the main goal of the parties was to address the

grievances of the Kurdish minority and contribute to the betterment – social, economic, political  
– of their situation (Allsopp 2015, 82).

## 4. Post-2000 Developments

### 4.1. 2002-2004

One of the first signs of a growing popular Kurdish consciousness, emanating from decades of frustration and a desire for change of the status quo, occurred on December 10, 2002, the International Human Rights Day, when the Yekiti party organized a demonstration in front of the Syrian Parliament. This demonstration aimed to highlight the lack of basic human and civil rights attributed to the Syrian Kurds and their discrimination within the majority Syrian society. This demonstration was the first of its kind since 1986 when demonstrators accompanied a funeral procession after several people died (in Qamishli and in Efrin) as a result of regime's violent suppression of Newroz festivities across Kurdish territories (Tejel 2009, 113)<sup>13</sup>. The regime once again punished the Syrian Kurds for openly displaying their cultural and national identity through the Newroz celebrations, a motif to be found throughout most of Kurdish history in Syria. The existence of the Yekiti party, a 'new' party that favored more radical tactics than the traditional parties of Syrian Kurds, and its new 'political toolbox' of a more active approach to the Kurdish question sparked an outburst of popular support. It tapped into the feelings of frustration and mistreatment that were building throughout the previous years and decades. The Yekiti party, established in the 1990s from the remnants of ex-PKK members in Syria, in a way began a new era of the Kurdish struggle in Syria – after years of PKK domination, the party put a focus on specific issues of the Kurdish minority in Syria. Its activities, mainly public manifestations and holiday celebrations, enabled the Kurds to occupy public spaces in which their common identity was strengthened and through which ordinary Kurds were given agency in the 'Kurdish struggle' in Syria. Similarly, the political parties of

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<sup>13</sup> This demonstration is not only significant because of the clear link between state persecution and any public display of 'Kurdishness', but also because the 1986 demonstration once again highlighted the difficult and complicated Kurdish position vis-à-vis the Arab minority present in the Kurdish regions. During the 1980s, animosity between newly resettled Arabs and the Kurds could be still felt – so much so that during the 1986 protest, Kurdish demonstrators clashed with the resettled Arabs which resulted in the killing of a young Kurdish girl; this highlighted the tension between the two groups and further polarized the Kurdish population in its opinion on the resettled Arabs.

Syrian Kurds started utilizing these demonstrations as tools for achieving some of their political goals. What was most important, however, was that this 2002 demonstration – followed by many others – highlighted the issues of Syrian-Kurdish population and presented a growing need for a discussion about status of the Kurds in Syria.

These developments were also preceded by a „Damascus Spring” which provided a context for renewed social action among Syrian opposition, including the Kurds. Damascus Spring refers to a brief period of time during which the current Syrian president Bashar al-Assad – after the death of his father, Hafez - presented several new changes such as granting the freedom of speech to Syrian citizens, or holding inclusive conferences that meant to open up the public space in Syria, granting bigger influence to opposition forces, and support civil society (Tejel 2009, 109-110).<sup>14</sup> Although this time period didn't prove to democratize the Syrian political system in the long run, it contributed to a small Kurds 'awakening' – and that of other opposition forces - to the topic of their standing in the state and initiated the conversation about long-dismissed topics within the broader Syrian civil society. Before these developments, the 'Kurdish struggle' in Syria was mainly seen through the optics of a transnational, pan-Kurdish struggle – a remnant of the decades of PKK and KRG influence that mostly acted to overshadow Syria-specific Kurdish issues and, therefore, suppressed a Syrian-Kurdish national identity and prevented it from fully forming (Allsopp 2015, 85). Naturally, there is a multitude of reasons why the development of a Syria-specific national struggle had been inhibited – the role of the traditional Kurdish parties that couldn't cross the regime's 'red lines' for fears of persecution; life of Kurds and their parties in illegality and criminality; and

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<sup>14</sup> During the time period of 'Damascus Spring' in early 2000, political reforms were encouraged by Syria's citizens after Basha al-Assad spoke in his inauguration speech about reforms and enhancing democracy. Through various civil forums that were organized throughout whole Syria, lawyers, politicians, activists, journalists, artists, businessmen, and many others openly spoke about widespread reforms in Syria (Yildiz 2005, 41). Civil society in Syria calling for reforms flourished until mid-2001 when the Syrian regime abruptly changes its course and started closing down various civil institutions and arresting their members – afterward, Bashar al-Assad claimed that the Syrian opposition had misunderstood his inaugural message and set clear 'red lines' on possible future reform that would be directed by the Syrian regime rather than the civil society (ibid.).

various aspects contributing to fragmentation such as religious differences, territorial discontinuity, or the multitude of other minorities living in the Kurdish regions. Furthermore, any public expression of Kurdish identity was closely monitored and therefore, much of the Syrian-Kurdish identity had to remain private (ibid.). Any demonstrations that occurred before 2002 – such as the one in 1986 after the death of a young boy during Newroz celebrations – were reactions to the regime’s suppression of public celebration of Kurdish identity rather than public protests demanding rights for the Kurdish people.

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2003 – the World Children’s Day – Yekiti, together with other political parties, organized another demonstration, this time in front of the Syrian seat of UNICEF in Damascus. For the first time, the Yekiti party was joined by other political parties that came out in support of the demonstration (Tejel 2009, 114). On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003, several Kurdish political parties organized a silent demonstration as a way to commemorate the 1962 census. While the Yekiti party preferred a more direct and visible strategy to demonstrations, its agreement to participate in a silent demonstration showed willingness to compromise and cooperate with the rest of the involved parties (Tejel 2009, 114). A year after the first demonstration took place in December 2002, a unified demonstration took place again with around 1,000 participants; through this string of demonstrations we can see how quickly the Syrian Kurds were mobilized by a ‘new’ and more direct party (ibid). The importance of the Yekiti party in the early 2000s lies mainly in its ability to mobilize the Kurdish population by articulating a common political, cultural, and social identity. Through mobilization, a group identity can be formed because the Kurds in question could rally together on the basis of common experiences, their language, customs and history, and feelings of frustration and long-term marginalization (Yamamoto 2015, 1). Of course, it is necessary to mention that the Syrian regime understood these demonstrations as a threat and gradually increased the number of arrested participants, including children and leaders of political parties. Despite the regime’s

reaction, the Syrian Kurds continued to periodically occupy public spaces with protests, silent demonstrations, or celebrations which was a significant change from the Kurdish activities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Amidst these protests, another significant player emerged that would play an important role in the Kurdish political landscape. In September 2003, the PYD was established from the remains of the exiled PKK. Its current leader is Salih Muslim who was previously active in the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria which he quit out of frustration from its “lack of success” (Gunter 2014, 105). Salih Muslim’s case is similar to many who were frustrated with the traditional political parties that were seen as corrupt, associated with the regime and infiltrated with its security services. In 2010, Muslim became the PYD’s president and remains a key party figure to this day. Although to this day the PYD remains the strongest political representative of the autonomous Rojava region, it has endured several splits and violence among the PYD and its offshoots. However, throughout its existence, it has supported many protests and demonstrations and has played a dominant role in the evolution of the Kurdish struggle and in today’s Syrian Kurdish landscape.

The protests, started in 2002, continued in 2004 through various rallies and commemorations of various occasions from Kurdish history (Allsopp 2015, 87)<sup>15</sup>. These demonstrations were sometimes created in collaboration with the Arab opposition in Syria – these collaborative demonstrations took place mainly in front of courts in order to protest arbitrary arrests of opposition, Kurdish or Arab; other protests were organized by frustrated Kurdish students (ibid.). Another important demonstration took place on International Women’s Day on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Not only did this gathering celebrate the role of women in

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<sup>15</sup> One of such commemorations was organized in remembrance of the Halabja massacre, a chemical attack on Iraqi Kurds in the city of Halabja that occurred in 1988 during the Iran-Iraq war (Allsopp 2015, 87). Other important remembrance day is for example November 13<sup>th</sup> – on this day in 1960, a cinema full of children in the town of Amuda burned down, killing 283 children most of which were under the age of 14; speculation persists to this day that the fire was deliberately started by the Syrian regime (Shekhani 2018).

the Kurdish society, the demonstration also celebrated the installment of federalism in Iraq which granted the Iraqi Kurds significant self-ruling powers (Tejel 2009, 114). Within this context, a wave of pan-Kurdish sentiments arose across the region and in the diasporas and demonstrations celebrating the success of Iraqi Kurds were organized throughout the world. Needless to say, this wave of pan-Kurdish solidarity did not go unnoticed by the Assad regime.

Just a couple of days later, on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2004, what was later known as the Qamishli uprising started. During a football game between two rival teams, one of which had fans known for their Arab nationalist sentiments while the other was predominantly supported by Kurds (Schmidinger 2018, 74-75). An unfounded rumor spread among the football fans about three children who were killed in a brawl between the teams which heightened the already-high tensions during the game – with anti-Kurdish, pro-Saddam, or pro-American slogans being shouted and stones being thrown between the attendants of the game (ibid., 75). This led to a brutal and violent suppression of the growing conflict by Syrian security forces which resulted in the death of up to nine people (ibid.).

After these events, Kurdish political parties called for the creation of an investigatory committee so it could attempt to untangle the conflicting reports about the outbreak of the conflict, find people responsible for escalation of the tension, and bring punishment to those who were responsible for the deaths that occurred (Allsopp 2015, 87). Several Kurdish parties then agreed to hold demonstrations and a joint funeral protesting the violent reaction of the regime (Tejel 2009, 115). Once again, the cooperation between different political parties was evident – in spite of their fragmented history, the Kurdish political parties cooperated and coordinated their actions since the new Kurdish ‘awakening’ in the early 2000s. This unity and co-operation had been evident since the first protests in 2002 up until the first days of the Qamishli uprising – however, this relationship was based on symbolic events and protests, rather than deep co-operation and co-ordination of the parties’ programs and goals. The turnout

at the demonstrations organized with the support of the political parties surpassed expectations of the parties involved and a truly mass response to the events of Qamishli all over Syrian Kurdistan occurred, with thousands of people joining the commemorations for the people killed during and after the football match.

The events at Qamishli resonated with the wider Kurdish population; they were also reported on by global media which further increased the visibility of the Kurdish struggle in Syria. With a turnout of thousands of Qamishli residents, Kurdish and Arab, that followed the funeral procession of the Kurds killed during the football match, the silent protest amounted to a significant success for the Kurdish parties (Tejel 2009, 115). However, the security forces responded once again by firing into the crowd which triggered another wave of unrest that led to attacks on public buildings and destruction of Hafez al-Assad's statues (ibid.). The brutality with which the regime decided to react to the events of the 'Qamishli uprising' further fueled anger and frustration among the Kurdish population. What could be once labeled as 'local unrest' resulted in a wave of protests within a broader Kurdish region including all Kurdish areas in Syria and Kurdish enclaves within other Syrian cities. Demonstrations were also organized in Turkey, Iraq, or Western diasporas. Opposition to the Assad regime was evident as Ba'ath party offices were attacked and statues of Hafez al-Assad were once again destroyed (Schmidinger 2018, 75). These protests lasted for several days and encountered similar violent reactions by the security forces as in the previous days.

Soon after the outbreak of the protests, Abdul Hamid Darwish<sup>16</sup> – one of the founders of the original KDPS, and leader of the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party at the time, a

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<sup>16</sup> Abdul Hamid Darwish is one of the most illustrious leaders of the 'traditional' Kurdish political parties. It was his party that started cooperating with the regime in the 1970s when the Syrian regime changed its tactic towards the Kurds from full repression to establishing contacts with some of the Syrian-Kurdish representatives. Furthermore, his position within the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party also showcases how many of the Syrian-Kurdish parties depend on their leaders and their networks of intra-personal relationships and influence among the Kurdish population – this strong reliance on the party's leader weakens the party because it fails to establish a mechanism through which leaders can change and the party can evolve (Tejel 2009, 91).

PUK-affiliated party that split away from KDPS in 1965, met with the provincial leader of the Syrian security services. A day later, a meeting occurred between the Ba'ath party leaders and several other Kurdish parties that also decided to join Darwish and negotiate with the regime (Allsopp 2015, 87). For a brief period of time, starting in 2002 and ending with the beginning of the Qamishli uprising, all parties could be said to function as representatives of Syrian Kurds; however, after this meeting, they became mediators for the Syrian regime and placed their stake in protecting the status quo (ibid.). In spite of the refusal of political parties to capitalize on the opportunity to bargain for better standing of the Kurds in Syria, the people remained active, although their disillusionment with their official political representatives grew.

In the following days, Kurdish political representatives vowed to end the violence and called for an end to the protests (Schmidinger 2018, 75). It is evident that the vast majority of Kurdish parties in Syria were afraid of engaging the regime at a higher and more dangerous level and, instead, decided to maintain the status quo without fighting for any concessions from the regime (Allsopp 2015, 87). The parties negotiated the release of several hundred of arrested protestors in exchange for cancelling the planned demonstrations. They also actively tried to prevent further public unrest by cancelling planned Newroz celebrations that were to take place on March 20-21, further connecting themselves to maintaining the status quo and intentionally inhibiting the mobilization of the Kurdish population (Allsopp 2015, 96). The coalition of political parties proposed three days of mourning during which the victims were to be remembered by black badges and black flags rather than by Kurdish nationalist symbols – further erasing any visible and public connection to Kurdish nationalism and nationalist symbols or sympathies (Savelsberg 2014, 92-93). Out of fear of repercussions – which were well-founded – majority of Kurdish parties decided to suppress the public display of Kurdish identity in exchange for their continued existence. However, what the wider Kurdish population saw was the sacrifice of the ‘Kurdish struggle’ for factionalist and personal agendas of the

parties, further fueling distrust of the population in traditional political parties – a sentiment that could be seen throughout the 2000s and 2010s. The reaction of Kurdish political parties was surprising – instead of using the popular anger and frustration as leverage, the parties aimed to calm the situation which basically meant returning to things-as-usual. This is also surprising because of the unity between the parties that could have awarded the Kurds a legitimate chance to present a unified opposition and gain concessions from the government. Most parties chose to adhere to the status quo for existential reasons – fearing persecution and arrests; the exceptions were the Yekiti party and the PYD which refused to ally themselves with the other Syrian-Kurdish parties (Tejel 2009, 118). This further fueled the division between the Kurdish parties, as one side condemned the other for accommodating the regime’s demands in exchange for personal and party survival. The underlying question of cooperation between Kurdish parties and the Syrian regime to this day remains one of the main topics of conflict among the Kurdish political representation.

The Qamishli uprising wasn’t an uprising of political parties; in the end, the main driving force behind the mobilization of Syrian Kurds were young men, most of them from lower classes (Savelsberg 2014, 92). The protests continued until March 25<sup>th</sup> and despite calls for unity between Kurds, Christians, and Arabs, the protests took on distinctly Kurdish sentiments, with Kurdish flags flown and nationalist chants chanted (Tejel 2009, 116). Conflicts between Arabs and Kurds also occurred, as well as clashes between demonstrators and various Ba’ath militias (Tejel 2009, 116). In the aftermath, dozens of people were dead, with hundreds of wounded and thousands of arrested and tortured, which included children (ibid.). In the aftermath, the Kurds were seen as a foreign element that threatened the unity of the Syrian nation – this narrative also seeped into the minds of the broader Arab population which resulted in an increase in anti-Kurdish sentiments within the society (Tejel 2009, 117). The accounts of why the Syrian regime reacted so brutally varied between Kurds – Kurdish nationalists claimed

that by creating chaos and demonstrations, the regime would be justified in getting rid of main political figures of the Kurdish movement in Syria (ibid.). In another account, the violent reaction was a result of Sunni security forces weakened during the rule of Bashar al-Assad that wanted to assert their power (ibid.).

The Qamishli uprising remains an important turning point in the standing of Syrian Kurds; additionally, it was – albeit only for a brief moment - one of very rare moments of unison between the multitude of Kurdish parties. Furthermore, the uprising brought about a wave of popular support for the Kurdish struggle which was previously unseen on such a wide scale. The mobilization that occurred during this time also affirmed a common Kurdish identity based on commemorations of national historical events, use of Kurdish symbols and the Kurdish language, and common experiences of marginalization and deprivation. Contacts between the Kurds and Syrian opposition also increased. Even though there were attempts at building a deeper cooperation between the Kurds and the Syrian opposition, none of them proved to be long-lasting.

#### **4.2. Post-Qamishli years; 2005-2010**

As a result of the Qamishli uprising, the political consciousness of many young Kurds increased considerably. This could be seen in the creation of various youth groups that supported Kurdish nationalist claims but were harsh critics of political parties which they saw as either corrupt, incompetent, or both. First of these was the Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK). The TCK was far from the only youth group that was established after the events of March 2004, but it was the biggest and best organized group that played a significant role in the protests in Rojava in 2011 and onwards (Schmidinger 2018, 77). Not only did these youth groups provide young Kurdish people with a political outlet that differed from the traditional party membership, they also voiced more radical demands that referred to Kurdish self-rule in Syria

(ibid., 78). Another change could be seen in a new type of group that originated in Syria for the first time – the Liberation Movement of Kurdistan that planned a violent struggle against the Syrian government and made reference to Kurdistan, both of which were seen as highly controversial and radical demands (Schmidinger 2018, 76). Although the group was officially destroyed in 2010 by the regime, it was historically the first Kurdish movement which “did not only explicitly call for an armed struggle on Syrian territory, but that also actually executed it” (ibid., 77).

While the developments among the Syrian Kurds were dynamic as never before, the unity that political parties showed for a brief window of time in March 2004 was proved to be a rare occurrence rather than a trend for the future. After the kidnapping and death of Sheikh al-Khaznawi<sup>17</sup> in May/June 2005 – a respected and popular Kurdish religious personality – another wave of protests erupted as al-Khaznawi’s death was thought to be the regime’s work (Schmidinger 2018, 78). However, rather than inspire more unity, political parties showcased their growing fragmentation – while 3 parties (Kurdish Freedom Party, Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria, Kurdish Unity Party in Syria) organized large-scale demonstrations attended by more than 25,000 people (Gunter 2014, 95), the rest of the Kurdish parties criticized such move, with a PUK-affiliated party leader (the aforementioned Abdulhamid Hadji Darwish) openly condemning these protests and the parties organizing them (Schmidinger 2018, 78). Hadji Darwish also aimed to unite sympathetic parties and organize them against the three parties organizing demonstrations (ibid.). While al-Khaznawi’s death led to Kurdish infighting and efforts to unite a group of parties against protesting parties, it also inspired unity

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<sup>17</sup> While Sheiks and tribal leaders mostly tend to stay out of the political landscape in Syria (a contrast to the Iraqi-Kurdish national movement in which tribes and clans play a crucial role, such as the Sheiks of Barzan), al-Khaznawi was an exception – before his death, his goal was to unite the Kurdish political parties (Schmidinger 2018, 23-24). It is possible that this ambitious goal was the reason for his kidnapping and death, most likely at the hands of the Syrian regime.

among the Kurdish population – a well-liked Sufi leader became a symbol of martyrdom which emboldened Kurdish nationalist identity among the Syrian Kurds (Gunter 2014, 95).

Another demonstration occurred in June 2005 in Qamishli, organized by the three aforementioned parties that organized the previous protests; this event was, unsurprisingly, once again met with violent opposition from the regime (Allsopp 2015, 88). The regime forces also attacked small business and non-participants, most likely in an attempt to further divide the Kurdish public on the topic of demonstrations and capitalize on the existing rift between Kurdish political parties (ibid.). The parties that criticized demonstrations highlighted these topics and blamed the organizers for “provoking the looting and bearing some of the responsibility for it” (ibid.). After the violent suppression and many arrests, from this moment until the protests of 2011, future demonstrations usually took the form of silent remembrance through gatherings and vigils; the parties clearly retreated from Qamishli-type of massive public protests and attempted to remain within the realm of action acceptable by the regime (ibid.). Once again, political parties decided to acquiesce in the face of the regime’s threats - the parties and their leaders faced jail, torture, or death; to support the status quo meant preservation of the parties’ safety (Allsopp 2015, 97). This also split the Kurdish parties into three main groups – those that cooperated with the regime but had little to no popular support; parties that were more radical in their demands for the Kurds and therefore were under constant pressure of the regime; and parties that occupied the middle that were constantly testing the regime’s ‘red lines’ and their flexibility (ibid.).

In October 2005, Syrian opposition officially included the “Kurdish problem” in the Damascus Declaration in an effort to build a unified opposition platform to the Assad regime (Tejel 2009, 126). In the document, parties that previously agreed to stop the demonstrations in 2004 decided to support the Damascus Declaration while other parties – Yekiti, Azadi, the Kurdish Future Movement, and the PYD, parties that supported active and more radical

measures – rejected the text because of its lack of focus on Kurdish issues (ibid., 127). The Declaration vowed to find a democratic solution to Kurdish questions within a wider Syrian context and propagated a view of the Syrian Kurds as a minority within Syria that was marginalized. On the other hand, the four parties that refused to join the opposition saw Syrian Kurds as their own nation and the text of the Damascus Declaration as reductive of the broader Kurdish struggle ongoing in Syria (Tejel 2009, 127). While the four Kurdish opposition parties faulted the Declaration for being reductive, many of its Kurdish supporters saw it only as the starting step for the development of real democratic change (Allsopp 2015, 93). However, the Damascus Declaration was mostly a meeting of intellectuals that bypassed the Kurdish – and Arab – populations and excluded them from the dialogue on future Syria (ibid.).

Several attempts were made to build a common platform with non-Kurdish Syrian opposition, no long-lasting and significant change was made and the Kurds rather pursued their own fight against the conditions they were facing. This division shows another important disagreement that continues to fragment the Kurdish political landscape – while the conservatives tend to see the Kurdish issue as a civic problem that sees the Kurds as a marginalized minority within Syria, the more radical parties refer to the Kurds as a nation and therefore posit more ambitious goals that include various forms of self-government. The more radical parties – Yekti, Unity parties, and Kurdish Future movement – refused to join the Syrian opposition for fears of being left on the margins of the broader issues once again. The more traditional parties saw power in co-operation with the bigger Syrian opposition and was willing to bargain with the regime for concessions.

At the same time, as writes Tejel (2009, 129), “the efforts for a unified Kurdish movement had never been more present.” At international conferences in Paris (2005) and Washington DC (2006), the final resolutions emphasized the need for a unified Kurdish movement, and in May 2006, the Kurdish National Assembly of Syria was established with the

goal of creating a unity platform for the Kurdish problem. However, most of these voices came from Kurdish diasporas outside Syria and the Kurdish representatives in Syria retreated out of fears of US meddling and the amount of control the Syrian parties felt they had to give up for an initiative that originated abroad (ibid.). A similar movement occurred in May 2007 in which 11 Syrian-Kurdish parties met to create a unified platform but because of many conflicts and long histories between the parties, the project never realized (ibid.). All of these efforts, together with the stabilization of the Syrian regime, resulted in a fatigue of the political parties and the wider population as hope for Kurdish unity in Syria dwindled. Furthermore, these failures at producing a unity platform also contributed to the crisis of existing parties that was felt by the Syrian Kurds.

During the PYD's third party congress in 2007, the party officially established its military wing, the YPG and the Central Coordinating Committee that was to serve as a coordinating and governing body that included various departments for young people, women, and culture (Gunter 2014, 110). These developments are important because they show that the PYD prepared for a potential violent struggle with the establishment of the YPG, years before the civil war broke out in 2011. Furthermore, it also gained an advantage in relation to other Syrian-Kurdish political parties which lacked their own militias.

According to Allsopp (2015, 90) we can see a dwindling of activity among the Syrian Kurds post-2008 mainly because the secret service issued a directive forbidding gatherings, demonstrations, or celebrations without explicit approval together with any Kurdish-specific sentiments being included (such as the display of the Kurdish flag). This further demonstrates that the existence and political representation of the Kurds within Syria was subject to frequent changes in approach from the government that often changed the 'red lines' within which Kurds could safely maneuver. Planned demonstrations in 2008 and 2009 were cancelled, both because

of fear of strong repercussions and the regime's promise to establish a dialogue between Kurdish representative and the regime – which never truly materialized (ibid.).

### **4.3. The revolutionary years; 2011-2018**

In 2011, a wave of protests swept across the Middle Eastern region in what was dubbed the “Arab Spring”. First protests in Syria erupted in March 2011 and subsequently spread across the nation. Although many expected the Kurds to join the anti-Assad opposition forces from the beginning of the protests, only the Kurdish Future Movement<sup>18</sup> joined the opposition from the beginning – it is also the only party, save for PYD, that didn't join the Kurdish National Council, an umbrella organization of Kurdish political parties (Savelsberg 2014, 94). Furthermore, the Syrian civil war threatened to spill over the borders and inflame other Kurdish regions, mainly the ones in close proximity in Turkey. In an environment of heightened tensions during the initial protest, it is especially important to note that most Kurdish parties, including the strongest PYD, decided not to join the anti-Assad opposition organization, the Syrian National Council/Coalition (SNC). This move can be understood within a broader context of Kurdish rocky and relatively distrustful relationship with the Syrian opposition and a distinct focus of the Syrian-Kurdish political parties on Kurdish issues rather than on the anti-Assad goals of the SNC.

The outbreak of the protests and the regime's reaction to the changing environment of what was, essentially, an insurgency by Syrian opposition, unexpectedly gave the Kurds in 2012 the opportunity to autonomous self-government within Syria because the Assad regime had to

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<sup>18</sup> The Kurdish Future Movement was established in 2005 by Mashaal Tammo and was one the only Kurdish party that participated in the Syrian revolution without a focus on the fight for Kurdish emancipation (although it does emphasize a distinct Kurdish identity); it does not call for Kurdish self-rule but rather for participation and representation in Syria's governance structures. From: <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48524&lang=en>

focus its strength on the fight with the anti-Assad opposition.<sup>19</sup> Of course, this likely wouldn't have happened if it weren't for two preludes: the Qamishli uprising and the death of Mashaal Tammo (the well-liked leader of Kurdish Future Movement) in October 2011, allegedly at the hands of the regime (Gunter 2014, 93). All of these events – together with the worsening domestic conflict with the Assad opposition - contributed to the later creation of an autonomous region, unofficially called Rojava, in Western Syria and prepared the ground for the withdrawal of Syrian regime troops from the area.

There is a misconception about Kurdish inactivity in the beginning of the protests in Syria (Schmidinger 2018, 86).<sup>20</sup> However, contrary to these claims, the Syrian Kurds of Amude were protesting as early as March 27, 2011, very soon after the first protests broke out in Daraa in the beginning of March (ibid). These protests weren't organized by political parties but rather by informal coordinating committees (although the PKK-affiliated parties tacitly supported the protests) and, apart from Amuda, were relatively weak in the number of participants. True mass demonstrations occurred only after Mashaal Tammo's death later in 2011 (ibid.).

Additionally, the criticism of traditional parties – still present since 2004 – gave rise to an unprecedented growth in the number of youth groups being established (Schmidinger 2018, 82). Once again, the driving forces behind the wider Kurdish mobilization could be found among the younger Kurdish populations rather than among the Kurdish political parties (Savelsberg 2014, 94). Sharing a distrust of the political system, young people were active mostly locally where they organized anti-government protests with specific pro-Kurdish

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<sup>19</sup> The withdrawal of forces from the Rojava region can also be interpreted as a strategic choice to allow Kurds free room to develop and realize their own political project in order to embolden the PKK along the Turkey-Syria border region and thus weaken the regime's main regional opponent by inadvertently supporting the PKK and the PKK-affiliated PYD.

<sup>20</sup> The perceived inactivity of the Kurds in the anti-Assad revolution created another split in the Kurds/opposition relationship – some parts of the opposition (e.g. The Free Syrian Army) distrusted the Kurds because they saw them as focusing on their own, partial interests like achieving self-rule or even independence (Harding 2012). On the other hand, the Kurds distrusted the opposition because of what they perceived as Arab nationalist tendencies which disregarded the fragile position of the Kurds in Syria (Markey 2012).

demands which they voiced through ‘local coordination committees’ (ibid., 89). In this way, grassroots protests paved the way for future action, and political parties – rather than inciting the demonstrations themselves – joined the bandwagon created by the civil society (ibid. 90). These groups, active mostly in the early stages of the Syrian revolution, often sided with the Syrian opposition and felt both ‘Kurdish’ and ‘Syrian’ – similarly as the Kurdish Future Movement. They gained edge in the beginning of the protests as they capitalized on feelings of frustration and marginalization; their effectiveness was also a product of a good use of modern communication technologies and social media. However, after the initial euphoria, many of the youth groups were dissolved or merged together or absorbed into party alliances such as the KNC; they also faced repression by other Kurdish parties who were feeling threatened (International Crisis Group 2013, 10).

Early after the start of the protests in March 2011, the Assad regime decided on April 7<sup>th</sup> to partially rescind its census decree from 1962 that created thousands of stateless non-citizens from among the Kurds (Gunter 2014, 101). Surprisingly, in April 2011, the Syrian regime allowed Salih Muslim – a prominent member of the PYD – to return back to Syria from his exile in Iraqi Kurdistan (Gunter 2014, 105). It is assumed that the main reason behind this move was the desire of the Syrian regime to coopt the PYD/PKK in its standoff with Turkey (ibid.). Whether this ‘power play’ is true or if Assad simply wanted to appease the Kurds in order to weaken his opposition, Salih Muslim definitely highlighted anti-Turkish sentiments – whether by attacking their support of the SNC, attacking the Iraqi-affiliated KNC as “lackeys of Turkey”, or even proclaiming that the Turkey-supported SNC was a greater threat to the Syrian Kurds than the Assad regime (Gunter 2014, 106).

This show of support towards one of the leading men within the PYD gains even more significance within a broader Kurdish context of the PKK/KRG cleavage. Although the relations between Syrian Kurds seem complex and chaotic – indeed they are – there is also an

underlying conflict between the Iraqi Kurds (KDP and PUK) and the Turkish Kurds (PKK) that has been present since the later 20<sup>th</sup> century which has been at the root of many trust issues among Kurdish political representatives. Because both of the Kurdish communities have been active in Syria, they have managed to shape the political landscape and significantly influence the Kurdish struggle in Syria. Mutual distrust, especially between Barzani's KDP and Ocalan's PKK, lies at the heart of the inability/unwillingness of Syrian-Kurdish parties to co-operate, together with ideological differences and controversial alliances. KDP is seen as an ally of Turkey, the PKK's main enemy; the PKK and the PYD are seen as the allies of the Syrian regime. The state of Kurdish politics is highly fragmented, which is good news to the Assad regime – by attacking Turkey and Turkish-affiliated opposition (such as the SNC or the KNC), the PYD not only prevents unity among Syrian Kurds but also helps Assad by fracturing, and thus weakening, the broader opposition into rival camps (Gunter 2014, 106).

Although some of the first protests appeared in the Kurdish regions of Syria as early as March 2011, truly mass demonstrations began only after the death of Mashaal Tammo in October 2011. Mashaal Tammo was an influential political activist and politician that fought for democratic pluralism in Syria from within the SNC, which would grant the Kurds equal standing within the majority society; he refused to align himself with the Kurdish nationalist parties and rather fought with the opposition forces for inclusive and pluralistic Syria. After Tammo's assassination on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, wild speculations appeared about the responsibility for the murder – Syrian Kurds blamed the regime, the regime blamed Turkey in a power move to create more chaos in Syria, others suspected Iran of sparking further fragmentation among Kurds (Gunter 2014, 100). Subsequently, Qamishli funeral procession of 50,000 people took place, making it the biggest public gathering since March 2011; the protests spread from Qamishli to other cities, both within and outside Syria that helped spread the rumor

that “a real turning point had been reached in favor of Kurdish unity in Syria and support for the uprising against the regime” (ibid., 101).

On October 26, 2011, parties that traced their origins back to the original KDPS – which constituted the majority of the Syrian-Kurdish parties - formed the Kurdish National Council (KNC) after mediation efforts by Massoud Barzani (Schmidinger 2018, 88). At the beginning of 2012, 16 parties made up the KNC with the exception of the PYD and the Kurdish Future Movement of the late Mashaal Tammo, which opted to remain a part of the SNC (ibid.)<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the KNC also included many youth and women’s groups, human rights groups, and other activists that were active in the protests. The general political goal of the KNC was to support the decentralization of post-Assad Syria which would include autonomy for Kurds.<sup>22</sup> Initially, there were two camps within the KNC in regard to the Syrian revolution – one, affiliated with Massoud Barzani’s KDP, that wished to clearly voice their support for the revolution (and overthrow of the regime) and the other one, affiliated more with Talabani’s PUK, which presented a more cautious stance towards the revolution (Savelsberg 2014, 96). We can see that fragmentation about major developments in regard to the future of Syria and Syrian Kurdistan exists even within the particular, ‘unified’ blocs.

Although no official handover was realized, the PYD was de facto in charge of the Kurdish regions by the end of 2011 (Gunter 2014, 111). In the first half of December 2012, the PYD created the Peoples Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK) which is a governing body of

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<sup>21</sup> Salih Muslim has declared that the efforts of Barzani to unite (and ipso facto increase his influence on Syrian Kurds) the Kurdish political landscape in Syria with the help of creating a common committee would “lead to the disintegration of the Syrian Kurds” (Gunter 2014, 106). Similarly, the PYD refused to attend the January 2012 KNC (Kurdish National Council) conference in Irbil or a SNC conference in February 2012. Similar sentiments could also be heard from the KNC parties that criticized PYD’s connection to the Turkish Kurds and the party’s dominating position on the Kurdish political landscape.

<sup>22</sup> The KNC was involved in talks with the Syrian opposition – whether with the Syrian National Council or the National Coordinating Body for Democratic Change – that were eventually unsuccessful. The main point of disagreement was seen in the KNC’s request of political decentralization (including Kurdish autonomy), while the opposition favored only administrative decentralization; furthermore, in SNC’s publication on the topic of the Kurdish issue, the group omitted previously agreed-upon parts that stressed the recognition of a Kurdish nation living in Syria (Carnegie 2019).

320 members that is supposed to oversee and administer the Rojava region and places where the civil war has been raging (ibid.). In essence, the goal behind the establishment of this council was to gain administrative control in the Kurdish areas governed by the Assad regime and prevent them from slipping into chaos and unchecked violence (ibid.). Furthermore, the PYD also established TEV-DEV – or the Movement for a Democratic Society – which was supposed to put into action the idea of democratic self-government according to the PKK/PYD ideology of democratic confederalism. Essentially, TEV-DEM is a coalition of 4 parties (the PYD and its allies) that de facto administer the Rojava region.

TEV-DEM, while a necessary institution for governance, also underscored the PYD's hegemony over the Kurdish regions and its unwillingness to include its Kurdish opponents in the body. In essence, the PYD has a big advantage in contrast to the other parties – not only because it possesses a strong military wing, but also because it created various institutions to implement its rule over the autonomous region. Although these PYD institutions claim to be an attempt at 'grass roots democracy', the reality is not as bright – they have little decisive power and are made up of PKK/PYD-supporters which puts in question the democratic nature of these administrative bodies (Gunter 2014, 111). Further criticism arose at this time because no democratic elections had legitimized the PYD's dominant ruling position and PYD's exclusive practices in regard to its opponents were reminiscent more of authoritarianism than grass-roots democracy.

While up until early 2012, the Kurds were protesting on the broader, anti-Assad opposition platform, by March 2012 the protesters started to incorporate Kurdish slogans and addressing Kurdish-specific issues (Savelsberg 2014, 94). Political parties also played a role in this development (ibid.). By this time, the power of grassroots coordinating committees was waning – some have dissolved, some fractured, and most of the remaining ones were incorporated either into the PYD's sphere of influence or into the KNC. Furthermore, the

Kurdish people soon understood that these committees – while capable of mobilizing the population and organizing protests - weren't capable of a long-term, society-wide change that would realize the political goals of these grassroots groups (ibid., 95).

In July of 2012, more than a year after the outbreak of the first protests, a unitary umbrella organization for Kurdish political parties in Syria was created and facilitated with the help of Massoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdistan in an attempt to reach a power-sharing deal between the two rival factions. This umbrella organization, meant as a power-sharing tool in the administration of Rojava between the PYD (more specifically, the TEV-DEV) and the KNC established in Erbil, got the name 'Supreme Kurdish Council' or 'Kurdish Supreme Committee'. The goal was to create a unity platform through which the Rojava region was to be administered. Both the PYD, and the Kurdish National Council parties took part in the Committee with 50/50 division of board members that was meant to administer the region which had been abandoned by the Syrian regime forces and consequently administered by the recently-created TEV-DEV. However, the PYD shortly increased its influence in the Committee and came to dominate its decision-making and the increasingly marginalized KNC decided to abandon the project. PYD'S TEV-DEM declared that it would replace the "interim administration project" previously agreed upon with the KNC (Sary 2016, 11). Although the Committee didn't enjoy much longevity it signaled an important, albeit short-lived, move toward Kurdish unity – unfortunately, the signing of the agreements was more of a diplomatic success rather than a true move towards unity and power-sharing of governance. It is important to note that while the Erbil agreement generally failed in what it set out to do, it built a basis on which PYD-KRG relations can be once again normalized (Iddon 2018).

Furthermore, in July 2012 the Syrian regime withdrew its forces from the Rojava region – this time, officially - to concentrate its strength against the Syrian opposition, and essentially left Rojava to be administered by the Kurds. However, this region left to the Kurds to be

administered, was fraught with conflict, violence, high tensions between the rebels, the regime loyalists, and the Kurds, together with the beginning onslaught of the Islamic State. As of this time, the Rojava – or the common name for Syrian Kurdistan – consisted of three cantons (Afrin, Jazira, and Kobani) in North and Western Syria. However, it is important to note that these cantons were separated from each other because of the territorial advances of the Islamic State that occupied these territories until June 2015 when Kurdish armed forces joined two of the three regions (Schmidinger 2018, 1). The YPG started a swift campaign to gain control of the most significant of Kurdish cities in the region and by August 2012, it managed to occupy most of them – because of the speed during which the PYD/YPG gained control of the region sparked suspicions that the military takeover was coordinated with the regime which allegedly gave the PYD information about its plans and times of the withdrawal of the security forces (Gunter 2014, 111).

Various clashes between Kurdish parties occurred in 2013, signifying the growing of fragmentation. While the PYD undoubtedly had the strongest militia – in March 2013 it established a female militia, the YPJ, to accompany the YPG - it was also strongly opposed to other Kurdish militias operating in the Rojava region (Gunter 2014, 108). While the PYD sometimes cooperated with other armed forces, it was strictly against any other Kurdish militia that could threaten its monopoly on violence. For example, on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the PYD's police force arrested more than 70 members of the Democratic Party of Syria who underwent KDP training in Iraqi Kurdistan (Gunter 2014, 108). Furthermore, it was reported that at the end of June 2013, the PYD was responsible for killing and injuring multiple Kurds in the city of Amuda, together with detaining several members of the Yekiti and Azadi parties (Gunter 2014, 108). The reaction from the other camp was quick – the KNC accused the PYD of trying to monopolize its power over Rojava and also over people within the region who refused to be subject to the rule of the PYD; furthermore, KNC claimed - once again - that the PYD is

affiliated with the Assad regime because of its alleged protection of the regime's helicopter landing sites (Gunter 2014, 108).

The tensions between the KNC parties and the PYD escalated. So much so that later in June of 2013, an anti-PYD protest was held in Qamishli, during which PYD members attacked their opponents with sticks and knives (Gunter 2014, 108). The main topic of the protest was alleged PYD cooperation with the Syrian regime; PYD's response was to once again suppress the protest and arrest protestors and political leaders from among the KNC parties (Syria Untold 2013). In an effort to stop further protests, the PYD forced the families of the victims to have only private funerals, in fears that a funeral procession akin to the Qamishli uprising in 2004 would turn into bigger anti-PYD protests (Savelsberg 2018, 100). Similar incidents of the PYD repressing its political opponents and their supporters have become a regular occurrence.

Ironically, the main topic of the protests was PYD's increasingly authoritarian tendencies that were reminiscent of the regime's tactics towards any opposition, including non-violent demonstrators. Similar tactics have resulted in the distancing of the PYD from the general population and growing distance between various parts of Rojava's politics and civil society. They have, similarly, contributed to the distrust towards political parties which are, at times, seen more as agents of 'higher powers' than true representatives of the Kurdish people in Syria.

Even though the PYD is criticized for silencing its critics and monopolizing its power over Rojava, it is still the most active group on the ground – it is not only a political party, but also offers the Kurds in Rojava social welfare, cultural services, and organizes day-to-day activities. On the other hand, most of Rojava still functions relatively well only because it is still supported by the central Syrian government in Damascus which maintains its government functions and pays salaries to government employees in this region. In this context, TEV-DEM

helped to alleviate the effects of the war while the YPG played a security role, substituting the role of the state. It was mostly focused on fighting the expansive Islamic State.

In November 2013, an official announcement was made by the PCWK about the establishment of a transitional administration in Syrian Kurdistan (Lowe 2014, 229). At this point in time, it was shown that tacit alliances between the PYD, the KNC, civil organizations, and militias were able to establish such an autonomous structure, although it is crucial to note that Rojava has faced many threats to its long-term survival (ibid.). A few months later, in January 2014, representatives of the Kurdish cantons ratified the constitution – officially the Social Contract – in which it declared autonomy from the central Syrian government and the PYD asserted its position as the official representative of the autonomous region. A new draft of the Contract was adopted in December 2016 which reflects the ideals of democratic confederalism, respect for ethnic and religious differences, and gender equality.

In 2013 and 2014, the Kurds were involved in intensive fights with their main enemy, the IS. Throughout 2013, the IS managed to encircle two of the three Kurdish cantons. Although the YPG fared relatively well, military-wise, they also incurred heavy losses. In 2014, the Yezidi minority was being targeted by the IS and the Kurdish town of Kobane was encircled by IS fighters – this siege would last until March of 2015. The fight for Kobane was strenuous and today it serves as a great moment of pride among Kurds – Kurdish fighters, Syrian and Iraqi, together with members of the FSA defended the town until the decisive US airstrikes managed to facilitate the liberation of the whole Kobane canton, city and surrounding villages (Schmidinger 2018, 105-106). However, after the destructive conflict and heavy losses, the humanitarian situation worsened (Schmidinger 2018, 105). Many civilians left the Kurdish regions because of the brutality and intensity of violence and lack of resources. While the fight for the liberation of Kobane serves as a point of national pride among Syrian Kurds, its post-war fate has created some disagreements. Some members of the PYD proposed an idea in which

the war-torn city of Kobane would be left destroyed as a memorial to the fighting and the war while a new city would be built nearby; this has, understandably, not resonated well with Kurdish opposition parties and the population that wants to return home (ibid., 108). However, generally, the fight against the IS has played a significant role in the construction of Kurdish identity in Syria. The pure evil that the IS came to personify is put in contrast with the heroic Kurdish fighters that have so far manage to successfully protect the Kurdish autonomous region from an onslaught of violence. This narrative also fits into the broader narrative of Kurdish nationalism and its articulation of the Kurds as heroic fighters throughout their violent history who manage to protect and reaffirm Kurdish national identity even in the face of formidable enemies. Additionally, the fight against the IS has also been viewed as a fight against the civilization's enemy by the Western democracies and the international arena. This was significant for the Kurds as the main fighting force against the IS because of the number of powerful international allies this fight brought them. However, it remains to be seen whether this support will be translated into broader political action on the international level or whether the Kurds' previous allies and their support will disappear together with their enemy.

In October 2015, the PYD established the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) - an alliance of various Kurdish, Arabic, and other militias, led by the YPG, which focused on fighting the Islamic State and is responsible for maintaining security in Rojava. In the official Rojava constitution (or 'Social Contract') from 2016, the SDF is cited as being the official defense force of the autonomous region. The SDF managed to liberate significant Rojava territories and, continuing this assault, managed to expel majority of the IS from the Kurdish territories by August 13th, 2016 (Schmidinger 2018, 112). In October 2017, the SDF managed to liberate Raqqa, the last stronghold and the self-proclaimed capital of the IS (Gunes 2019, 68). The US support – in active engagement, arms supplies, and other resources - given to the SDF helped it considerably (ibid.). However, the fighting didn't stop – Turkish troops were watching the

swift advancements of the SDF and its US support from behind the border and didn't like what they were seeing. Turkey continued to plan its invasion of Afrin and promised to recapture all regions controlled by Kurdish forces (ibid.). In 2016, Turkey attacked YPG positions for the first time and increased its involvement throughout 2017 – both military and diplomatic to convince the US administration to stop supporting the SDF. The swift SDF advancement would play a role in a new conflict between Turkish troops and the SDF in the region of the Kurdish-majority city Afrin and its surroundings.

In March 2016, the Rojava region officially declared its autonomy under the name “Democratic Federal System of Rojava-Northern Syria”. However, later it was renamed to “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” (DFNS) in December 2016, dropping the reference to Rojava or ‘West Kurdistan’. Based on the Social Contract put into effect in 2014, the region is meant to be territorially united, decentralized, polyethnic and multicultural, and built around Ocalan's idea of democratic confederalism – this was meant to be reflected in the region's name. It is administered with the help of the Democratic Autonomous administrations which is essential at involving local population in governance (Gunes 2019, 70). At the heart of this political project is the proclamation to end the marginalization of Kurds and other minorities “through organizing them at the local and regional levels and thereby breaking the state's dominance and hegemony is at the core of the system” (Gunes 2019, 62). These organizing principles stand in opposition to the KNC-affiliated camp that does not share PKK's ideology. Similarly, changing of the official name from Rojava to DFNS was another divisive point between the camps. While the PKK-affiliated PYD favored the name change because of the polyethnic nature of the region and the fact that a few cities and regions are historically Arab, the Iraqi-affiliated Kurds criticized this move for abandoning the ‘Kurdishness’ of the region by dropping any mentions of the Kurdish people from the name (Schmidinger 2018, 2). In essence, Kurdish nationalists often object to terminology that reflects and draws attention to the

national borders between the Kurds – the name Rojava – shortened from ‘Rojavaye Kurdistan’ as it is popularly called - can be generally translated and understood as ‘West Kurdistan’ which relates the Syrian Kurds to a bigger, pan-Kurdish community within the region (ibid.). This conflict further shows the deep fragmentation between the Syrian Kurds with Kurdish nationalists who identify with the pan-Kurdish movement on one side and do not agree with PKK sympathizers. This rift showcases fundamental differences between two camps of the Kurds in Syria and points to a division on a deeper level that relates to different perceptions of self-understanding and self-identity.

In 2016, the conflict between the PYD and the KNC intensified. In August, the KNC leader, Ibrahim Biro, was arrested and deported to Iraq; KDPS offices in Qamishli were attacked by PYD supporters; over the next few days other KNC supporters were arrested (Schmidinger 2018, 136). The situation escalated so much that the KNC once again held anti-PYD protests in multiple Kurdish cities including Qamishli, Amude, and even Vienna (ibid.). In early March of 2017, a PKK-affiliated Yezidi militia was caught in an armed fight with members of the Iraqi-affiliated Rojava Peshmerga who tried to expel the Yezidi militia from the Iraqi mountains. Two weeks after this occurrence, more than 40 members of the KNC parties were arrested, supposedly as an answer to the violence against the Yezidi militia (Schmidinger 2018, 115). Following the rise in intra-Kurdish conflict, the headquarters of the KNC was raided on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017 and 13 KNC members were arrested (Schmidinger 2018, 137).

The stability provided by the ruling PYD increases the region’s (and the party’s) legitimacy; this was further supported by first elections held on September 22<sup>nd</sup> (commune elections) and December 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 (local elections for town, city, and regional councils). Elections for the higher posts within the DFNS were planned for 2018 but had to be postponed because of the armed conflict in the Afrin region. While the voter turnout was 70% the elections

were dismissed by the Syrian regime – referred to as a “joke” by the Syrian deputy Foreign Minister (Reuters 2017) and the KNC dismissed these elections as illegitimate and “a flagrant violation of the will of the Kurdish people” (Ibrahim, al-Haj Ali and Edelman 2017). In spite of this, it can be argued that to some degree, these elections have provided much needed legitimization to the regime set up in Rojava (Schmidinger 2018, 133). However, the elections overwhelmingly included PYD sympathizers and therefore sympathizers of the project of democratic confederalism, other opponents from within the Syrian-Kurdish community deny the legitimacy of the autonomous ‘government’ and label it as authoritarian, especially as the important decisions are made almost exclusively by the upper echelons of the PYD party (ibid., 134).

As was mentioned before, currently the DFNS faces another violent conflict. Attacks of Turkish troops on SDF positions began in 2016 and continued throughout 2017 in an effort to stop territorial gains of the Syrian Kurds. In January 2018, Turkey began attacking the city of Afrin and the Afrin canton by an air and land offensive (Cunes 2019, 76). This offensive – dubbed ‘Operation Olive Branch’ by Turkish troops – continues until today and its main goal is to stop further territorial gains by the Kurds as well as the inhibition of creating a territorially compact and connected Kurdish region that would share its border with Turkey and its Kurds. In this way, we can see that the fragmentation of Kurds is not only internal but also influenced by external context in which Kurdish opponents further encourage the fragmentation of Kurds in a ‘divide and rule’ strategy.

## **5. Intra-Kurdish Fragmentation in Syria**

### **5.1. Territorial Fragmentation**

The Rojava region, made up of three cantons following the Syrian-Turkish border region, remains territorially fragmented to this day. In the beginning of the Syrian revolution, these cantons were all separated from one another mainly due to the onslaught and territorial expansion of the Islamic State. When the cantons were originally established in 2014, they constituted only of three smaller regions far away from each other. The YPG forces managed to liberate enough territory so as to connect two of the three cantons (the Kobani and the Jazira canton); however, the Afrin canton remains territorially separated from the rest of Rojava. It is currently under the rule of Turkey which puts the Afrin Kurds into a situation similar to pre-2011.

It is also important to note that because of the distance between the three strongholds of the Kurds – Afrin, Kobani, and Qamishli (capital of the Jazira canton) – also means that there are significant differences between them. These differences concern mainly the demographic structure (presence and numbers of minorities) and the economic structure.

The economy of the three cantons is quite different – while the Afrin and Kobani cantons are predominantly known as agricultural cantons, the Jazira canton contains several gas and oil fields which make up most of its revenue. Similarly, the Afrin and Kobani cantons are the two of the most damaged cantons that are in dire need of rebuilding and economic incentives. These cantons struggle with the availability of electricity and drinking water, making the gap between Kurdish territories within Syria even more significant. The economy of these cantons is also influenced by their geographical position. While the Afrin and Kobani cantons are neighbored by Turkey which establish an embargo on the Rojava region which further worsens the economic situation of these two cantons. The Jazira canton that neighbors not only Turkey but also the Iraqi Kurdistan enjoys much more economic freedom because of

its connection to the KRG. This connection also enables the entrance of humanitarian aid into Rojava which is crucial for the poor and underdeveloped region. However, the border crossing between the KRG and Rojava has also been a source of contention because of political rifts between the two opposing political camps in Rojava and the KRG.

The Jazira canton – although long considered to be the Kurdish stronghold in Syria, especially in the capital, Qamishli – is the most demographically complicated. Jazira is very ethnically mixed – while the Kurds constitute around 80% of the canton’s populations, there are also sizeable minorities of Assyrians, Armenians, Arabs, and Chechcens (Lebsky 2016). The administration of the biggest cities, Qamishli and al-Hasaka, is split between the Assad regime and the PYD. Similarly, the Afrin canton also has a sizeable Arab minority. This is important as another point of fragmentation that was pointed out in this thesis is the question of how to treat minorities and especially the presence of Arabs that were resettled in the Kurdish regions during the rule of Hafez al-Assad – this high presence of Arabs creates another contentious topic between the Kurds of Syria.

The inability of Kurds to create a unitary and homogenous Rojava points to possible future difficulties in the administration of this autonomous region. Because of the significant economic and demographic differences, the differences between living standards across the cantons, the geographical distance between the cantons, and the onslaught of Turkey together with its total embargo on its border with Rojava, the political project of an autonomous Rojava is currently very fragile.

## **5.2. Cultural and Linguistic Fragmentation**

Although there is a common Kurdish culture across Syria without significant differences in the cultural practices, fragmentation has been evident mainly in the interconnection between culture, politics, and the articulation of identity. It must be noted that

with the installment of an autonomous Kurdish region, the general freedom to practice and enjoy Kurdish culture in public spaces has increased considerably – after the PYD took control of the Rojava region, all laws prohibiting the celebration and manifestation of Kurdish language were lifted (Tsurkov 2019). This meant that pro-Kurdish books and magazines could be freely published; the teaching and speaking of the Kurdish language, Kurmanci, was legalized; education on Kurdish history or literature has been included in the school curriculums; new media outlets could be established.

This cultural flourishing is also reflective of the many minorities that live in the Kurdish region. It is important to note that even though Rojava is under Kurdish leadership, the Kurds do not make up an overwhelming majority within this region and they share this region with many other minorities, either ethnic (e.g. Assyrians, Arabs, Armenians, Chechens) or religious (e.g. Yezidis, Muslims, Christians). This also adds to the linguistic fragmentation of Rojava. These minorities are awarded freedoms like the Kurds, in the PYD's project of inclusive, grassroots democracy. However, it must be said that while these minorities can practice their culture and can be involved in local and regional councils, at the highest levels they are ruled overwhelmingly by the Kurds. There are seldom any non-Kurdish symbols displayed in Rojava and the Rojava imagery remains Kurdish (Miley and Riha 2015). The biggest question among Kurds remains in the question of integration of the Arab minority – while some consider them an integral part of Rojava after decades of co-habitation, others see them as a fifth column of the Syrian regime or allies of the Islamic State. There is another cleavage visible in this regard: while the PYD's ultimate goal is a multi-ethnic inclusive democracy that, in theory, aims to integrate the Arabs of Rojava into the administration, the KDP/KNC views these Arabs as a result of the Arabization policies of the Ba'ath regime and wants to resettle them outside of Rojava (Jongerden and Jong 2015). While the ruling PYD

officially runs a polyethnic, inclusive administration, there have been reports of forceful displacements of Arabs and demolitions of Arab villages (Amnesty International 2015).

The area controlled by the Kurds and its cultural freedoms stand in direct opposition to the Afrin region which is currently under Turkish control where the public display of a distinct Kurdish culture has been once again criminalized – the use and teaching of Kurdish were forbidden, Newroz celebrations banned, and public manifestations of Kurdish identity like the Kurdish flag or statues have been removed and destroyed (Tsurkov 2019). This also alludes to another fact of the Kurdish struggle – Kurdish culture is deeply politicized as the display of Kurdish culture is perceived as directly tied to the Kurdish nationalist project and to political demands of the Kurdish political parties.

The politicization of Kurdish culture is evident in the media or in school curriculums. Many Kurds living in Rojava are actually opposed to the new curriculums which are constructed and produced by the ruling Kurdish party, the PYD (Tsurkov 2019). This means that ideas and the articulation of identity from the ‘official’ ideology of the PYD are taught in schools, leaving little room for criticism of the ruling party or critical thinking. Similar development has also happened in the realm of media – dissident sources that offer criticism or present alternatives to the PYD are repressed and arbitrarily punished for exercising their fundamental freedoms and rights. There have been reports of TEV-DEM controlling media in Rojava in order to control the messages projected to the Kurdish population which further complicates the articulation of a different Kurdish identity proposed by other political actors (ibid., 100). Throughout the years, journalistic freedom has been slowly destroyed as journalists and magazines critical of the ruling party were either intimidated, heavily censored, arrested, or beaten (Gutman 2017). In 2015, the PYD revoked licenses of ‘Rudaw’, a KRG-affiliated news agency, or Orient TV, a Syrian opposition TV station (ibid.). This further highlights that

the growing authoritarianism of PYD stands directly in the way of inclusion of opposition into the political system and alternative articulations of Kurdish nationalism and identity.

Intra-Kurdish linguistic fragmentation is not a significant issue in Syria – most of the Kurds speak Kurmanci, “North Kurdish”, that is also spoken in Turkey’s Kurdish areas. Fragmentation along the linguistic line occurs mainly when we look at the Kurdistan region as a whole. However, this does not mean that the Rojava autonomous region is linguistically homogenous – because of the many and numerous minorities living in this region, the number of used languages and dialects is higher. For example, the two ‘official’ languages are Kurdish (Kurmanci) and Arabic, but various dialects of the Syriac language are also used by the Assyrian minority (Tsurkov 2019).

### **5.3. Political Fragmentation**

During the Syrian revolution and subsequent civil war, the main actors that created different versions of Kurdish identity were the PYD, the KNC, and youth groups such as the National Organization of Kurdish Youth (SOZ). The articulation of identity by these actors was greatly influenced by other Kurdish political parties and their leaders, most notably the PKK, the KDP, and the PUK. Other actors in identity-making included the Syrian regime and the anti-Assad opposition, which contributed to various interpretations of Kurdish identity, although these are not the focus of the thesis. The main split remains across the PYD-KNC line, or more broadly, the PKK-KRG line. Both of these actors present two competing versions of Kurdish nationalism and refuse to accommodate the other for the sake of unity (International Crisis Group 2013, 22). The main conflict lies in the question of leadership of the pan-Kurdish community and the tools employed to get there. Both sides lack a common vision of potential

post-Assad Syria and of the possible future and development of the Rojava region (ibid., 26). Conflicts also include the parties' position towards the Turkish, Iraqi, and Syrian governments.

The various youth groups or local coordination committees, present in Syria during the beginning years of the Syrian revolution and the subsequent civil war, talked of the Syrian Kurds more as a minority within Syria that has been fighting for citizenship and human rights without any mention of secessionism or territorial fragmentation (Rifai 2016, 16). They focused on being Syrian and Kurdish at the same time and advocated for general democratization in Syria. They also had closer ties to the Arab opposition and didn't promote Kurdish nationalism specifically. Their version of Kurdish identity focused on unity between Kurds and other Syrians rather than on Kurdish nationalist claims (ibid., 17). These Kurdish youth groups became easily divided and ran into a problem of translating mobilized crowds of protestors into meaningful political action (International Crisis Group 2013, 10).

In the beginning of the revolution, it was mostly the young Kurdish generation that set the scene for further developments and played an important role in setting the agenda on topics of democratization and marginalization of Kurds (Savelsberg 2014,101). However, soon after the Kurdish political parties took over the dominant position within the political landscape of Syrian Kurds and, due to their internal fragmentation and intra-Kurdish fighting, have acted more "as obstacles, not as driving forces for democratization" (Savelsberg 2014, 102). While these youth groups have generated a great amount of support for revolution and anti-regime protests, they have failed to translate their achievements into a long-term political plan. Most of them have either fell apart, merged into a political party or have been absorbed by umbrella organizations such as the KNC or the KCK.

In the beginning of the revolution, the local youth groups managed to increase kinship and solidarity between Kurds, in Syria and in the neighboring countries; however, these sentiments were only present at the grassroots level and did not 'spill over' into the political

arena (Kaya and Whiting 2017). Quite the opposite – the increased Kurdish activity that came with the social upheaval post-2011 exacerbated intra-Kurdish tensions on the elite level and increased divisions between competing political actors (ibid.).

### **5.3.1. Kurdish national identity according to the PYD and the KNC**

The PYD stresses the idea of democratic autonomy and shares with the PKK its wish to produce transnational Kurdish identity that relates to pan-Kurdish sentiments rather than to Syria as a national state (Rifai 2016, 13). The PYD subscribes to the idea of creating a ‘non-statist democracy’ that would be based on self-organization through local and regional committees (Jongerden 2019, 62). The PYD/PKK sees this as a model that could also be applied in other Kurdish communities and more broadly, across the Middle East (Kaya and Whiting 2017, 16). Since the PKK ideology is seen as non-statist, in that its goal is not the creation of an independent nation-state (i.e. Kurdistan) but rather a collective of Kurdish communities that would govern themselves based on the idea of ‘grassroots democracy.

The main institution that serves to recreate the PYD’s version of Kurdish identity is the PCWK through which it administered the day-to-day life of Rojava inhabitants; the YPG which proved it could successfully secure the region also helped to create a PYD support base within Rojava (ibid., 14). The PCWK and the PYD aimed to counter what they perceived as a corrupt and unsuitable KNC counter-model of how Rojava should be administered (International Crisis Group 2013, 13). In the beginning, the PYD put itself in the position of countering the ‘traditional’ political parties that have failed in representing the Syrian Kurds. Although it can be argued that it is now guilty of many actions which it previously criticized, this is true for other Kurdish parties as well – accusations of mistreatment of political opponents have been used by both the PYD camp and the KNC camp.

The PYD is also reported to be curbing the freedom of assembly by suppressing anti-PYD protests<sup>23</sup> and has been arresting political activists who do not support the ruling party (Gutman 2017). The PYD currently does not enjoy much popularity among the Kurdish population – Kurdish opposition politicians estimate that the PYD only enjoys 10% of real support from the Rojava population (ibid.). Whether this is true or not is hard to confirm, since the 2017 elections didn't involve any opposition parties and the only voting options were the PYD's members and allies.

One of the biggest advantages that the PYD has is its military wing that gave the political party legitimacy through the liberation and safe-keeping of the Rojava region. The role of PYD's military wing also lies in its creation of a national myth, a vision of heroic Kurds who fought to protect their homeland – the battle of Kobani can be seen as an expression of this sentiment. These characteristics could be also applied to the whole conflict with the IS, in which Kurds – and the YPG in particular – were seen as the protectors of their homeland. The PYD also used various symbols to reference Kurdish identity, such as displaying Kurdish national symbols, like the flag, during their rallies and using Kurdish language (ibid.). More specifically, the PYD also showed public support for PKK, as portraits of Ocalan were flown during the PYD demonstrations.

With the help of new communication channels and utilization of social media, the PYD has successfully promoted the idea of 'Western Kurdistan', an autonomous region independent from Syria (ibid., 15). Additionally, the PYD won over many supporters because they did not present themselves as a traditional, centralized political party which appealed to many youth

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<sup>23</sup> Most of the anti-PYD protests were organized in relation to reports of the YPG kidnappings of young men and women – sometimes even children under the age of 16 – in order to fill the militia's ranks (Gutman 2017). It is estimated that as much as 40% of the militia's fighters were recruited by force; others join because of the salary and the lack of other employment opportunities (ibid.). This points to the fact that while the YPG is the strongest Kurdish militia in Syria, a big part of its members does not adhere to the PYD's ideology – which can lead to the doubts of the PYD's real popularity on the ground. However, gauging the real support behind the PYD in reality is extremely difficult, as the PYD silences its critics and the 2017 election results were skewed because of the absence of any opposition parties.

organizations and activists tired of the status quo (Jongerden 2019, 65). However, its close ties to the PKK and the Turkish Kurds prevent the PYD from forging an independent Syrian-Kurdish identity and the PYD's refusal to cooperate with other Kurdish political actors underlines this point. The main criticism aimed at the PYD is centered around its authoritarian governance, with many calling the PYD "dictators" (Krajeski 2015, 99). Criticism is also voiced because of the PYD's monopoly over violence and seeing the group as using violence to reach desired political aims; non-PYD members often cite non-violence as their reason for joining KNC-related parties (Berge 2015, 167).

The KNC has been more vocal about Kurdish future in post-Assad Syria and often refers to a relationship with the Syrian regime, aiming for decentralization but no territorial fragmentation within Syria (Rifai 2016, 15). Similarly, the KNC parties reproduce heroic moments in Kurdish history – although they cannot boast of liberating Rojava like the YPG – and have also used portraits of the KDP founder and ex-president of Iraq, Mustafa Barzani, during various protests (ibid., 16). The KNC parties aimed to distance themselves from anti-regime protests and emphasized Kurdish right to self-determination (International Crisis Group 2013, 11). However, unlike the PYD, the KNC lacked institutional strength and therefore wasn't as successful at building such a strong support base although the PYD's authoritative tendencies have turned many Syrian Kurds against them. Furthermore, the complexity of relationships within the KNC further complicates its reach towards the broader Kurdish population.

When talking about the creation of an independent Kurdistan it is extremely important to note that perceiving intra-Kurdish differences and conflict as inferior – and thus, claiming that the Kurds cannot have an independent state because of their 'inferior' inability to cooperate with each other would show signs of orientalist thinking. Rather, what this thesis set

out to study was the extent of intra-Kurdish fragmentation over fundamental political questions and whether these rivalries are conducive to a state-building enterprise. Furthermore, it is important to note that while the PKK/PYD does not advocate and fight for the establishment of a Kurdistan in its original sense – as a nation-state of Kurds, it does not reject the ‘spread’ of democratic confederalism to the broader Middle East and especially to the Kurdish minorities in this region. Ocalan’s ideology is not about breaking down and building new state borders, but rather about transcending of these borders through building self-governed local and regional communities that are meant to serve as an alternative to the ‘state solution’ proposed by the KNC and the KRG. This is also a vision of future Kurdistan but it is not based on the traditional proposition of a typical nation-state as Kurdistan is usually understood.

Nevertheless, most of Kurdish political movements have ultimately sought some form of recognition and self-determination, either through autonomy, self-government within a state or an independent state (Jongerden 2019, 62). Although Kurdistan – an independent Kurdish state – has been an idea tightly connected to discussion over the ‘Kurdish struggle’, it has been shown that political cooperation within ‘Kurdistan’ is highly factionalized and fragmented. While throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century the main disagreements between various Kurdish movements lay in the form of self-determination, since the 2000s the main cleavage between these movements is between those supporting the creation of a ‘statist’ solution, i.e. federalization, growing autonomy, with a future vision of an independent Kurdish nation-state (the case of the KNC/KRG) and those rejecting it and pursuing a form of non-state government (the case of the PKK/PYD) (Jongerden 2019, 62).

It is evident that the most fundamental difference between the PYD and the KNC lies in their approach to state and state-formation. While the PYD, in theory, rejects the state and favors self-government by the people themselves through autonomous assemblies, the KNC aims to replace the Assad regime with an alternative that would allow the Kurds to govern

themselves autonomously within Syria (Jongerden 2019, 65). For unity to occur within the Syrian-Kurdish political landscape, either (or both) of the parties would have to make radical concessions in their view of the Kurdish state-form, which seems highly unlikely as these tenets make up the basis of the parties' respective ideologies. This fundamental difference and mutual exclusivity of the proposed ideas of Kurdish future in self-rule point to an unsurmountable obstacle in reconciliation and inclusive power-sharing. This also highlights a broader problem that applies to the pan-Kurdish political movement(s) – the struggle between the PKK and the KRG model remains one of the most significant obstacles to a pan-Kurdish state.

The relations between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan have been formed by mutual distrust and conflicts mainly because of the conflicting visions that the main political actors present; this relationship can be seen as a microcosm of the broader, cross-border Kurdish issue in which two large and most active camps – the Turkish and Iraqi Kurds – have often shared very similar goals but in spite of this, have stood in opposition for much of their intertwined history. Despite the fact that there have been attempts at mutual reconciliation between the Rojava and the KRG – such as permanently opening a border crossing between the two regions and establishing economic ties between them – this relationship remains tense after years of strain and failed unification attempts. The main manifestation of this struggle and the biggest obstacle to reconciliation between the two Kurdish political camps remains - the refusal of cooperation between the PYD and the KNC within Syria. The PYD, the group in power, is now much too strong to agree to the KNC demands of equality and it seems that the only way normalization could occur is if the KNC accepted to be politically active within an administration based on the PKK/Ocalan's ideology which clashes with the ideology of the Iraqi-affiliated Kurds and their parties (Iddon 2018). As was mentioned above, it is highly unlikely that a true reconciliation between these two political actors will happen any time soon as such a move would require one of the parties to dramatically change its outlook on the Kurdish political

project and its future. This cleavage remains the most significant aspect of intra-Kurdish fragmentation in Syria, but also in the wider pan-Kurdish movement. These competing ideologies and articulated identities create a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to a unified Kurdish political movement that would enable the creation of a common Kurdish (non)state based on either ideology proposed by the two political camps.

While there have been signs of cooperation between these two political actors – mainly in the fight against a common enemy, the IS – and waves of pan-Kurdish sentiments that were triggered by the events of the Syrian civil war (e.g. the fight for Kobani), the political fragmentation within Syria increased as the PYD has been accused of clamping down on its opposition and on critics of the existing regime.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the opposition parties are unable (and unwilling) to participate in the Rojava elections which further increases fragmented relations between the two camps. On the other hand, the KNC has strongly renounced the PYD and its tactics multiple times and has distanced itself from the PYD administration. At this point in time, the fragmentation between these parties seems to have taken on a totality – either of the political camps not only refuse to co-operate, but refuse to even participate in the same governance structures or in the same Kurdish political project. This directly contradicts the possibility of a unified Kurdish nationalist movement that would enable the creation of a common political platform. These developments are also reflected in the wider pan-Kurdish movement where the same scenario and the same opponents (i.e. PKK versus KRG) create a fundamental obstacle to Kurdish unity.

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<sup>24</sup> The PYD has been accused not only of violations of the international humanitarian law, suppression of freedom of speech and the freedom of journalists and media, or suppression of the right to assembly by banning anti-PYD protests. The ruling party has also attacked its political opponents – the KNC and its member parties – by regularly arresting opposition leaders and party members or by closing down nearly all offices of the Kurdish opposition parties in 2017, supposedly on the grounds that these parties weren't officially registered (Ibrahim and Nelson 2017). When asked, the KNC parties said they didn't need to register with the PYD, because their 'license' was given to them by the people (ibid.). Same attitudes were present also during the 2017 elections when the KNC parties refused to participate on the PYD's platform.

Furthermore, the main ideas and future goals of the Kurdish parties about future development differ significantly between different parts of the Syrian-Kurdish landscape – while most agree that Syrian Kurdistan, decimated by war and marginalized for decades, needs to be developed, the road to ‘development’ is another point of conflict between the sides (Schmidinger 2018, 7). While the PKK follows a more leftist approach – promoting a collectivists form of socialism, the KDP propagates ideas of neoliberal economy (ibid.). The PKK promotes a return to the communal style of living and business, especially in agriculture which creates a large part of the Rojava’s economy (together with oil fields mainly located in the northeast of Syria), while the KNC promotes a more traditional model of centralized government and a private business sector. The differences in economy structures between the PYD-dominated Rojava and the KRG do not only result in ideological splits but also in difficulties in mutual trade.<sup>25</sup>

In the words of Schmidinger (2018, 129), “the political split between the PYD and the parties of the KNC has proven impossible to overcome. Instead, opposition forces accuse the PYD of having erected a new dictatorship.” The internal dynamics of the Kurdish national movement in Syria remain strained and unfriendly, mainly because of the monopoly the PYD enjoys over the administration of the autonomous region. Most important developments – such as the official proclamations of the three cantons – were done without coordination with the KNC parties (ibid.). Lack of democratic elections until September 2017 means that gauging the sympathies of the population and their stance towards the PYD is extremely difficult. Furthermore, none of the opposition parties have taken part in the administration of Rojava, which further delegitimizes the political system currently functioning in the region (ibid.).

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<sup>25</sup> For example, the Semalka border crossing between Rojava and the KRG – the only crossing of its kind – was closed for more than three months due to political rifts between the PYD and Iraqi Kurdistan in the past; it has been reopened since the 2016 (Rudaw 2016). This demonstrates how political fragmentation and intra-Kurdish conflicts affect Rojava’s economy, the delivery of humanitarian aid, or the possibility to escape to a ‘safe place’ in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Accusations of attacks on opposition from the PYD and the insufficiencies of the judicial system have also been criticized. These inadequacies have been mostly aimed at PYD, as most of the suffering members are from the KNC camp (Schmidinger 2018, 132).

Another point of conflict among the two camps, also mentioned above, is the opinion towards the Arab minority within Rojava – while the PYD aims at establishing an inclusive region, the KNC parties favor resettling the Arabs to their original homes, pre-Arab Belt policies (Schmidinger 2018, 130).

While doubt remains about the future nature of Rojava-KRG relations, there is a possibility of future normalization with one of the top diplomats from Rojava saying that “the interest of the Kurdish nation today requires that, even if we are weak politically, we have to come together and prioritize national interests over personal or party interest” (Iddon 2018). However, this trend is not yet visible in the intra-Kurdish relationships – quite the opposite. The differences between the PKK and KRG visions of Kurdistan still remain significant and are perceived as mutually exclusive. Similarly, concessions from either camp have been extremely rare and centrifugal forces within the movement have been on the rise as both camps continue to alienate each other rather than try to embark on a journey of power-sharing. The political actors involved follow their own parochial interests without much discussion about the ‘bigger picture’ of the pan-Kurdish cross-border movement. Some cooperation could be visible in the Kurdish fight against the IS, but even this cooperation hasn’t been coordinated and continuous.<sup>26</sup> Although the near vision of greater autonomy for Syrian Kurds is shared by the political actors, the application of this autonomy finds fundamental ideological differences between the parties. It is very likely that political fragmentation along these fundamental

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<sup>26</sup> While the PYD did accept help from the KRG militias during the fight for Kobani, in another instance – when a strong enemy was not present – the PYD forbade a KNC-affiliated, KRG-trained militia of 3,000 fighters to cross the border from Iraq to Syria. Most recently, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) dominated by the YPG refused the offer from KRG to send Peshmerga fighters to bolster the vulnerable Syria-Turkey border (Rudaw 2018).

ideological lines will continue in Syria and this is likely to have a significant impact on the broader Kurdistan region as tensions between PKK and KRG are set to continue.

## 6. Conclusion

What this thesis set out to study was the topic of intra-Kurdish fragmentation and whether the available findings significantly influence the prospects of a unified Kurdish nationalist movement emerging that would be suitable and capable of representing the Kurdish people on the way to self-rule and autonomy. Although intra-Kurdish infighting has been a recognized trait of the Kurdish nationalist movement(s), this fragmentation is seldom put into the center of attention; it is usually accepted by scholars as a fact of the Kurdish landscape. More specifically, the text examined the aim of this work was to trace whether this fragmentation is a natural sign of a heterogeneous society or whether it is significant enough to pose obstacles to the construction of a broader, inclusive, and power-sharing Kurdish national movement. The thesis studied four types of fragmentation (political, territorial, cultural, and linguistic) with a greater focus on political cleavages as this aspect relates the most to the question of the Kurdish state-building enterprise and is also deeply intertwined with the other aspects of fragmentation. While the thesis provided historical context of Syrian-Kurdish nationalism since the end of WW1 and the times of the French Mandate in Syria, its focus lay mostly on the time period post-2000 and 2004 when the Qamishli uprising occurred and shone a spotlight on the Kurdish struggle in Syria. Of course, it is once again to be highlighted that while the internal fragmentation of the Kurdish nationalist movement is an important aspect of the Kurdish struggle for more independent and autonomous self-rule, it is definitely not the only answer to the question of future Kurdistan. Actions of other regional and international actors greatly determine the Kurdish future fate, as well as the geopolitics of the region and the transnationality of the Kurdish issue.

The issues of cultural, territorial, and linguistic fragmentation are often overshadowed by the Kurdish political actors. The main reason behind this is that ‘Kurdishness’ – in its cultural, political, territorial, and linguistic sense – has been politicized in the Syrian environment

because it has been, in itself, illegalized. Before 2011, Syrian Kurds faced waves of repression from the regime and public displays of ‘Kurdishness’ – including national symbols, celebrations of Kurdish holidays, the use of the Kurdish language, Kurdish literature and art – were criminalized by the Syrian regime. The political representatives translated these repressive practices into political requests which created the link between Kurdish culture and language on the one hand and political action on the other. The cultural aspect of Rojava is also conducive to fragmentation because of the presence of many minorities in this region. The most divisive topic in this regard is the question of the Arab minority, most of which was resettled throughout the Kurdish-heavy regions during the rule of Hafez al-Assad. The presence of other minorities in the Kurdish regions also complicates the Kurdish claim to these territories; the case of the resettled Arabs also strengthens the regime’s claim as it can argue in the future that the Kurdish regions are simply not Kurdish enough.

Territorial fragmentation is not only visible from the pan-Kurdish view of the Kurdistan region which is separated by national borders. This has further implications on the divergence of the individual Kurdish nationalist movements – the borders do not only demarcate territories of the nation states but it also separates the Kurdish people into different contexts and realities. The transnationality of the Kurdish issue, therefore, further highlights intra-Kurdish fragmentation and the growing distance between various Kurdish ‘subgroups’. Furthermore, the Rojava region in itself is fragmented.

While there were several occurrences that could point to a reconciliatory and unified Kurdish action, whether in Syria or across national borders, these instances were mostly true for the wider Kurdish population(s) rather than for the political actors and parties. On the contrary – the fragmentation between different political actors increased considerably post-2000 and especially post-2011. There were several reasons for this development – the clash between traditional and new parties and their methods (e.g. exemplified by the actions of the

Yekiti party); the institutional weakness of many of the political parties (e.g. parties' existence is directly tied to the party founder/leader); the high quantity of political parties with parochial and often mutually exclusive interests and a history of inter-personal conflict; prioritization of personal and party interests over the interests of the Kurdish people; diverging views on key issues such as co-existence with minorities, cooperation with the Syrian regime, or affiliation to the Turkish/Iraqi Kurds; and others. However, one of the most significant centrifugal forces in the Syrian-Kurdish political landscape is the existence of competing and mutually-contradictive ideologies of the two political camps that have formed in the Rojava region since the start of the Syrian revolution – the PKK-affiliated PYD and its allies on one side with the KRG-affiliated KNC and its member parties and movements. This clash of ideologies and future goals is also reflective of the broader pan-Kurdish issue where these two camps also clash regularly and present seemingly irreconcilable differences. The mutual distrust and hostility, which pervades their relationship, has also contributed to polarization of the intra-Kurdish conflict. This is further underscored by the PYD's hegemony over Rojava which it has asserted in the region since the beginning of the Syrian revolution – because the PYD is firmly embedded in Rojava at this point in time, it appears that future reconciliation between the two camps is highly unlikely as the PYD does not have many incentives to share its power. This also heightens the PKK/KRG tensions, as the PYD has managed to put the PKK's ideology into practice and show that the Iraqi KRG is not the only Kurdish self-rule experiment to be successfully translated into reality and to be emulated by other Kurds.

All of the contemporary Kurdish nationalist movements that exist across the Middle Eastern regions have developed in different conditions, contexts, and an environment. The past experiences of these Kurdish 'subgroups' differ significantly. Kurdish identities articulated by these movements have been shaped by their relationship with their 'Others' who were all different. This divergence between the individual Kurdish movements, that have been

influenced by their national context, can be also said to be one of the reasons why there is no unified Kurdish national project and also one of the reasons why it seems increasingly unlikely that one will be constructed in the future.

At this point in time, the Syrian civil war is still actively underway and the Afrin region is controlled by Turkish forces who entered the city in 2018. This lends itself to a chaotic landscape that is vulnerable to frequent changes. Furthermore, an important question hangs over the Kurds' heads in regard to the Syrian regime – while it did give up most of its control over the oil-rich Kurdish areas in Northern Syria, it is highly likely that this was only a strategic gamble in difficult times that will be revoked once the conflict with the Syrian opposition is over – and internal Kurdish fragmentation that makes the Syrian Kurds more vulnerable to attacks from outside the group can help the regime in its potential fight over the control for Rojava. Furthermore, the Syrian Kurds must face an anti-PYD Turkish assault and come to terms with the withdrawal of international support, mainly from the US administration. All of these factors make prognostics about the future of the Kurdish national movement highly uncertain – however, it seems that the odds are not in the Kurdish people's favor. In such a difficult context, Kurdish conflicts and sectarianism further underscore the uncertainty about future developments that the Kurds face and show that intra-Kurdish fragmentation significantly weakens the Kurdish national movement by posing a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to power sharing, common action, and, possibly, a united Kurdistan – whatever form it may take.

## Záver

Diplomová práca sa venovala téme internej fragmentácie sýrskych Kurdov. Jej hlavným argumentom bolo konštatovanie, že vnútorná fragmentácia a nejednotnosť v rámci kurdskeho národného hnutia je jedným z faktorov zabraňujúcich vytvoreniu jednotného (pan)Kurdskeho národného hnutia a tým pádom aj vytvoreniu nezávislého kurdskeho štátu, respektíve politického projektu. Základnými kategóriami, ktoré boli hodnotené bola politická, teritoriálna, a kultúrna/jazyková fragmentácia.

Prvá časť práce sa venovala najmä teórii a predstavila teoretické ukotvenie základných konceptov, ktorým sa diplomová práca venuje. Zároveň predstavila hlavné kategórie fragmentácie a poskytla základné informácie k témam kurdskeho nacionalizmu a národnej identity. Druhá časť práce sa venovala historickému a súčasnému kontextu postavenia Kurdov v Sýrii a to v období od konca 1. svetovej vojny až po rok 2018. Súčasne uviedla analýzu empirických dát a to opäť na základe troch kategórií fragmentácie, ktoré boli predstavené v teoretickej časti.

Výsledky práce poukázali na vysoký stupeň vnútornej fragmentácie sýrskych Kurdov a poukázala na hlavné štepne línie tejto fragmentácie. Štiepenie pozdĺž politickej úrovni sa ukázalo ako najvýznamnejšie, keďže je prepojené s ostatnými študovanými kategóriami. Štiepenie poukázalo najmä na vzájomné konflikty aktérov pozdĺž línie PKK verzus KRG, ktoré vytvára na sýrsko-kurdskej (ale aj pan-kurdskej) politickej scéne dva hlavné tábory, ktoré prezentujú vzájomne sa vylučujúce záujmy, ideológie, a ciele do budúcnosti. Tento konflikt sa preukázal ako kľúčová prekážka k vytvoreniu spoločného a zjednoteného kurdskeho politického projektu. Vzájomné zhoršujúce sa vzťahy medzi kurdskými aktérmi a neschopnosť efektívnej komunikácie a kompromisu taktiež poukazujú na vytváranie zdanlivo neprekonateľných rozdielov v rámci sýrskeho kurdskeho národného hnutia. Teritoriálna fragmentácia sa v Sýrii prejavuje najmä neprepojenosťou všetkých kurdskejších regiónov na severe Sýrie a vysokou rôznorodosťou a nevyrovnanosťou medzi jednotlivými kurdskými regiónmi. Kultúrna fragmentácia, úzko prepojená s tou politickou, taktiež poukázala na nejednotu Kurdov v Sýrii a to najmä v otázkach prístupu k nekurdským menšinám alebo politickej kontroly kultúrnej a občianskej scény v kurdskej autonómnej oblasti Rojava.

Vo výsledku práca potvrdila argument uvedený na jej začiatku – nielenže poukázala na významné rozdiely a štiepenie, taktiež zhodnotila aj zhoršujúcu sa situáciu medzi významnými kurdskými politickými aktérmi v Sýrii, ktorá reflektuje pan-kurdske trendy.

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## **Fragmentation of Kurdish Identity?**

### **The Case of Syrian Kurds**

#### **Introduction to the Research Topic**

The Kurds constitute a nation numbering around 30 million people which is spread out across the Middle East along the Zagros Mountains, mainly in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, although there are numerous Kurdish minorities all around the globe - they make up one of the biggest minorities in the world. Most of the Kurdish people identify as Sunni Muslim, but the group is very heterogeneous – not only when it comes to religion, but language as well. The history of this nation is traced back to the Medes people of the Middle East (9<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BCE) – but in spite of long history of existence, this ethnic group has never enjoyed independence from stronger empires or nation states. The Kurdish people were ruled by the Arabs, then by the Ottomans and the Persians. Although the future looked promising for the Kurds post-WWI – according to the Treaty of Sevres of 1920, Kurdistan was to be established in the region – but this was short-lived, as eventually the Kurds were separated into several neighboring nation states.

Despite the fact that the Kurds have never achieved proper, modern statehood (except for the short-lived Mahabad Republic in Iran), the idea and wish for self-government has stayed with the Kurdish people consistently and the question of creation of the Kurdish state is highly debated. Modern Kurdish nationalism, which emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, can be found at the root of this desire. During this time, the Kurdish people have attempted to gain more independence and get closer to the idea of self-government – either as an autonomous region or a sovereign state.

The recent history of the Kurdish people has been shaped by discriminatory policies of the respective states. The history of each ‘subgroup’ (meaning the Syrian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, Turkish Kurds, and Iranian Kurds) was and continues to be differentiated in regard to the state’s approach to dealing with the Kurdish minority. The destiny of the Kurdish people is also heavily shaped by other factors external to the group, such as the state and opinion of the international community, Middle East regional powers, or conflict in the region (such as the Syrian Civil War) among others. However, as significant as these external factors are, this thesis will not focus heavily on them as these particular topics have enjoyed a lot of attention from the

international academic community. What will be of more importance to this research are the internal factors within the Kurdish group – namely, I will look for the differences and fragmentation within the Kurdish community in order to see whether the creation of an independent Kurdistan would be a viable and a feasible goal for the group. In my hypothesis, I state that the differences and diversity of the group in questions regarding such a development (e.g. state formation, ideas of self-government, co-operation and power-sharing between important Kurdish political actors) are too vast for the creation of Kurdistan to occur now or in the near future.

Much of the debate today centers around the topic of a Kurdish state – there are many credible reasons that encourage such a development (e.g. nation's right to self-determination; history of oppression, discrimination, genocide; etc.). However, in my thesis I would like to critically assess the possibility of such an endeavor. Even though many see the Kurds as a cohesive group with a set of shared ideas and belief, the reality presents a much more complex picture of a nation fragmented along several lines. The lack of a unified political discourse on the important existential questions of the Kurdish people will be questioned and studied in my research. In my thesis, I will study the causal mechanisms that led to Kurdish fragmentation and attempt to uncover the main reasons behind such a development.

However, the Kurdish nation spans several states and consists of millions. As it would be almost impossible to write a complex, in-depth analysis of the entire Kurdish nation in the limited diploma thesis format, I have chosen the case of Syrian Kurds as the main example to study. There are several reasons why – firstly, studies on this topic are less numerous than the studies on the Turkish or the Iraqi Kurds. Additionally, the Kurds in Syria enjoy more autonomy and independence than those of Iran which means that the analysis can more accurately study self-governance and distinct identity. Secondly, both Turkish and Iraqi Kurds have been involved in Syrian 'Kurdistan'. This is relevant as I want to answer if and how have these 'subgroups' influenced, or attempted to influence, the development, goals, and identity of the Kurdish minority and its political parties in the state. There are undoubtedly many factors external to the group that shape its developments – the ongoing civil war being one of them – and the internal study of the group will not be sufficient alone to encompass all the nuances of the complex Kurdish question. However, as the Syrian Kurds stand at several intersections, I am of the opinion that the gathered data and end results could be relevant to the Kurdish issue as a whole, and showcase the main issues connected with the possible creation of an independent Kurdish state.

## Research Questions

The main idea behind my master thesis is to analyze the concept of an independent Kurdish state from a critical standpoint and theoretically examine whether the establishment of such a state is a real possibility or whether the internal heterogeneity and diversity between Kurdish ‘subgroups’ is too extensive for such a development to occur. By heterogeneity and diversity, I refer to the differences between important Kurdish political figures and parties and divisions within the Kurdish community itself in relation to the ideas of self-government, shared ideas about autonomy/independence, and internal rivalries between political players or other types of affiliations (e.g. tribal). I will study whether the distinct Kurdish subgroups now differ too much in their goals, ideas of governance, and identities for the establishment of a common state. There are also other points of contention relating to Kurdish identity such as tribalism or fragmented geographical territory. Another question I will try to answer is whether these internal differences are questions of politics and ideology, or rather identity and self-understanding of what it means to be Kurdish.

As an example of such a split within the Kurdish community, I will look at the case of Syrian Kurds and their development from a neglected minority within Syria to a minority with its own political parties and leadership and partial autonomy in the Rojava region. This example of transformation and development of the Kurdish minority will serve as case used for studying the internal developments of Syrian Kurds throughout the years. In the Syrian case, it is also easy to see a more complex inter-relationship between the Kurds of the region as a whole, as both Turkish and Iraqi Kurds have been heavily involved with the Syrian Kurds. One of the major splits that could possibly define this case is along this Turkish/Iraqi line (i.e. PKK/KDP split, or even Ocalan/Barzani split). For these reasons, I chose to track the process of Kurdish development in Syria. Through describing this process, I will attempt to show the points of contention within the Kurdish community and track the growing fragmentation of the group. I will also study whether the findings of the analysis in Syria could be applied to the broader Kurdish community within the region and shine a light on a bigger problem of a fragmented nation. In this way, I will attempt to transform the findings of my thesis into a broader context of the Kurdish struggle.

### *Hypothesis:*

The factors contributing to the inhibition of creation of a Kurdish state are not only external but significant internal factors are also at play. The main internal factor that contributes to the

Kurdish inability of creating their own state is disunity and fragmentation within the group. This fragmentation is a result of a clash between distinct identities and major Kurdish political parties and figures from Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and others which divide the Kurdish community into several antagonist groups unable or unwilling to compromise with each other. This development thus complicates the creation of an independent Kurdish state and inhibits Kurdish development in regard to increasing levels of self-governance.

***Research Questions:***

- Is the Kurdish community too internally fragmented for the creation of a Kurdish state to occur in the near future?
- How does the case of the Syrian Kurds exemplify fragmentation of the Kurdish nation and identity?

## **Methodology, operationalization, and used data**

This diploma thesis is aimed at further deepening the understanding about the inner workings of the Kurdish community in the regional context. While the ‘Kurdish question’ has been awarded much time and attention in the academic world, critical analysis of its internal workings, inter-group relations and differences in shared goals or ideals has not enjoyed as much attention. The standing of the Syrian Kurds started to change with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and this autonomy-driven process still retains much of the momentum. The Syrian case also includes further complexities, such as the involvement of the Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, each of which has been pushing its own agenda within the region. As the developments continue to maintain their dynamism, I will attempt to include as recent information as possible including the year 2018.

In my thesis, I will employ the process tracing method, more specifically the explaining outcome process tracing as defined by Beach and Pedersen (2011)<sup>27</sup> at the APSA annual meeting as a “case-centric method that attempts to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of an outcome”<sup>28</sup>. This type of process tracing includes both systematic and non-systematic (i.e.

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<sup>27</sup> BEACH, Derek and Rasmus Brun PEDERSEN. *What is process tracing actually tracing?: The three variants of process tracing methods and their uses and limitations*. Paper prepared for presentation at The American Political Science Association annual meeting Seattle, Washington, USA September 1-4, 2011, 1-35.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

case-specific) causal mechanisms which can in turn provide results that could be used in other similar cases or reveal topics for further study. In this particular case, I will test my hypothesis and attempt to explain why the Kurdish movement in Syria is fragmented and divided, and through process tracing try to find the answers as to how this situation came to be, what main factors and mechanisms contributed to it, and whether these results could be applicable to other cases or the Kurdish region as a whole.

The thesis will use both primary and secondary sources relevant to the topic. The primary information will include announcements and proclamations of the involved actors, official statements and other similar information taken from some of the numerous outlets of the different Kurdish groups – be it television, radio, newspapers and magazines, or official outlets of the actors. Secondary sources will include studies on Kurdish politics and relationships between Kurdish subgroups (Mansour 2012; Paasche 2015), discourse studies of the Kurdish group (Sheyholislami 2011, Ekci 2014), studies on Kurdish identity and its development (Galip 2015; Rifai 2016). More broadly, I will be interested in literature on fragmentation of identity and relevant information on Kurdish ethno-nationalism and its developments (Kuzu 2016; Romano 2006; Vali 1998; Yavuz 2007). The theory on process tracing and a critical reflection of this method and its relationship to security studies will also be included (Beach and Pedersen 2011; Bennet and Checkel 2014; Checkel 2017). Other factual information will be taken from relevant secondary literature on the topic, as well as from various state and non-state agencies which track the situation of the Kurdish minority.

## List of References

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