

Uniting Syria's Kurds – last week in Kurdish news

As Kurdish political parties meet to agree a common approach for negotiating Kurdish relations in the new Syria, this week's article examines the troubled relationship between the two main Kurdish political organisations, the need to focus on basic demands, possible implications for other ethnic groups, and the roles of Turkey and the United States.



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Today, if all goes to plan, Kurdish political parties with radically different political understandings will meet together in Qamishlo to agree a common approach towards

the Kurdish role in Syria, and to choose a delegation to represent Kurdish interests in negotiations with the Interim Government. In announcing the date for this major conference on “Unity of the Kurdish Position in Rojava”, Mazloum Abdi, the Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces, who has led negotiations between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the Syrian Interim Government in Damascus, commented, “Kurdish unity is a national necessity for resolving the issue of the Kurdish people in Syria”. There is widespread excitement and relief at the prospect of Kurdish “national unity”, especially at this critical juncture, but what is being meant by “nation” and “unity”, and what contradictions might be hidden in that term?

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines a nation as “a group of people with a common language, history, culture, and (usually) geographic territory”. Like the similar, and overlapping, definition of ethnic group, this is not a definition with precise boundaries. How different does something have to be to be considered a different culture? When does linguistic difference qualify as a different language rather than a dialect? In the Kurdish case there may be some groups, such as the Yazidis, who vary as to whether or not they identify as Kurds, but there are millions of people who think of themselves as unequivocally part of the Kurdish people.

What is considered as “unity” depends on what area of action is being considered. Political unity becomes possible, and not oppressive, if this is limited to a particular issue, such as Kurdish rights. Otherwise, it risks denying genuine political differences and suppressing political freedoms. Kurds, like any other group, have a range of political views, but this need not stop them coming together over shared demands. Loqman Ahme, of the Green Democratic Party explained to Rojava Information Centre, “The aim of this conference is to unite the Kurdish position, but not to unite the Kurdish parties.”

PYD and ENKS

The main Kurdish political party in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), ascribes to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. They have been trying to build a system of bottom-up democracy that prioritises women’s rights and multicultural coexistence and centres social need rather than capitalist profit. The PYD and related groups have had a troubled relationship with a coalition of opposition parties named the Kurdish National Council (ENKS). The ENKS is conservative in outlook. It has strong links to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, which practices a crony capitalism and is close to the Turkish Government. The ENKS lost out in the competition for popular support, and the PYD was able to exploit the power vacuum of the Syrian civil war and establish alternative autonomous structures in the Kurdish regions in what has become known as the Rojava Revolution.

If today’s talks succeed, this won’t be the first time these two very different organisations have agreed to work together. In July 2012, on the eve of the Rojava Revolution, KDP leader, Masoud Barzani, helped facilitate a power sharing agreement.

For the PYD, this was important to prevent intra-Kurdish tensions at a time of great uncertainty. For the ENKS, this was a way to recuperate some of their lost influence.

However, the ENKS refused to take part in the council system established by the PYD and chose to oppose it from outside. They wanted a direct role in governance that would have overridden this decentralised system. Even when the PYD organised elections for an overall “transitional administration” the ENKS declined to take part, denouncing this as a PYD project.

The existential crisis posed by ISIS brought about another co-operation agreement, but that too was short-lived. Turkey is set on destroying the Autonomous Administration established by the Kurds in Syria, and the KDP’s close relationship with Turkey ensured that KDP and ENKS opposition to the PYD became outright hostility. The ENKS supported the KDP’s blocking of aid from crossing into Syria, and they have been repeatedly accused by the Autonomous Administration of acting as fifth columnists. In light of these accusations, the Autonomous Administration shut down ENKS offices and arrested ENKS members, and the ENKS accused the Administration of violating their human rights.

Between the PYD and ENKS there is a lot of history to overcome, on top of intrinsic differences in political outlook; but there have been a great many attempts to bring the organisations together. These have been spearheaded by the Americans, for whom an unspoken subtext will have been the tempering of PYD radicalism. France has also played a role, and the Barzani clan are again invested in Kurdish unity. The urgency of the current moment seems to have finally overcome political differences and historical conflict. Today’s conference is a one-day event with hundreds of delegates and a lot of public speeches, so the groundwork of negotiations will have already happened.

Decentralisation

While there is agreement as to the need for Kurdish cultural and language rights, there remain different views on the political structure required to ensure this. The ENKS want to see the Kurdish regions run as part of a fully federal Syria, while the PYD has always argued for their system of autonomy, with decentralised bottom-up democracy and everything run as locally as possible. Badran Çiya Kurd, advisor to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, confirmed two weeks ago that last month the different Kurdish groups had agreed a “common political vision” that called for “a federal, pluralistic, democratic parliamentary system”. Any form of decentralisation will be opposed by Syria’s interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and intensely resisted by his Turkish backers.

What about non-Kurds?

For the ENKS, the demands themselves are relatively straight forward, but for the PYD there are additional considerations that add complications, both philosophical and practical. In seeking Kurdish unity, they are acting as Kurds, but when they are part of the Autonomous Administration, they are acting for all the peoples of North and East

Syria. This is their political role as an Administration, but it is also integral to their multicultural philosophy. The Administration has already put together a different negotiating team for North and East Syria that deliberately has representatives from both Kurdish and Arab communities and also one person who is Assyrian.

The Kurdish leadership's dual role will not be a problem if they are able to negotiate their desired solution of greater autonomy and cultural freedoms for all parts of Syria, and a strong voice for decentralisation could benefit everyone. But what happens if the interim government attempts some sort of deal that allows a measure of autonomy for the Kurdish majority areas, and demands, in exchange, that other regions return to centralised control from Damascus. Arab-majority areas, such as Raqqa, that were liberated from ISIS by Kurdish-led forces have also invested energy and hopes in setting up local council systems and encouraging women's rights. Already, Manbij has seen its freedoms disappear after occupation by Turkey's mercenary militias. Might other areas be made to lose theirs too? Öcalan's philosophy calls for respect for all peoples, but the situation on the ground may force the Kurdish leaders to accept a compromise.

External actors

Much will depend on the position taken by external actors. The political situation in Syria is still unstable and al-Sharaa's control is far from secure. Turkey is pushing him to make as few concessions to the Kurds and the Autonomous Administration as possible, and is offering him help with his army and security services and help with reconstruction. The United States, which has been very active behind the scenes facilitating negotiations, still keeps Syria under heavy sanctions. They are using Syria's urgent need to get the sanctions lifted as a lever to force concessions from Damascus, and it seems that they have already got al-Sharaa to detain two leaders of Islamic Jihad and to agree in principle to the possibility of recognising Israel. Israeli interests are a focus of America's list of demands, but they might be persuaded to push for regional autonomy. This would be looked at positively by Israel, who don't want to see a centralised Islamist state on their border, in addition to reducing the risk of further violence and authoritarianism.

What's happening to Turkey?

Turkey's actions are a major source of instability for the whole region, but Turkey's current trajectory is difficult to understand. They are still going through the motions of establishing new peace negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, but these have not included any concrete changes from the government.

This week, a delegation from the pro-Kurdish DEM Party talked about Öcalan's situation with the Minister of Justice, and also about serious abuses in the justice system more generally. Even while they were meeting, the authorities slammed another baseless charge on Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the HDP (the DEM Party's predecessor), whose release has been demanded by the European Court of Human Rights.

In fact, Turkey seems determined to commit to an authoritarian path. The Istanbul Bar Association has published a report on the police violence and detentions following the mass protests against the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu – the İstanbul mayor and potential presidential candidate. Introducing the report, the Bar Association president commented, “In the last month, we have witnessed the violation of the hard core of human rights that are valid even in war.”

The Swedish journalist arrested for reporting on the protests could face a twelve-year prison sentence. And, not content with locking up İmamoğlu and detaining his lawyer, the authorities have now issued a warrant for his lawyer’s lawyer.

Turkish citizens searching for a moment of ostensibly light relief have been drawn yet again to the antics of mafia criminals and their links to politicians. Interest has been prompted by an interview in a North Cyprus paper with Cemil Önal, the financial manager of “illegal betting baron” Halil Falyalı. Önal, who was arrested in the Netherlands, but released after sixteen months and (it is reported) cooperating with the Dutch and American authorities, has been talking about Falyalı’s operations and his collection of blackmail tapes – and he has implicated various people close to the government. These include former Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, who is said to have accepted bribes, and the sons of Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, of whom there is said to be compromising tape footage.

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