

## Chapter 14

# Kurdish Diaspora's Diverging Political Aspirations in the MENA Region

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### **Abstract**

*The main Kurdish political parties in the Middle East have different political and ideological goals. Varying approaches to the Kurdish issue are based on differences emanating from different ideologies and political interests among different groups. For instance, in Syria, the Movement for a Democratic Society seeks to create a democratic and decentralized confederation that promotes diversity in ethnicity, religion, and gender equality. Conversely, the Kurdish National Council advocates for Kurdish autonomy within Syria. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its associated groups throughout the region are opposed to Kurdish nationalism, and advocate for a democratic, confederal, multi-ethnic initiative instead. Their focus is on promoting grassroots democracy, cultural rights recognition, and self-administration within the existing borders of the states controlling Kurdish territories, rather than challenging those borders. This research aims to explore the geopolitical and historical context of the Kurdish diaspora's presence in different countries in the region; to examine the nuances and dimensions of the current political aspirations of the Kurdish diaspora in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); and to analyse the future repercussions of current political aspirations of the Kurdish diaspora.*

**Keywords:** Kurdish, diaspora, political, MENA

## Introduction

The Kurds inhabit a region spanning approximately 392,000 square kilometers and covering parts of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Based on recent demographic statistics from the four countries, the total Kurdish population is estimated to be around 28 million. In Turkey, the eastern and southeastern areas are referred to as “North Kurdistan”, with a Kurdish population of approximately 15 million residing in an area of about 190,000 square kilometers. In northern Iraq, the region is known as “South Kurdistan”, with around 7 million Kurds living in an area of about 125,000 square kilometers. The northeastern part of Syria is called “West Kurdistan” or “Rojava Kurdistan”, where about 2 million Kurds inhabit an area of approximately 12,000 square kilometers. Lastly, the northwestern region of Iran is called “East Kurdistan”, with a Kurdish population of about 4 million residing in an area of about 65,000 square kilometers (Manyuan, 2017).

From the 1960s with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to the 1990s with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), political parties actively promoted Kurdish nationalism and advocated for their people’s rights. The PKK, in particular, adopted a new name and political agenda, calling itself the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress. In pursuit of Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights, the PKK even endorsed Turkey’s full membership in the European Union, hoping that this would exert pressure on Ankara to address the Kurds’ grievances.

This research endeavors to provide a comprehensive examination of the geopolitical and historical context of the Kurdish diaspora’s presence in various countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. By delving into their migration patterns, settlement, and interactions with host societies, the study aims to understand the factors that have shaped the Kurdish diaspora. Additionally, the research seeks to analyse the current political aspirations of the Kurdish diaspora in the MENA region. It involves an exploration of their demands for cultural recognition, political

representation and autonomy, along with an assessment of the strategies they employ to achieve these objectives. The study goes beyond the present circumstances to project the potential future repercussions of the diaspora's political engagement, shedding light on its possible influence on regional dynamics, governance structures and state-society relations. Through qualitative research methods such as content analysis, the study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Kurdish diaspora's political landscape, contributing to academic knowledge and policy development.

## **The Geopolitical and Historical Context of the Kurdish Diaspora's Presence in Different Countries in The Region**

During the premodern era, neither the Ottoman nor Iranian states had fixed borders, and the modern concepts of "territorial integrity" and "sovereignty" were not adopted until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their primary concern was centralising power so as to effectively collect taxes and enforce military service through appointed governors. To reduce the Kurdish presence in the fertile lands west of Lake Urmiya, both the Iranian monarchs and the Ottoman regime took different measures. The Iranian monarchs resettled Turkish tribes like the Afshar and Qara Papakh in the region, while the Ottoman regime forcibly deported some Kurdish tribes to far-off territories, including Libya. However, the state's attempts to assimilate the relocated populations into the state culture and language were not successful, as these were primarily confined to the court or the capital city. In the absence of state-sponsored mass education, official language, mass media, and modern institutions, the deported Kurdish populations managed to maintain their language and culture. They were known by their neighbors as Kurds or identified by their Kurdish tribal or clan names (Nezan, n.d.).

In the aftermath of World War I, the Ottoman part of Kurdistan was redivided and incorporated into Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Secular and nationalist regimes assumed power

in Turkey and Iran and implemented harsh assimilation policies. In Turkey, a law from 1934 mandated the transfer of non-Turks, mainly Kurds, to Turkish-speaking regions, limiting their population to 5%. Kurdish villages and towns were depopulated, and Turks were resettled in Kurdish areas. Turkey and Iran suppressed several Kurdish revolts in the 1920s and 1930s, forcibly resettling around one million Kurds in western Turkey after the 1925 Kurdish revolt. The suppression of Dersim Kurds from 1937 to 1938 has been regarded as a genocide, leading to waves of refugees entering neighbouring countries (Olson, 2000).

Subsequently, the 1950s saw a majority of Kurdish Jews leave historic Kurdistan. This was triggered by the Iraqi government passing laws that revoked their citizenship and froze their assets, accompanied by bomb attacks on Jewish establishments in Baghdad. In recent years, connections between Kurds in Israel and their homeland have strengthened, with cultural initiatives fostering ties. Political initiatives seeking official support between Israel and the Kurdish Regional Government also exist, but the main motivations remain cultural and nostalgic (Kara, 2019). Israel's Jordan also saw Kurdish immigration, with the Kurdish population in Jordan believed to range between 60,000 and 70,000 individuals, who maintain their political influence. Furthermore, the Kurdish diaspora maintained a positive relationship with the Jordanian court (Williams, 2014).

In contrast, Turkey and Iran aimed to destroy the tribal, feudal, and religious centres of power among the Kurds. Their policy was to integrate Kurds as citizens rather than recognising them as a distinct group with self-rule or cultural and linguistic rights. Iraq, under British Mandate and the monarchy, acknowledged limited Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights, but the suppression of the Barzani revolt from 1943 to 1945 led to several hundred refugees seeking asylum in the Kurdish region of Iran. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two significant developments resulted in the major uprooting and resettlement of Kurdish populations both within the region and internationally. The first factor

was the ongoing coercive assimilation policies implemented by the governments of Iraq, Iran and Turkey, which led to a growing resistance among the Kurdish people. As a response to these oppressive policies, armed conflicts erupted in Iraq intermittently from 1961 to 2003, in Iran from 1967 to 1968 and again since 1979, and in Turkey since 1984.

In Turkey, significant events such as the 1980 military coup and the armed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) from 1984 to 1999, along with ongoing repression, led to a forced urbanisation process within the country. These factors pushed more Kurds to seek refuge in diasporas across the region and around the world. The Turkish government, treating the PKK's demands for self-rule as terrorism, destroyed and evacuated hundreds of villages and hamlets, resulting in a significant internally displaced population. Additionally, the Southeast Anatolia Project, a major hydroelectric and irrigation network, flooded several hundred villages and displaced hundreds of thousands of villagers.

In Syria, repression of Kurds began in 1958 with the formation of the United Arab Republic and continued in the following years. Many Kurds were stripped of Syrian citizenship, and plans were made to depopulate Kurdish regions and replace them with Arab settlers. This led to a sizable Kurdish refugee population seeking asylum in neighbouring countries like Lebanon. In Iran, the armed conflict between the Kurds and the Islamic state also created a significant refugee situation, with tens of thousands seeking refuge in other countries. These wars and conflicts have not only contributed to the formation of diasporas but also fostered interactions among trans-state Kurds, leading to both unity and conflict within the fragmented Kurdish community (Benjamin, 2023).

Over the years, Kurds in Syria have faced challenges, including periods of repression, discrimination and political activism. The first three coups following Syrian independence were carried out by officers of part-Kurdish background. However, Kurds were subsequently purged from senior army

ranks during Arab nationalist rule. Repression and conflicts persisted, leading to Kurdish urbanisation and political activism. Similarly, the issue of the Kurdish problem has had a significant impact on Turkey's foreign policy over the years. During the 1990s, some Arab states did not provide support to Turkey in its efforts to combat the PKK, which led Turkey to strengthen its relations with Israel (Gumusluoglu, 2016). A parallel situation appeared to be repeating itself as the PKK's active militant branch in Iran, known as the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, necessitated cooperation between Turkey and Iran (Kara, 2019).

### **Nuances and Dimensions of Current Political Aspirations of the Kurdish Diaspora in the MENA**

#### **Turkey**

Tensions have escalated between Turkish authorities and Kurdish groups, such as the PKK, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and People's Defense Units (YPG), which is the Syrian Democratic Union Party's armed wing with ties to the PKK. These groups have conducted various attacks against Turkish authorities in the southeast. Ankara faced a dilemma as it relied on the Kurdish people's protection in its war against the PKK at home and the PYD in Syria. While it is unclear which states supported Barzani's efforts, Israel overtly backed the Kurdish people's quest for their own state, despite considering the PKK a terrorist group. Saudi Arabia also saw a benefit in using the Kurds to weaken Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and sent signals supporting a Greater Kurdistan to reduce the ambitions of these countries (Hearst, 2017).

YPG is "heavily influenced by the ideas of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in jail in Turkey since 1999, convicted of treason." (Perry & Jones, 2022). Abdullah Öcalan's vision calls for a "democratic nation project" that can unite people of various ethnic backgrounds and cultural traditions in Turkey, Syria and the Kurdistan region. He

criticises the concept of nation-states in the Middle East, arguing that they have caused disasters and deepened the crisis in the region. Öcalan believes that a third world war is taking place globally, with the Middle East as its centre of gravity, and the fate of capitalist modernity's third world war will be determined by developments in Kurdistan. He advocates for a democratic nation solution that fosters peace, equality, freedom and democracy, exemplified by the self-administration of Rojava in Northern and Eastern Syria. Öcalan emphasises the importance of a democratic negotiation and social reconciliation to solve the long-standing Kurdish-Turkish conflict and calls for a dignified peace and meaningful democratic solution in Turkey. However, he has been held in total isolation on İmralı Island since 1999 (Öcalan, 2020).

Meanwhile, the PKK's ideology has evolved, and it now advocates for a decentralised system of local self-governance called "democratic confederalism" (Palmer & Holtz, 2023). The PKK has repackaged itself with the formal name of "Union of Communities in Kurdistan" (KCK) (Saeed, 2019, 102). "KCK is intended as the first step of transformation from political movement to social movement." The KCK aims to protect "Kurdish and other minorities from assimilation and politicising them and increasing their awareness against fascist and genocidal attacks and could be seen as a resistance against any threat that wants to attack diversity and democracy." Cultural linkages such as the official recognition of the Kurdish language and the establishment of civil institutions that aim at promoting gender and youth equality while focusing on "elimination of unemployment and poverty" remain part of the KCK's aspirations. Notably, the KCK also aims to focus on ecological improvement, that was seen to be deliberately destroyed. These efforts are part of the Democratic Autonomy Project that the KCK proposes as an "alternative model of managing society to that of the centralist statist authority in Turkey" (Saeed, 2019, 170-175).

## Iraq

The Kurdish political movements in Iraq are marked by complex alliances, shifting loyalties and armed conflicts. Iran's involvement played a significant role in supporting different Kurdish factions, influencing the dynamics of the Kurdish struggle in Iraq (Bruinessen, 1986). In Turkey, a series of pro-Kurdish parties were established over the years but faced repeated bans by the Constitutional Court. The first was the People's Labour Party (HEP) in 1990, which later merged with the Social Democrat Party (SHP) for elections in 1991. Despite gaining 22 seats in the Turkish Grand Assembly, the HEP was banned in 1993.

After its disbandment, the Freedom and Democracy Party (OZDEP) was formed in 1993 but was also outlawed, leading to the establishment of the Democracy Party (DEP). However, DEP members faced legal challenges, with some MPs sentenced to prison and others seeking refuge in Europe. Following this pattern, the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) emerged in 1994, becoming the first Kurdish party to participate in national elections. Although it gained significant support in the Kurdish region, it failed to cross the 10 percent threshold required to enter the Turkish Parliament. HADEP was eventually banned in 2003. The Democratic People's Party (DEHAP) was founded next, gaining around seven percent of the total votes in the 2002 elections but still not enough to secure parliamentary seats. DEHAP later merged with the Democratic Society Party (DTP), which faced accusations of being the political wing of the PKK. In 2009, the DTP was banned, and its co-chairs were stripped of their immunity and barred from political membership for five years. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) emerged as the eighth pro-Kurdish party, with a focus on seeking a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue through peaceful means. However, like its predecessors, it also faced the risk of being outlawed by Turkey's Constitutional Court (*History of Kurdish Political Parties in Turkey*, n.d.).

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Notably, the HDP, established in October 2012, built upon the democratic goals of its predecessors by actively engaging with diverse non-Kurdish groups. It emerged from the Peoples' Democratic Congress (HDK), which was a coalition comprising the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), along with leftist parties, women's associations, environmentalist organisations, and associations representing various ethnic and religious minority communities (Aziz, 2022).

Initially, several early pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey were focused on communism and economic empowerment, uniting Kurds and Turks toward a common objective. However, as pro-Kurdish advocates became more outspoken about Kurdish rights, differences arose within these parties regarding the priority of these rights. Consequently, Kurdish activists established their own communist and socialist parties. While these groups initially cooperated with other left-leaning counterparts, the 1960 anti-communist crackdown led to greater independence and emphasis on regional identities rather than communist affiliations for pro-Kurdish political parties. When attempts to integrate the pro-Kurdish movement into the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) faced resistance, a majority of its remaining members formed the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Labour Party (HEP) (Koontz, 2021).

The HDP, formed in October 2012 through the consolidation of 20 socialist parties, is recognised as a pro-Kurdish leftist party. The HDP's policy statement delineates its objectives, notably advocating for the self-determination rights of the Kurdish people. The party actively seeks a nonviolent and democratic resolution to the Kurdish predicament, emphasising equality and voluntary unity. Furthermore, the party endorses causes such as decentralised governance, gender parity, environmental conservation, education, support for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more (LGBTQ+) community, socially progressive policies centred on workers, and the elimination of obligatory military service. The HDP also aims to attract additional

minority demographics, including secular and liberal voters. The HDP maintains loyalty to Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the banned PKK, but functions within the framework of the Turkish political system (Lansford, 2016).

### **Syria**

In Syria, the Kurdish political landscape is characterised by the presence of two opposing parties, namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The PYD currently controls territory in Syria and leads the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which serves as a local partner to the US-led Global Coalition. However, despite its territorial control and military role, the PYD faces challenges in terms of international recognition and participation in negotiations concerning Syria, unlike the KNC, which enjoys a recognised status. The discord between the two Kurdish parties can be attributed to their differing ideologies and the interference of regional and international actors. These factors have contributed to a lack of harmony within the Kurdish political landscape in Syria. Nevertheless, there have been recent efforts from both sides to reconcile their differences through direct negotiations. These steps indicate a willingness to find common ground and work towards a more unified Kurdish political front in Syria. However, the journey towards reconciliation may still face obstacles due to the deeply entrenched ideological differences and external influences on the Kurdish political scene.

Unlike other parts of Kurdistan, the political party divisions within Syria, particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistane li Syria-PDKS), are notably complex. Most Kurdish political parties in Syria, with the exception of the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD), have emerged as a result of their separation from the PDKS, which was founded in 1957. Throughout history, Syrian administrations have not recognised or allowed the PDKS and subsequent Kurdish political parties to participate in Syrian elections. These parties have faced prohibitions, lack of recognition, and increased pressure, as they have

been viewed as a threat to the country's integration and Arab identity. Consequently, the rights of these Kurdish parties have been limited. Despite the challenges they have faced, the Kurdish political opposition in Syria has pursued a sensitive and moderate approach to advocate for the establishment of a separate Kurdish state in neighbouring countries. Their struggle has been characterised by peaceful and democratic methods.

The PYD, founded in 2003 by Syrian Kurds, has adopted a distinctive stance by neither siding with the Syrian regime nor with the opposition. Instead, the PYD has justified its position by highlighting the neglect of the Kurdish people's natural and democratic rights. The party has shown a preference for resolving current issues pragmatically and peacefully. However, the PYD has also embraced the principle of armed struggle when deemed necessary to address existing problems (Tugdar & Al, 2017, 28-29). The Kurdish National Council (KNC) was formed in October 2011 in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Initially comprising 11 Kurdish parties, its membership grew to 15 in 2012 with the addition of other parties and movements. However, the number decreased to 13 by 2018. Many of the parties within the KNC align themselves with the ideology of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which governs the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The council also includes left-wing Kurdish parties and youth movements, some of which emerged after the start of the Syrian revolution.

The Syrian PYD maintains close ties with the Turkish PKK, which has been designated as a terrorist organisation by the United States, the European Union and Turkey. Despite this association, individual PYD officials deny any direct connection and assert that the PYD operates independently, even though it collaborates with the PKK in the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK). The KCK is an alliance of Kurdish forces and parties from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, following the approach of democratic federalism under the leadership of the PKK. The KNC played a crucial role as one of the founding members of the National Coalition for

the Forces of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition in 2012. Members of the KNC actively participate in various leadership bodies, including the High Negotiation Committee and the Constitutional Committee. These engagements demonstrate the KNC's significant involvement in Syrian political affairs and its efforts to represent Kurdish interests within the broader Syrian opposition. The KNC considers Peshmerga as part of its command structure (al-Ghazi, 2021).

However, the PYD has chosen not to align itself with the main Syrian opposition platforms, such as the Syrian National Council, the Syrian Coalition for the Forces of the Revolution, or the Free Syrian Army. Instead, it maintains its own path and objectives, leading to complexities in its relationships with other Syrian political factions. At present, the PYD holds the leadership position within the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), which is a coalition comprising several parties such as the Assyrian Union Party, the Democratic Peace Party of the Syrian Kurds, and the Kurdistan Liberal Union Party. The People's Defense Units (YPG) serves as the military wing of the PYD and leads the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a military alliance formed by various armed factions.

The objective of the collective is to bring about a resolution to the Syrian conflict through a decentralised framework that guarantees the rights of minority groups, including the Kurds. Unlike the rebel factions in western Syria that aimed to overthrow Assad, the YPG and SDF have largely steered clear of direct confrontation with him throughout the seven-year war. This has distinguished them from the aforementioned rebels. Both the SDF and YPG affirm that their goal is not to establish an independent nation (*Kurdish-Backed Body Aims to Widen Authority in Syrian Northeast*, 2018).

The PYD has two main objectives: achieving constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and establishing autonomous governance. In terms of the first goal, the PYD shares similar aspirations with other Kurdish parties in Syria, all part of the Kurdish National Council, seeking recognition of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group with political and cultural

rights, and advocating for a nation with robust institutions ensuring equal rights for all citizens. Regarding the second objective, which involves creating democratic autonomy, the PYD diverges from the KNC, its main political rival. The KNC follows a “Barzani approach” that aims for a power shift from clans to the state, aligning with liberal nationalist principles, similar to Iraq’s model. In contrast, the PYD pursues a bottom-up strategy, where local communities govern autonomously within a unified Syria. Essentially, the PYD envisions a decentralised Syria, where decisions are made at the local level and then coordinated with higher levels of the system (Kızılkaya et al., 2021).

### **Iran**

The recent protests in Iran have reinvigorated diaspora politics, with Kurdish opposition groups facing challenges in finding common ground for the future of the country and the rights of Kurds within it. Cracks in the Kurdish opposition became apparent when Abdollah Mohtadi, the leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala), a Kurdish leftist-nationalist party, joined the Georgetown Group. This alliance, announced at a prominent event at Georgetown University in February, included seven other Iranian opposition figures and celebrities, such as Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran’s last Shah, activist Masih Alinejad, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, and others. The group released a “Solidarity Charter”, outlining a vision for a future political system that is “decentralised”, “democratic”, and “secular”, to be established through a referendum. However, the Georgetown coalition suffered a setback when Pahlavi and Esmaeilion withdrew their participation in late April. Despite this, Alinejad, Boniadi, Ebadi, and Mohtadi appear to have remained involved. It is worth noting that the charter signed by Mohtadi was rejected by leaders of other major Iranian Kurdish groups. Mohtadi defended his participation by citing political pragmatism, stating that the current priority is to “topple the Islamic Republic”, and that ethnic communities like the Kurds can later expand their demands once this goal is achieved.

The fate of the Georgetown Group remains uncertain, but the tensions within the Kurdish opposition underscore the challenges of uniting various groups with differing visions for Iran's future and the rights of ethnic minorities, including the Kurds (Salih & Faris, 2023).

Meanwhile, the PYD/PKK and Iran have developed an alliance. Iran seeks to establish a secure route to its Hezbollah-controlled territory in Lebanon by leveraging the PYD/PKK's control over parts of Syria. This strategic move directly contradicts the interests of the US. The historic relationship between Iran and the PKK persists, with the PKK's stronghold in northern Iraq encompassing the Qandil Mountains, some of which are within Iranian territory. Iran's response to the PKK, despite Turkish pressure, has been relatively subdued. In contrast, Iranian security forces have targeted the KDPI, aligned with the KDP. While Iran has shown sympathy toward the PKK and provided limited military cooperation with Turkey, its support has transitioned to being orchestrated through Iran-led Shia militias spanning Syria to Iraq. This complex situation further intensifies the regional dynamics and the challenge it poses to the security interests of the various actors involved (Ozkizilcik, 2021).

### **Future Repercussions of Current Political Aspirations of The Kurdish Diaspora**

The political aspirations of individual Kurdish parties within the diaspora have far-reaching implications for both their respective host countries and the broader Middle East region. These aspirations are characterised by diverse ideologies, strategies, and relationships with regional and international actors. The PKK's commitment to democratic confederalism and local self-governance reflects a departure from its earlier emphasis on armed struggle. The YPG's role as the military wing of the PKK has implications for security dynamics in Turkey and Syria. PKK and YPG's close alignment with Abdullah Öcalan's vision for a democratic nation project carries the potential to influence the Kurdish struggle

and shape negotiation processes with Turkey and Syria. Meanwhile, continued ties with the PKK could hinder the YPG's international recognition and limit its participation in diplomatic initiatives aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict.

However, the HDP's efforts to engage with diverse non-Kurdish groups and advocate for a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue signal a commitment to inclusivity and peaceful coexistence within Turkey. The party's connections to Abdullah Öcalan and its association with the PKK's ideology pose challenges to its domestic and international legitimacy. The HDP's goals of decentralisation, gender parity, environmental conservation, and support for minority rights have the potential to influence Turkey's domestic political landscape and policies that could provide an alternative to Recep Tayyip Erdogan's conservative Justice and Development Party.

Turkey's pro-Kurdish party, the HDP and its leftist allies have called on their supporters to vote for Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the main opposition candidate, in the recent presidential election, opposing President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The HDP, Turkey's third-largest party, had previously decided not to field a presidential candidate and strongly hinted at supporting Kilicdaroglu. HDP co-leader Mithat Sancar emphasised that the upcoming election is crucial for Turkey, leading them to back Kilicdaroglu, whose goals align with theirs in ending Erdogan's rule. The HDP's support broadens Kilicdaroglu's alliance and complicates Erdogan's long-standing hold on power (*Turkey's Pro-Kurdish Party Backs Erdogan's Rival for President*, 2023). While the PKK's original objective was to achieve Kurdish independence from Turkey, since the 1990s this objective has changed. Öcalan now claims to advocate "democratic autonomy" for Kurds, with a focus on equal cultural and political rights within the Turkish state rather than secession. The HDP/BDP have supported the "democratic autonomy" vision, with a particular declared focus on respect for minority rights (*Kurdish Political Representation and Equality in Turkey* - House of Commons Library, 2021).

## Diaspora in the MENA Region and Beyond

Presently, there is an ongoing tension between leftist parties and the pro-Kurdish movement, which has evolved to include a broader opposition coalition, including conservative nationalists. Similar to the past when the CHP resisted promoting the pro-Kurdish movement to avoid alienating their Kemalist base, nationalists within the party now avoid openly embracing their opposition allies for fear of losing their support (Koontz, 2021).

The KNC has severed its ties with the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) and suspended its membership in the Syrian National Coalition. Kurdish factions are reevaluating their survival strategies and alliances as civilians flee the incoming bombardment in the so-called “safe zone”. The KNC is concerned that the US might desert its allies like the PYD and change the demographics of northeast Syria (Koontz, 2021).

In Syria, the PYD’s pursuit of democratic autonomy and self-governance within Syria’s decentralised framework shapes the political landscape in areas it controls and influences the broader Syrian conflict. The PYD’s relationship with the PKK and collaboration with the SDF could likewise limit its involvement in negotiations concerning Syria’s future. The KNC’s alignment with the KDP and participation in Syrian opposition bodies, like the Constitutional Committee, reflect efforts to represent Kurdish interests within the broader Syrian context. The differing ideologies and strategies of the PYD and KNC underscore challenges in forging a unified Kurdish political front in Syria and addressing divisions within the Kurdish diaspora.

From the perspective of Kurdish history in Syria, there has not been a major contradiction between the Kurdish community and the Assad family. Both Hafez and Bashar Assad have used the Kurdish issue as a bargaining chip to control Turkey’s actions (Ibrahim, 2019). This approach has allowed Kurdish groups like the PKK and its affiliated parties and armed forces to grow in Syria. While Kurdish armed forces like the HPG have engaged in conflicts with the Syrian government during the civil war, their main objective was to push Syrian

forces out of West Kurdistan, which they have largely achieved. The SDF fought against the Islamic State because the latter attempted to conquer the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria”. The Kurdish forces have not conducted military operations beyond the boundaries of West Kurdistan. The ultimate goal of Kurdish political parties and armed forces in northern Syria is to establish an independent Kurdish state, with the “Federation” serving as an essential part of it. As long as the Bashar regime accepts the “Federation” as a de facto “state within a state”, the Kurdish groups are not likely to insist on overthrowing the regime. Leaders of the PKK, the Democratic Union Party, and the SDF have clearly stated this position (Manyuan, 2017).

The willingness of the Bashar regime to recognise the Kurdish people's desire for independence is slated to determine the policy direction of Kurdish political parties and armed forces in northern Syria (Al-Khalidi, 2019). Assad and Russia aim to persuade the Kurds to dissolve their partnership with the United States (Zaman, 2023). If the regime is confident of long-term support from Russia, it may oppose Kurdish independence. However, if it lacks such confidence, it might tolerate the de facto independence of the Kurdish territories to secure its political survival. The PKK's push for Kurdish autonomy within existing states may have broader implications for the Kurdish population across the region. Kurdish communities in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran may become more assertive in demanding political rights and cultural recognition. This could lead to both opportunities for dialogue and cooperation, as well as potential challenges and conflicts with central governments in the respective countries.

Both the PYD and the SDF view negotiations as a means to gain increased international recognition and potentially secure a seat at the negotiating table on Syria, even though Turkey opposes their involvement. Initially, negotiations were prompted by concerns over Turkey's threat of military operations targeting areas under PYD control, such as Qamishli and Kobani, following Operation Peace Spring in 2019. Moreover, the “SDF says it can be part of the Syrian army, but

only if it becomes an army that protects the people and that is the army of a democratic Syria” (Kızılkaya et al., 2021).

It is important to note that many Syrian Kurds join the YPG not out of ideological allegiance to the PYD, but due to practical incentives like jobs, privileges and access to essentials during war. This utilitarian motivation, rather than shared beliefs, drives their involvement. There have been reports of forced recruitment by the YPG that could lead to adverse effects. Moreover, the YPG’s alignment with the US and the Syrian regime is subject to change. The Pentagon partnered with the YPG out of strategic necessity, not an endorsement of their democratic values, following the end of the Free Syrian Army programme. This choice yielded limited combat engagement despite significant funding (Gunter, 2019, 575).

However, the current situation appears to have shifted with the Biden administration. The PYD now believes that the US will continue to support the SDF and its presence in the region. This has led the PYD to have less of an incentive to engage in negotiations compared to previous years. However, continued offences by Turkey may lead to some changes.

Conversely, the KNC stands to gain significant benefits from the ongoing dialogue and its outcomes. For the KNC, participating in the management of the regions in north-eastern Syria through negotiations is an opportunity to safeguard its political interests and garner support from its followers. Since the rise of the PYD in Kurdish-majority areas, the KNC has experienced a decline in its support base due to several factors. One key reason is the restrictions imposed by the PYD on the KNC’s activities in Syria. Moreover, internal fragmentation and divisions within the KNC have also contributed to its waning popularity. At the same time, the PYD has achieved some success in effectively governing the regions it controls, which further impacted the KNC’s support. The military operations of Olive Branch and Peace Spring, along with subsequent violations by factions of the Syrian National Army against the local Kurdish population,

have further alienated many KNC supporters. The perceived weakness of the KNC's responses to these violations has also played a role in the loss of support.

Furthermore, if the Autonomous Administration gains greater international recognition, some Kurdish parties within the KNC might be tempted to participate in it independently, potentially weakening the cohesion and influence of the KNC as a unified political entity. Therefore, engaging in negotiations becomes crucial for the KNC to maintain relevance, protect its interests, and counterbalance the growing influence of the PYD in the region (al-Ghazi, 2021). In more recent times, the KDP faced criticism and protests, with accusations of violence against protesters by the party during the 2011 demonstrations, leading to public outrage. Moreover, the party has been criticised for operating like a "mafia organization", with familial connections and nepotism influencing its leadership and decision-making. Despite criticism, the KDP has maintained a broad base of political allegiances and is considered a populist and nationalist party today (Kurdish Democratic Party KDP, n.d.).

Notably, in Iran, Komala's involvement in alliances like the Georgetown Group demonstrates a pragmatic approach to opposition politics and a willingness to collaborate with other Iranian opposition figures. The party's pursuit of Kurdish autonomy within Iran may impact domestic politics and relationships with other Iranian Kurdish groups, potentially influencing efforts to address Kurdish rights and self-determination. In the wake of the unsuccessful Georgetown alliance and in an effort to capitalise on the weakening protest movement inside Iran, Kurdish opposition groups are shifting their focus to develop a united political strategy. This move is motivated by Tehran and Baghdad's increased pressure on Iranian Kurdish groups in Iraqi Kurdistan to disarm and dissolve their camps, which has raised concerns about disunity among them.

Nevertheless, major Iranian Kurdish groups like Komala, PDKI, and PJAK advocate federalism as a means to grant Kurds

full autonomy while preserving Iran's territorial integrity. Kurdish representatives emphasise the need for realism and pragmatic considerations in their pursuit of a federal united Iran. They argue that the international community and regional powers prefer a stable Iran over a failed state, which could lead to internal unrest and create a migrant crisis.

Despite the different alliances that have emerged, observers believe that the differences among Kurdish parties are primarily strategic and not related to their overall political objectives. Many members of Iran's non-Persian ethnic communities, comprising almost half of the population, feel marginalised and discriminated against by the state's emphasis on Persian culture and language. These communities are seeking to strengthen the opposition front and are considering alliances with other ethnic groups, such as Arabs, Azeris, and Baluch, who share similar grievances.

The PDKI and other Kurdish groups plan to present their political platform to the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran, an opposition body comprising diverse political organisations from various ethnic communities. The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK), once an opponent of the Shah and later siding with Saddam Hussein, is also positioning itself as supportive of the political rights of Iran's ethnic communities. They have used the term "nationalities" to describe these communities, indicating a significant political move with implications for collective self-conception and relations with the Iranian state. Kurdish groups are open to dialogue with all parties, including the MEK, to address Iran's future and Kurdish rights (Salih & Faris, 2023). However, the current government currently does not appear very amenable, for instance, the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad requested the United Nations' help in "neutralizing Kurdish opposition groups" that are active within Iraq (*Iran Seeks UN Help To 'Disarm' Iraqi Kurdish Parties*, 2023).

Meanwhile, there is a possibility that the tensions between the KDP and Iran could be alleviated. However, certain issues, such as the growing gas industry and relations

with Turkey and the US, are likely to continue causing friction with Iran. Alongside their interactions with regional powers, the KRG, especially the KDP leadership, has shown a keen interest in fostering strong relationships with Arabian Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, that could further make reconciliation more difficult (Aziz, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

The history of the KDP and other Kurdish political parties in the region is marked by complexities, prohibitions and challenges. The PYD, founded on the social and political heritage of the PKK, has pursued a unique approach to address the Kurdish people's rights and grievances, combining peaceful and armed means when appropriate. The Turkish operations, such as Euphrates Shield and Peace Spring, have caused major rifts among Kurdish political parties, and prominent Kurdish politicians in both factions have condemned the Turkish offensive. However, differing ideologies and alliances may pose significant challenges to finding a unified response to the crisis.

The political aspirations of various Kurdish parties within the diaspora continue to hold immense significance for both the immediate regions in which they operate and the broader Middle Eastern landscape. These distinct aspirations, driven by diverse ideologies, strategies and alliances, collectively contribute to shaping the future of the Kurdish people and their quest for autonomy, self-determination and recognition. The evolution of the PKK and its emphasis on democratic confederalism, alongside the YPG, mark a departure from previous armed struggle tactics. Conversely, the HDP seeks inclusivity and peaceful solutions, albeit with the challenge of reconciling its ties to Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK. In Syria, the PYD pursues autonomous governance and self-determination, influencing dynamics within the territories it controls, while the KNC navigates Syrian opposition bodies to represent Kurdish interests. Similarly, Komala demonstrates pragmatic collaboration within

alliances to advocate for Kurdish autonomy within Iran. These parties challenge existing nation-state systems and have the potential to redraw national boundaries. Furthermore, the divergent paths chosen by different Kurdish parties underscore the complexities of uniting a fragmented diaspora toward a common goal.

The future of the Kurdish diaspora lies in the delicate balance between peaceful negotiation and the legacies of armed struggle. As Kurdish parties engage in diplomatic initiatives, negotiate with host countries, and collaborate on international platforms, their actions shape the trajectory of a region grappling with identity, autonomy and stability.

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