

# MERIA

## THE MAIN KURDISH POLITICAL PARTIES IN IRAN, IRAQ, SYRIA, AND TURKEY: A RESEARCH GUIDE

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*Kurdistan is divided, and the Kurdish people are not united geographically. They are split among numerous political parties and institutions in several different countries. Various early attempts to build Kurdish national movements after 1918 failed. Modern Kurdish parties began to emerge after World War II. In the post-Cold War era, Kurdish movements have gained momentum politically, economically, socially, as well as at the regional and international levels. The current period may well be a particularly crucial one for Kurdish aspirations. This article offers an overview of Kurdish political parties and references the most significant literature and resources available on them.*



Map of Kurdistan according to Google

### INTRODUCTION

As Kurdistan is divided and the Kurdish people are not united geographically, they are split among numerous political parties and institutions in several different countries. They follow different leaders in each region of Kurdistan. After World War I, the Kurds created national organizations and institutions to further their cause. These included the Society for the Rise of Kurdistan (Kurt Teali Cemiyeti), established in 1918 in Istanbul; the

Free Kurdistan Movement in 1923 in Diyarbakir; and Xoybun in 1927 in Lebanon. The goal of these organizations was to lead Kurdish rebellions against the Ottoman Empire and later, against Turkish state. Yet all of these organizations failed to achieve their goals and vanished from the public sphere in the following years.

However, toward the end of the Second World War, the first modern Kurdish political party was established. The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iran (PKDI) was founded

in 1945 in Eastern Kurdistan, Iran, by Qazi Muhammad. There, they declared the short-lived Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in January 1946.

The purpose of this article is to describe the current landscape of the main Kurdish political parties in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, including their leaders, political goals, their transformation, influence, and their significance for Kurdish society. It provides a brief history about the Kurds and Kurdistan and also includes international Kurdish organizations.

## THE KURDS

The Kurds make up the largest nation in the world without an independent state.<sup>1</sup> They number over 30 million and are spread throughout the Middle East, mainly concentrated in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They “consider themselves... descendants of the Medes and other Indo-European tribes who settled around the Zagros Mountains range some 4,000 years ago.”<sup>2</sup> Despite not having a country of their own, the Kurds have succeeded in maintaining their ethnic identity over the years.

“The Kurdish world is diverse, and there are no exact linguistic and religious criteria by which the Kurds can be defined. There are a number of Kurdish dialects; there is no single religion that binds them; and they are spread out across many different countries.”<sup>3</sup> This division is the result of geographical factors. “Located at the crossroads of civilizations, Kurdistan has been traversed by numerous invaders and occupying forces. Alexander the Great followed this path on his way to the east, as did the Persians en route to the west.”

In later periods, “the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Sassanids all made expeditions with the goal of dominating the region. Century-long battles between the Ottoman and Persian Empires all took place in Kurdistan. This led to the division of the land of the Kurds in the first half of seventeenth century, following the 1639 treaty of Zuhab between the two fighting empires.”<sup>4</sup> Following the First World War and the demise of

Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan once again became subject to partition by the victors of the war. Kurdistan was divided among three newly established nation states--Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.

## IRAN

### *The Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Iran (PDKI)*

The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), considered the “ultimate modern Kurdish political party,” was established on August 16, 1945, by Qazi Muhammad in Mahabad in eastern Kurdistan/Iran.<sup>5</sup> Just a few months after its creation, on January 22, 1946, the PDKI established the “Republic of Kurdistan,” (also referred to by historians as the “Republic of Mahabad,” since Mahabad was chosen as the capital) in a section of Iranian Kurdistan.

With the northern part of Iran under Soviet control just after the Second World War, Soviet support had been critical for the establishment of the Kurdish republic. However, less than year later, an agreement between the Iranian central government and the Soviet Union was signed, bringing the republic’s short-lived independence to an end. On December 17, 1946, Iranian troops launched a major military offensive into the region, effectively ending the republic’s short-lived existence.<sup>6</sup>

Following the republic’s collapse, many PDKI leaders were imprisoned. Twenty were executed, including Qazi Muhammad, PDKI head and president of the republic. “Thereafter, the PDKI went underground. In the 1970s, under the direction of its new leader, respected Kurdish intellectual Dr. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, the party joined the uprisings against the shah’s dictatorship. However, soon after Ayatollah Khomeini had seized power in 1979, Khomeini declared what he termed a ‘holy war’ on the Kurds of Iran. This resulted in the deaths of over 10,000 Kurds.”<sup>7</sup>

Based on reports published by Kurdish sources close to the PDKI:

Following Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the Iranian regime, under then President Hashemi Rafsanjani, expressed its readiness for negotiations with Ghassemlou in Austria. The PDKI delegation accepted. On July 13, 1989, in Vienna, Ghassemlou and his aides, Abdullah Ghaderi-Azar--the PDKI representative abroad--and Fadil Rasoul--the intermediary and an Iraqi Kurd--were shot dead by Iranians at the negotiating table.

According to Austrian MP of the Green Party Peter Pilz, "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran from 2005-2013, had been responsible for the gathering, had assisted in preparing the weapons, and had been a member of the execution team, which also included Mohammed Jafar Sahraroudi, Hadji Moustafawi, and Amir Mansur Bozorgian."<sup>8</sup> In 1992, "the Iranian regime targeted the PDKI's new leader Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, in Berlin, Germany. Sharafkandi and three of his friends were murdered by the Iranians and their proxy Hizballah at the Mykonos Greek restaurant in central Berlin."<sup>9</sup>

The PDKI renounced its armed struggle in the ensuing years and went underground once again. According to the PDKI's party program, "the highest body of the PDKI is its Central Committee elected in the PDKI's Congress. The Central Committee also elects an executive body best known as the Political Bureau, which also includes the general secretary, who is elected by the Central Committee."

The PDKI leader, as of the writing of this article, is Mustafa Hijri.<sup>10</sup> The PDKI, which has held 15 conventions, also endorses democratic struggle in Iran, autonomy, and the right to self-determination for the Kurds. In the past, especially during the Iran-Iraq War, it was backed by the Iraqi government, and it held a strong position on the ground in the Kurdish region. Since its decision to abandon armed struggle in the 1990s, it has become weak and disorganized. It has some influence, although not strong, in Iranian Kurdistan, and

it is active among the Kurdish diaspora in North America, Europe, and Australia.

### *The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)*

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is a splinter group of the PDKI and is led by Khalid Azizi. In 2006, at the PDKI's 13<sup>th</sup> convention, the dispute over choosing its next leader led some senior members to leave the party. Under Azizi's leadership, they created the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). In 2012, "the PDKI and KDP met in Iraqi Kurdistan to discuss a possible reunification,"<sup>11</sup> however, for the time being, they function independently. The KDP is based in Iraqi Kurdistan and has no real influence on the masses in Iranian Kurdistan.

### *Komala*

"Komala, meaning 'society' in Kurdish, was established in 1969 in Tehran as a Marxist Kurdish movement. Led by Abdullah Mohtadi, it was mainly inspired by Mao's China and other socialist countries."<sup>12</sup> From the beginning, it engaged in a clandestine campaign and became part of the ongoing Kurdish struggle against the Iranian shah. However, in 1983, it joined other leftist movements in Iran, and together they formed the short-lived Communist Party of Iran. In the following months, Komala left the Communist Party and continued its struggle under its own name. Along with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI), Komala became one of the two main Kurdish parties in Iran fighting for Kurdish rights against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"In the mid-1980s, Komala was active and influential around Sanandaj, the capital city of the Iranian Kurdistan province, while the PDKI was more powerful around Mahabad, the former Kurdish republic in Iran."<sup>13</sup> However, internal fighting broke out between the PDKI and Komala in the mid-1980s, leading to hundreds of deaths.

Not long after the 1989 murder of PDKI leader Ghassemlou in Vienna, one of Komala's most prominent figures was killed in

Larnaca, Cyprus.<sup>14</sup> In 1997, Komala joined the establishment of the Kurdistan National Congress in Brussels with other Kurdish parties. Although it had established military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, the U.S. invasion of Iraq ended its military activities there. The current leader of Komala, as of the writing of this article, is Abdullah Mohtadi. The organization has no strong influence among the Kurds in Iran. It runs some community centers in Scandinavia and in North America. It also owns a satellite TV station (Rojhelat TV) in Sweden, which broadcasts in Kurdish and Farsi, and a newspaper based in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### ***The Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK)***

In 2004, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK) was created by Iranian Kurds under Haji Ahmadi's leadership. The party calls itself a political, social, and cultural movement with an armed wing. PJAK and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) also share Qandil as a base. PJAK was condemned as a terrorist group by the United States in 2009. PJAK, considered to be a PKK splinter group, is also outlawed in Iran.<sup>15</sup>

PJAK leaders and fighters regard imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan as their supreme leader and share his philosophy. The party operates military bases and training camps in the Qandil region bordered with Iran, Iraq, and Turkey and has around 3,000 armed fighters. Half of the PJAK's forces are female, and the movement has a strong commitment to women rights in Kurdistan and around the world. The group took up arms just after its establishment and has challenged the Iranian regime ever since. "In 2011, heavy clashes broke out between PJAK and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps." This ended with a ceasefire in September 2011,<sup>16</sup> still in effect, as of the writing of this article.

PJAK is a member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistanê or KCK), an alliance of Kurdish groups and divisions led by their elected Executive Council. The KCK's Executive Council is led by Cemil Bayik, acting leader

of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. "PJAK's ultimate objective is to establish semi-autonomous regional entities or Kurdish federal states in Iran, Turkey, and Syria--similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq." However, "for the time being, their primary mission is political. That is, they seek to spread their message across the Kurdish region of Iran and to weaken tribalism and traditional politics as well as to fuel Kurdish nationalism."<sup>17</sup>

PJAK is still led by its founding president Haji Ahmadi, who is a German citizen, and has different bodies and branches. Its armed wing is called HRK (Hezen Rojhelatî Kurdistan), the military forces of Eastern Kurdistan; its women's branch is The Union of the Women of Eastern Kurdistan; and its youth movement, the Union of the Youth of Eastern Kurdistan. PJAK is also a member of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) based in Brussels and runs its own satellite TV station, Newroz, based in Oslo and licensed by Norway.

## **IRAQ**

### ***The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)***

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was created in Baghdad in August 1946. Its creation was in response to Mustafa Barzani's desire to become financially and politically independent of Qazi Muhammad and the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan.<sup>18</sup> As the Kurdish national freedom movement, the KDP became the Iraqi branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran. Barzani was elected as president while in exile, and Hamza Abdullah was elected secretary general on August 16, 1946. Since then, the party has worked for Kurdish rights and also fought against the dictatorship in Iraq. Mustafa Barzani served as the party's leader from the beginning until his death in 1979. After his death, his son Idris Barzani replaced him. In 1987, his younger son Masoud Barzani became the new party leader.

At the party's 13<sup>th</sup> congress held in December 2010 in the capital of the Kurdistan

region, Erbil. There, the congress reelected Masoud Barzani as president of the party. Further, Masoud Barzani’s nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, was made vice president. As of the writing of this article, Masoud Barzani is president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. “In addition, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) coalition occupies 59 seats in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament and leads the region’s government with Nechirvan Barzani serving as prime minister.”<sup>19</sup> “In the 2010 Iraqi elections, the Kurdistan list under Jalal Talabani, both general secretary of the PUK and president of Iraq, won 43 seats and 13.2 percent of the total votes.”<sup>20</sup>

Other influential names in the KDP are Hoshyar Zebari, the Iraqi foreign minister, and Mansour Barzani the head of Iraqi Kurdistan’s

intelligence service, Parastin. The Barzani family and the KDP wield influence not only in Iraqi Kurdistan but also in Iranian Kurdistan. They provide sanctuary in the KRG area of northern Iraq for their Iranian sister party, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan. Among the Turkish Kurds, their influence is weaker. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Bakur (north) is not a major player. The Syrian affiliate, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria is similarly uninfluential. The Kurdistan Democratic Party has representatives in Turkey, in nearly every European country, and in North America. It also maintains good relations with Israel. The KDP runs several television stations as well, including major ones such as Kurdistan TV, Zagros TV, and Rudaw.

**Figure I: KDP-Affiliated Parties in Kurdistan**



***The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)***

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was established in 1975 by current President of Iraq Jalal Talabani. “It was founded following the Iraqi army’s defeat of the Kurdish rebellion led by Mustafa Barzani, which forced Barzani to flee to the United States and led to the breakup of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Along with his close friends Nashirwan Mustafa Amin and Ali Askari, Talabani announced the PUK’s establishment on June 1, 1975, in Damascus, Syria.”<sup>21</sup> The PUK brought together various socialist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. Since then, the PUK and the KDP have become the two major rival parties of the region, each with an almost equal power circle. After the First Gulf War,

the PUK joined the Kurdistan Parliament in Northern Iraq and as did the KDP. Yet disputes over power and revenue sharing erupted into a civil war in 1994.

“In September 1998, Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani signed a peace agreement in Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the United States,” however, “the Kurdish Regional Government remained split between the two rival administrations until after the 2003 U.S. invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th regime, when the PUK and KDP joined forces under a united government based in Erbil.”<sup>22</sup> The PUK’s secretary general, Talabani, was elected president of Iraq in 2005 by the Iraqi National Assembly and was reelected for another term in 2010.

Jalal Talabani’s wife, Hero Talabani;



Barham Salih, former prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government and deputy prime minister of Iraq; and Mele Baxtiyar, a member of the PUK's Central Committee are the party's most powerful figures. In addition, Qubat Talabani, Jalal Talabani's son, also serves as the KRG's representative in the United States. In 2006, Nashirwan Mustafa, long-time associate and possible successor of Talabani, left the PUK in 2009 and established his own movement, known as Gorran or the Change Movement.

According to the PUK's program, the party "strives for the right of self-determination for the Kurdish nation in a democratic Iraq and advocates a political solution to the Kurdish question based on the principles of the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and the recognition of national and cultural identity." In addition, it believes in "the promotion of a civil society with democratic institutions. It

works for the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" "it favors a free-market economy."<sup>23</sup> Like the KDP, the PUK has the representatives in Europe. It also and has good relations with the West and with Iran. The party's affiliated business elite run a major television station, Kurdsat, as well as daily newspapers, radios, and monthly magazines. Before its dissolution, the PUK was the balancing power against the KDP. Now, however, many believe it has lost about a third of its supporters to the Gorran Movement led by Nashirwan Mustafa. The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (KDPP) in Syria, which is one of the oldest Kurdish movements in the Kurdish region, is the PUK's sister party. In addition, the Komala Party in Iranian Kurdistan has strong ties with the PUK, finding sanctuary and operating in the PUK-dominated areas.

**Figure II: PUK-Affiliated Parties**



***Gorran: The Change Movement***

Gorran is a liberal and reformist Kurdish political party in Iraqi Kurdistan under the leadership of Nashirwan Mustafa. Founded in 2009, it is the main opposition to the ruling two-party coalition of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (the Kurdistan List), which governs the Kurdistan Regional Government. Shortly after its formation, Gorran participated in the regional elections in Kurdistan. Contrary to expectations, it gained a surprising 22 percent of the total votes in Iraqi Kurdistan and came in second after the Kurdistan List (comprising the KDP and PUK), with 25 seats in the 111-seat Kurdish Parliament. In the 2010 Iraqi elections, it refused to join the Kurdistan List and run under its name. They won only 8 seats, whereas the Kurdistan List gained 43

seats.

Following the Arab Spring in February 2011, Gorran led the first demonstrations in the Kurdistan region, mainly in Sulaymaniya. The movement demanded political, social, and economic reforms as well as an end to rampant corruption and nepotism. The protests turned violent and the security forces intervened. Ten people were reportedly killed and hundreds were injured. According to BBC, "Gorran has already shaken the political landscape in Kurdish areas,"<sup>24</sup> and support for the movement "stems from the simple fact that it is the new, dynamic, fresh option in Kurdistan, calling for "an end to monopoly control of power."<sup>25</sup>

One of Gorran's main objectives is to "uproot rampant corruption." The party is particularly popular among Kurdish youth. In addition, "many former PUK/KDP members,

retired Peshmergas (the armed forces of the Kurdish Regional Government), and academics are involved in the movement's campaigns against ongoing two-party domination.<sup>26</sup> The movement's leader, Nashirwan Mustafa, served as commander-in-chief of the Peshmerga forces from the late 1970s to 1992. He was the mastermind of the 1991 Kurdish uprising against the Saddam Hussein dictatorship and has been referred to as the "legendary Peshmerga commander." Gorran also operates the KNN television channel; a radio station, Denge Gorran; and publishes a daily newspaper, *Rozhnam*.<sup>27</sup> Gorran is also a member of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) in Brussels.

### ***The Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party: KDSP***

The Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (KDSP) was created in 2002 in Iraqi Kurdistan as a pro-Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) movement. For around the first two years after its establishment, KDSP engaged in armed struggle. However, after the 2003 U.S. invasion, it abandoned this and joined the political system. As of the writing of this article, Diyar Garib is the party leader.<sup>28</sup> The party held its fourth annual congress in Kirkuk from May 1-3, 2008, but was banned from participating in the July 2009 KRG elections. Following Turkish demands, the KDSP's offices were shut down in many cities by Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, though the party itself continued to operate. The KDSP advocates the right to self-determination and an autonomous Kurdish government within the existing states. The party is gaining ground among women and youth due to its secular philosophy and commitment to the women's rights and feminism. It is also a member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) and the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) based in Brussels.

### ***The Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)***

The Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) was founded in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994 by a group

of religious Kurds led by Salahuddin Bahaadin. A Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, KIU's goal is the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq that would incorporate the principles of Western-style democracy as well as freedom of the press as compatible with Shari'a law.<sup>29</sup> The party also promotes free trade, entrepreneurship, and investment as well as combatting corruption and bureaucracy. In addition, KIU advocates women's rights and "full citizenship for ethnic and sectarian groups." It is also involved in charity work in the region. Many of its supporters are students and those in rural areas. "In the January 2005 elections, the KIU joined other Kurdish parties to form the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, which won 75 out of 275 seats in the Iraqi National Assembly." It then left the Democratic Patriotic alliance to run under its own name in the December 2005 parliamentary elections, winning five seats.<sup>30</sup>

"In 2009, however, the Islamic Union received only six seats in elections in the Kurdistan region and gained only four seats in the 2010 elections in Iraq." The KIU's leader, as of the writing of this article, is Secretary-General Mohammed Faraj. The KIU refers to itself as "a reformist national party, striving to resolve society's political, social, economic, and cultural issues from an Islamic perspective."<sup>31</sup> The party was accused of organizing an attack on December 2, 2011, in Zakho, in which after Friday prayers, an unidentified group of people raided liquor stores, beauty salons, a Chinese massage parlor, and several hotels that were selling alcohol. The violence spread to other Kurdish cities as well. In retaliation, KDP members burned down KIU's offices throughout the Kurdish region.<sup>32</sup> While there are other minor Islamic movements in the Kurdish region, the KIU is the largest and most influential.

### **SYRIA**

#### ***The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS)***

"The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria

(KDPS) is one of the many Kurdish parties that emerged from the 1957 Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (1957 KDPS)” and “is the sister party of Massoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq.”<sup>33</sup> “The original party was founded by Osman Sabri--a Kurd from Turkey who had fled to Syria after the unsuccessful Shaykh Said rebellion in the Kurdish region in 1925--along with Abd al-Hamid Hajji Darwish, Hamzah Diweran, and other Kurdish politicians.”<sup>34</sup> Due to a ban on opposition parties, it has not been recognized by the Syrian government.

The KDPS was a member of the Kurdish Political Congress, established in 2009, prior to the Syrian uprising. It also joined the Kurdish National Council, formed in October 2011. Masoud Barzani appointed Dr. Abd al-Hakim Bashar secretary-general of the party in 2008. Bashar also serves as chairman of the Kurdish National Council.<sup>35</sup>

This Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria is not to be confused with the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria led by Nasraddin Ibrahim, which also took on the name of “Al-Parti,” and other minor parties that share the same name in order to highlight their roots in the 1957 KDPS. Bashar is also the chairman of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a newly formed umbrella organization representing around ten Syrian-Kurdish parties. The party is considered the second strongest political party in Syrian Kurdistan after the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD). KDPS’s desire to establish its own Peshmerga forces have not yet been realized due to the PYD’s opposition. There are, however, reports that some 2,000 Kurdish fighters defected from the Syrian army and are training in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### ***Yekiti: The Kurdish Union Party***

The Kurdish Union Party (Yekiti) was established in 2009 by Fouad Aleko, Isma’il Hamo, and together with other Kurdish politicians. Hamo succeeded the former secretary general in 2010. “The Yekiti movement is one of ten political groups that created the Kurdish National Council (KNC),

an opposition alliance established in October 2011 in Syrian Kurdistan.”<sup>36</sup> According to its program, “Yekiti believes in dialogue and democratic means to achieve its objectives.... It stands for democracy, free and fair elections, freedom of press, political pluralism, and respect for individual rights and national groups.”<sup>37</sup> Yekiti also works for federalism in Syria in accordance with the Iraqi model, whereby the Kurds have long had de facto rule in the Kurdish region. Yekiti does not have any known military force; however, there have been reports of some “Yekiti members infiltrating the Free Syrian Army-controlled Selahaddin Eyyubi Brigade near Aleppo in order to gain political leverage and military aid from Turkey.”<sup>38</sup>

#### ***Azadi: The Kurdistan Freedom Party***

The Kurdistan Freedom Party, also known as Azadi, was founded in 2005, “by the then members of the Kurdish Left Party, led by Hayrettin Murat, and the Kurdish People’s Union Party, led by Mustafa Cuma.” Murat was elected as Azadi’s first secretary-general.<sup>39</sup> Mustafa Cuma, one of the leading figures of the newly created movement was arrested in 2008 by the Ba’th regime. He was released in 2011, after nearly three years in prison. Following his release, Cuma was elected as the new secretary general of the party, while Bashar Emin became deputy secretary general of the party. Cuma’s election as secretary general became the subject of an internal dispute, leading some members--including Hayrettin Murat--to leave the party.

“There are now two different Azadi parties in the Kurdish region, one led by Cuma and the other by Mustafa Hidir Oso. Azadi was one of the more successful Kurdish parties in Syria, enjoying considerable public support on the ground, before the uprising in the country broke out in 2011.”<sup>40</sup> It joined the Kurdish Supreme council with other smaller Kurdish parties and signed the Erbil Agreement under Masoud Barzani’s auspices. However, Azadi has been accused of collaborating with Turkey and jihadi movements that attacked Serekaniye, a Kurdish town located on the



border with Turkey and Aleppo's Kurdish neighborhoods.

Mustafa Cuma is known for his opposition to the PYD and its armed forces, the YPG. He told the Kurdish newspaper *Rudaw* that "they would establish their own militia group and would fight the YPG if necessary."<sup>41</sup> The party supports the Selahaddin Eyyubi Brigade, a small Kurdish militia group fighting the Asad regime in the Aleppo region under FSA control, and does not deny this. Cuma, the party's current leader, lives in Iraqi Kurdistan, as do other Kurdish leaders of the region.

### ***The Democratic Union Party (PYD)***

"Founded in 2003 as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is one of the most prominent Kurdish opposition parties in Syria."<sup>42</sup> It is also a member of the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC), which brings together all of the Kurdish parties in the region. Among the PYD's stated goals are "the constitutional recognition of Kurdish rights and 'democratic autonomy' for the Kurdish region." Following the signing of the Adana agreement in 1998 between Syria and Turkey and after the 2004 Qamishli uprising, the PYD experienced "years of violent repression at the hands of the Syrian regime. In the ensuing weeks of the uprising in Syria, the PYD joined the Kurdish Patriotic Movement in May 2011, but declined to join the Kurdish opposition parties that formed the Kurdish National Council (KNC)."<sup>43</sup>

In 2010, Salih Muslim, a chemical engineer from the region, was made party chairman.

[Muslim], who was originally based in Iraq in order to avoid political persecution by the Ba'th regime... returned to the Kurdish region of Syria in order to take direct part in the unfolding of events. He urged the Kurds to fight for their rights. He added that the Kurds had fought for Arabs, Turks, and Iranians, but received nothing in return and that it was time for the Kurds to get rid of this shame and fight their

own people.<sup>44</sup>

Muslim's "leadership was reconfirmed at the PYD's fifth party congress, held on June 16, 2012." There, "the party's Central Committee was expanded and dual leadership was introduced. Asiyah Abdullah was elected co-chairwoman of the party,"<sup>45</sup> as part of the PYD's policy of equal representation of the sexes at all levels. "Despite accusations, the PYD denies any organic ties with the PKK but accepts the ideas and philosophy of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who is imprisoned in Turkey."<sup>46</sup>

While the number of members is unknown, the PYD is one of the largest parties in Syria and the strongest and best organized in the Kurdish region. "According to a Western diplomat in Damascus, many Syrian Kurds have previously been active in the PKK, and there are many Kurdish families in Syria where at least one family member is a PKK veteran or was killed while fighting with the PKK. Many of these families sympathize with the PYD."<sup>47</sup> The PYD's armed wing, YPG (Popular Defense Committees), controls almost all Kurdish towns and villages including the oil-rich Rimalan in the region and is estimated to have an armed force of about 20,000, half of which are female fighters.

In addition, "the PYD dominates its Syrian Kurdish political rivals, such as the Kurdish national council (KNC), by virtue of its significant popular support and its effective organization."<sup>48</sup> Aside from the YPG, the PYD has created a regional police force called *Asayish* in Kurdish. It also runs newly established Kurdish schools across the region and provides public services. Although, the PYD has been accused by the Kurdish Azadi party and Kurdistan Democratic Party for having ties with the Ba'th regime in Damascus, it has always rejected such allegations. In addition, in the course of 2012 and 2013, it took on Syrian army around the Kurdish Neighborhoods of Aleppo and Qamishli and has been fighting jihadi rebels in the Kurdish region. The PYD is represented at the Kurdistan National Congress in Brussels

and is a founding member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). Unlike the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which has strong ties with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barzani, the PYD enjoys good relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani.

### ***The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (KDPP)***

The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (KDPP) is a splinter group of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria and was created in 1965. Abd al-Hamid Darwish, the leader of the party, as of the writing of this article, is “one of the most senior and experienced politicians among Syrian Kurds. Darwish, who has been the secretary general of the party since its creation, has maintained personal ties with the leaders of the Kurdish parties in other parts of Kurdistan.”<sup>49</sup> The KDPP of Syria is the sister party of Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). It is also a member of the Kurdish National Council (KNC).<sup>50</sup>

“The ongoing rivalry between the KDP and PUK historically has translated into a KDPS-KDPP competition that persists alongside other divisions under the somewhat loose KNC umbrella.”<sup>51</sup> The KDPP also has good relations with the PKK’s off-shoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The KDPP struggles for a decentralized Syria and an inclusive government that recognizes the political and cultural rights of the Kurds and other minority groups in the country.

### ***The Kurdish National Council (KNC)***

Kurdish National Council in Syria is an amalgamation of around ten Kurdish parties in Syria. It was founded in October 2011, during a period when the Syrian National Council was declared in Istanbul, Turkey. The goal of the KNC was to unite the Kurdish parties and to organize a struggle against the Syrian regime in the Kurdish region. Nevertheless, it faced challenges from the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The PYD did not agree to join the KNC,

and from the time of the uprising in Syria acted independently. While the KNC attempted to join the Syrian National Council (SNC), its demands were not met, leading the KNC to leave the SNC shortly after its establishment. The KNC is under the control of Masoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and is led by Dr. Abd al-Hakim Bashar, the leader of Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS). It is also a member of the Kurdish Supreme Council, established in accordance with the July 2012 Erbil agreement, sponsored by Masoud Barzani.<sup>52</sup>

It was created in order to balance the PKK-affiliated Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). “The KNC demands constitutional recognition of Kurdish national identity, an end to discriminatory policies and laws--including the prohibition of the use of the Kurdish language and establishment of Kurdish schools--compensation for those affected by the Ba’th Party’s policies to date, and political decentralization of government--in the context of Syria’s territorial integrity.”<sup>53</sup>

## **TURKEY**

### ***Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)***

The “Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was founded in 1978 as a reaction to Turkish oppression of Kurds in Turkey and the continuous military interference in the Kurdish regions in the southeast part of modern Turkey.”<sup>54</sup> “The PKK’s founding leader Abdullah Ocalan and its Central Committee members--including M. Hayri Durmus, Cemil Bayik, Mazlum Dogan, Mehmet Karasungur, Kesire Yildirim, and Sahin Donmez--came from radical political student circles in urban centers.”<sup>55</sup> “Initially, the organization held a Marxist political ideology, emphasizing the need for a radical transformation of the social and political organization of Kurdish society. It sought the establishment of an independent Kurdistan, uniting Kurds across several borders.”<sup>56</sup>

“After the military coup in Turkey in 1980, the PKK’s leading members fled to Syria and

later established training camps in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, which was controlled by Syria at the time. In August 1984, the PKK launched its armed struggle against Turkey by attacking Turkish army posts located in the Kurdish cities of Eruh and Semdinli, right on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>57</sup> In Turkish terms, the event marked the 29<sup>th</sup> Kurdish rebellion; according to Kurdish historian and writer Ahmet Kahraman, the third Kurdish uprising had begun. This opened a new chapter in the long history of Kurdish rebellion and insurrection in Turkey.

During the first few years of the conflict, the Turkish government did not take the PKK seriously. The PKK's influence soon spread to Kurdish communities all over the world. It abandoned its Marxist ideology and adapted itself to the new post-Cold War world. Kurdish nationalism became the movement's dominant philosophy, which enabled it to gain the sympathy of millions of Kurds worldwide.

"By the mid-1990s, the PKK had virtual control over large parts of southeast Turkey; at its peak, the group had more than 15,000 operatives in the region."<sup>58</sup> The PKK-led Kurdish war with Turkey since 1984, has claimed more than 40,000 lives on both sides, mostly Kurds, and has resulted in the destruction of more than 3,000 Kurdish villages by Turkey's security forces.

However, in 1998:

Ocalan was forced to leave Damascus due to Turkey's threats that it would invade Syria if it continued to support the PKK and host Ocalan. He left for Europe in hopes of finding another safe haven and, nevertheless, failed in his attempt. After traveling between Moscow, Rome, and Athens, Ocalan was eventually caught and delivered to Turkish agents in Nairobi, Kenya. It is widely believed that Ocalan's arrest was part of an international intelligence operation.<sup>59</sup>

"He was later tried and sentenced to death by a Turkish court, but his sentence was commuted to life in prison following the abolishment of

the death penalty in Turkey in October 2002."<sup>60</sup> "Upon Ocalan's call from his prison cell, the PKK declared a ceasefire in 1999 and withdrew most of its forces into Iraqi Kurdistan, where it was based. In 2002, in response to Ocalan's request, the PKK's eighth congress changed the party's name to the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK)."<sup>61</sup>

In 2003, KADEK was renamed Kongra-Gel (Kurdistan People's Congress) in attempt to distance itself from its image as a terrorist organization and in order to pursue a peaceful political course. However, the move was unsuccessful, and the PKK returned to its original name in 2008. In the following years, the PKK and the Turkish government held secret talks in Oslo, Norway, for the first time in three decades. Nonetheless, the talks failed in 2011.

"The PKK's July 23 to August 12, 2012, armed campaign in the Semdinli region of the Hakkari Province on the Iran-Iraq border was of unprecedented magnitude. The PKK allegedly attempted to place a town under siege and challenged the government in a conventional battle. The PKK said it was implementing a new tactic of holding territory inside the country."<sup>62</sup> It succeeded to force the Turkish army into their posts and "hold a 150-mile long border region with Iraq, establishing several checkpoints around the Kurdish cities."<sup>63</sup> The PKK fought with heavy weapons in the battle, considered to be one of the bloodiest and most sustained confrontations since the conflict began in 1984.

As of March 21, 2013, the PKK and Turkey's government have held talks in order to find a political solution to Kurdish conflict. A bilateral ceasefire was reached, though Turkish authorities deny this. On April 25, 2013, the PKK's acting leader at the time, Murat Karayilan, told a crowd of journalists in the Qandil Mountains that "their forces would withdraw from Turkey starting on May 8, 2013--as pledged in the ongoing negotiations between Ocalan and the Turkish government."<sup>64</sup> According to Aliza Marcus, a leading scholar on the organization, "the PKK enjoys the support of the majority of Kurds in

southeast Turkey and among national-minded Kurds.”<sup>65</sup>

Other senior PKK figures include Cemil Bayik, Mustafa Karasu, Sabri Ok, Ali Haydar Kaytan, Duran Kalkan, Beritan Dersim, Sulbus Peri, Delal Amed, Rengin Botan, Sozdar Avesta, Bese Hozat, Ronahi Serhat, Riza Altun, Bahoz Erdal, and Nurettin Sofi. Moreover, the PKK is considered the dominant Kurdish movement in Syrian and Iranian Kurdistan as well as in the diaspora. The PKK runs several NGOs and hundreds of community centers worldwide, including in Japan, Canada, Russia, Australia, South Africa, and in Scandinavia. There are also a number of private television and radio stations and publications in Europe that are closely related to the PKK. The PKK, with its millions of supporters, is undoubtedly the best organized Kurdish movement in the world economically, politically, and socially.

#### ***The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP)***

The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) is the eighth successive Kurdish political party in Turkey. Its goal is to find a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey through peaceful means in order to secure the fundamental rights of the Kurds. All of its predecessors were outlawed by Turkey’s Constitutional Court. “The first pro-Kurdish party was the People’s Labor Party (Halkin Emek Partisi, HEP), established on June 7, 1990, by Fehmi Isiklar and nine other Kurdish MPs in Turkey.”<sup>66</sup> “The HEP joined the Social Democrat Party (SHP) for Turkey’s 1991 general elections and gained 22 seats in the Turkish Grand Assembly. In July 1993, the HEP was banned by Turkey’s Constitutional Court.”<sup>67</sup>

Following its disbandment, “Kurdish MPs founded the Freedom and Democracy Party (OZDEP) in May 1993. On November 23, OZDEP was also outlawed and was succeeded by the Democracy Party (DEP). In March 1994, the Turkish parliament lifted the immunity of six DEP MPs, including the first Kurdish female MP, Leyla Zana.”<sup>68</sup> “They were later sentenced to 15 years in prison on

charges of treason and affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Other members escaped to Europe and joined the establishment of the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile in Brussels. On June 16, 1994, the DEP was disbanded by the Constitutional Court.”<sup>69</sup>

With each banned Kurdish party, a substitute party was formed. The People’s Democracy Party (HADEP) was founded on May 11, 1994, with Murat Bozlak as the elected leader. HADEP was the first Kurdish party to participate in the 1995 and 1999 elections. It did not, however, meet the 10 percent required threshold and thus did not win any seats--although it was dominant party in the Kurdish region. In the 1999 local elections, it won 37 municipalities across the Kurdish region, including seven major Kurdish cities. Yet HADEP’s fate was the same as its predecessors, and it was outlawed by the Turkish Constitutional Court on March 13, 2003. In addition, 46 of its founding members were banned from political activities.

Next, the Democratic People’s Party (DEHAP) was established. DEHAP gained around seven percent of the total votes in Turkey in 2002. Despite its total votes numbering around three million, which could have translated to more than 30 MPs, it did not succeed in entering the Turkish parliament. “The Constitutional Court opened a case against the DEHAP, but the party later merged with the Democratic Society Party (DTP) led by veteran Kurdish politician Ahmet Turk”<sup>70</sup> and Aysel Tugluk, one of Ocalan’s lawyers. The DTP did not participate in the 2007 elections, but its candidates ran independently. It secured 22 seats in the Turkish parliament on its first attempt and was accused by the Turkish government of being a political wing of the PKK.

In the 2009 local elections, the DTP won mayorships in 100 cities and towns in the Kurdish region. The party was banned by Turkey’s Constitutional Court on December 11, 2009. In addition, its co-chairs, Turk and Tugluk, were stripped of their parliamentary immunity and barred from membership in any political party for five years.

The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) was created in 2008, before the DTP was closed, and many Kurdish MPs joined. BDP candidates ran independently as well, and the party secured 36 seats in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Six of its elected MPs are, as of the writing of this article, still in Turkish jails. The party advocates human and minority rights and has equal representation at all administrative levels in and municipalities it holds. Its co-chairs are Selahattin Demirtas (male) and Gulten Kisanak (female). It is also the only party that openly supports the rights of gays and lesbians, as outlined in its program.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the BDP has offices and representatives in Washington, Brussels, Paris, Erbil (Hewler), and Rome.

### ***Party of Rights and Freedom (HAKPAR)***

Party of Rights and Freedom (HAKPAR) was established by Abdulmelik Firat, former member of Democratic Party in Turkey in a move to counter PKK related Kurdish parties in the region. Party is now led by Kemal Burkay the former secretary general of Kurdistan Socialist party (PSK) who returned from Europe after spending 30 years there. Its public support is almost nonexistent due to Burkay's ties with the Turkish government and his dislike toward the BDP and the PKK.

### ***Party of Participatory Democracy (KADEP)***

KADEP was founded by Serafettin Elci, who had served as minister of agriculture in the 1970s in Turkey. The party advocates Kurdish nationalism and has good relations with the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq. Elci was elected to the Turkish parliament in 2011, following his coalition with the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP); however, he passed away in 2012. Lutfi Baksi is the current KADEP leader. The party wields no real power in the region.

## **INTERNATIONAL**

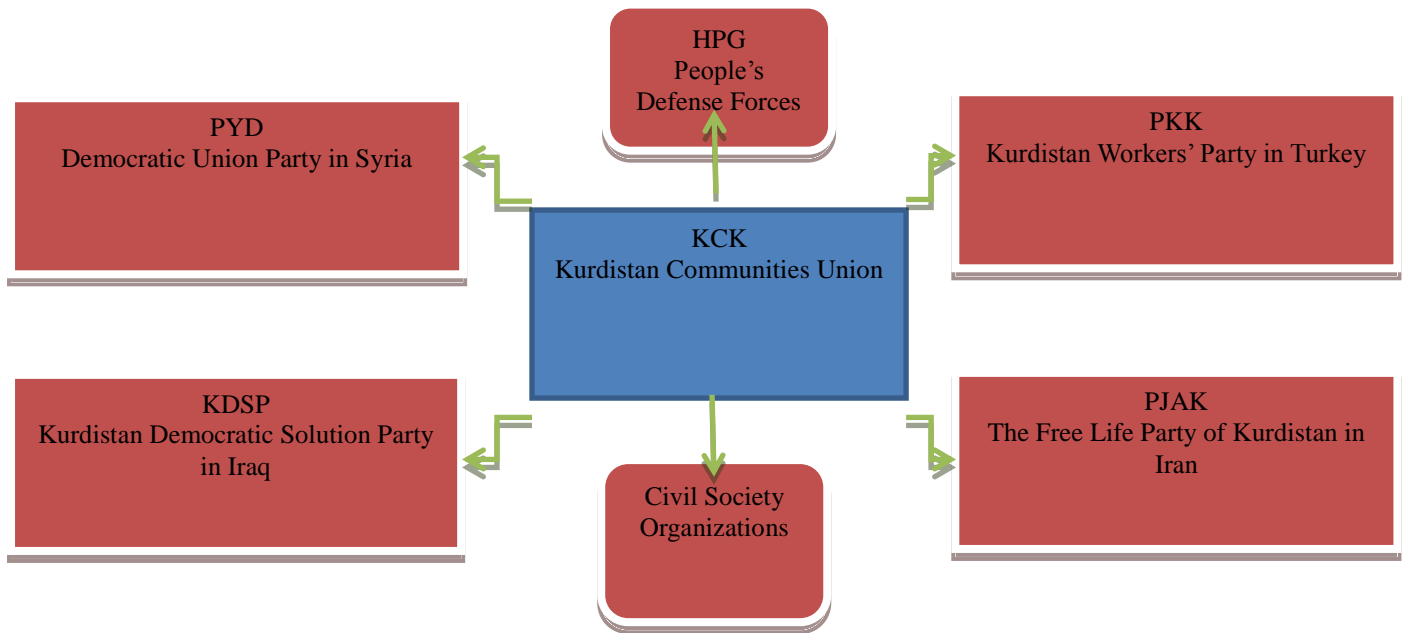
### ***The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)***

The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) is an umbrella organization that encompasses all of the PKK-affiliated parties and organizations in Kurdistan. "The establishment of KCK is based on the principle of 'democratic confederalism' proposed by Abdullah Ocalan in 2004." Ocalan suggested the concept "as an alternative to the nation state and as a model for resolving conflicts in the Middle East. Within this framework, the KCK serves as an executive organ coordinating with the PKK and PKK-affiliated parties and organizations operating in other Kurdish regions."<sup>72</sup>

Abdullah Ocalan is the group's honorary leader, however, due to his imprisonment, the organization is led by an elected executive council. "Cemil Bayik, now the acting leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party who replaced Murat Karayilan in July 2013, is the current co-chair of the KCK Executive Council along with Bese Hozat, a leading female commander in the PKK."<sup>73</sup> Murat Karayilan, the former head of KCK; "Zubeyir Aydar, a former Kurdish member of the Turkish parliament in the 1990s and a leading member of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) are the deputies of Bayik and Hozat."<sup>74</sup> Kongra-Gel (Kurdistan People's Congress), the KCK's assembly, is led by Dr. Remzi Kartal, who served as a member of the Turkish parliament in the 1990s.

"The KCK has five main subdivisions: the ideological front, social front, political front, military wing, and the women's front."<sup>75</sup> In addition to the PKK, political parties such as the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), active in Iranian Kurdistan; the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekiti a Demokratik, PYD), operating in Syrian Kurdistan; the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (Partiya Carseravi Demokratik Kurdistan, PCDK) in Iraqi Kurdistan, civil society organizations in Kurdistan; the PKK's armed wing; and the People's Defense Forces (HPG).

**Figure III: Members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)**



***The Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe (KON-KURD)***

“The Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe (KON-KURD) is an international organization located in Brussels whose goal is to achieve, defend, and develop the social, economic, political, and cultural rights of the Kurdish people. KON-KURD works within the democratic framework that exists in Europe.”<sup>76</sup> KON-KURD is another umbrella organization of the Kurdish community centers linked to the PKK in Europe, North America, and Australia. Around 200 groups from across the globe are members, and the organization is represented by the Kurdish federations and associations in all European countries.

The federation of Kurdish associations in Germany is YEK-KOM. With approximately one hundred member associations, it is the largest of all. The federation in Austria is FEY-KOM; Great Britain's is FED-BIR; Belgium's

is FEK-BEL; in Denmark, it is FEY-KURD; "in France FEYKA; in the Netherlands FED-KOM; in Sweden KURDISKA-RADET; and in Switzerland FEKAR.”<sup>77</sup> All are members of KON-KURD, which is headed by Ismet Kem, a former Kurdish journalist who has lived in Europe for many years. At its 19<sup>th</sup> Congress in Brussels in June 2013, KON-KURD changed its name to KCD-Europe (Kurdish Democratic Society Congress in Europe). As of the writing of this article, the new chair/co-chairs of KCD have yet to be announced.

***Kurdistan National Congress (KNK)***

The Kurdistan National Congress (Kongra Netawiya Kurdistan, KNK) was established in 1999 as the successor of the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile by exiled Kurdish and Assyrian politicians, lawyers, and activists. “It is a coalition of organizations from across Europe and Kurdistan... working to promote

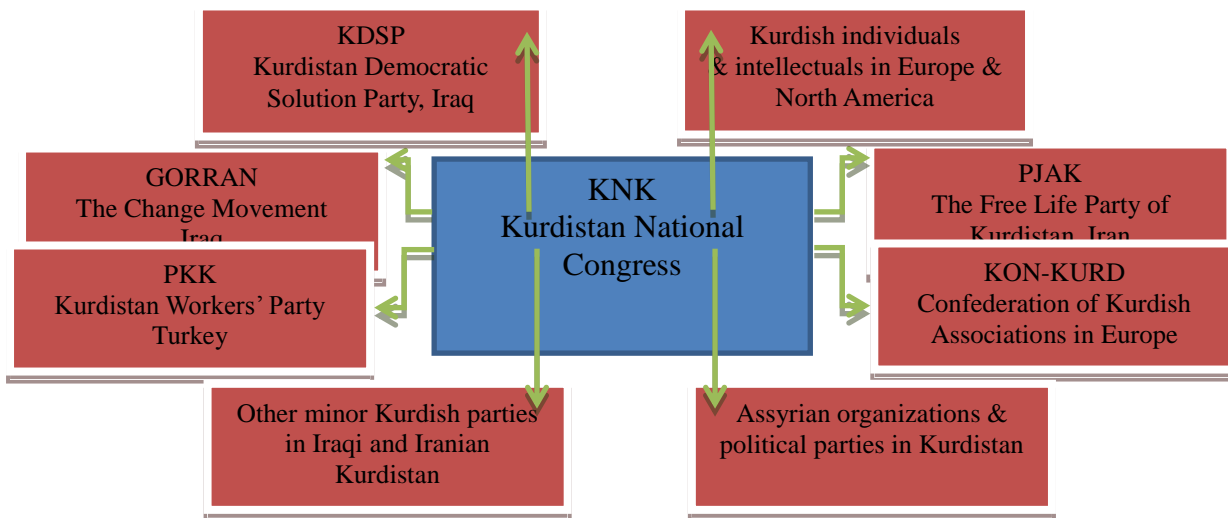


and lobby for a peaceful political solution to the Kurdish question.”<sup>78</sup> The KNK headquarters are located in Brussels, with branches in several other major European cities as well.<sup>79</sup>

KNK's objective is "to bring together the representatives of the Kurds from across the Kurdish regions to lobby foreign governments, the EU, the UN, and other international

organizations in order to raise awareness of the situation in Kurdistan through the media briefings and in public forums. In addition, KNK "works with politicians, human rights groups, and NGOs to bring attention to political issues and human rights violations in Kurdistan. The KNK is co-chaired by Tahir Kamalizadeh, a prominent Kurd from Iranian Kurdistan and Nilufer.”<sup>80</sup>

**Figure IV: Members of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK)**



***The Kurdistan National Congress of North America (KNCNA)***

The Kurdistan National Congress of North America (KNCNA) was established in 1988 in the aftermath of the Iraq’s chemical weapons attacks on Halabja and other Kurdish cities and villages Artin. Based in Irvine, California, the organization represents Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan living in the United States and Canada.<sup>81</sup> The KNCNA, ’s main objective is “to unite Kurds living in North America to work toward a better future” and to promote a free and democratic Kurdistan.<sup>82</sup> The KNCNA is not to be confused with the Brussels-based Kurdistan National Congress (KNK or Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan).

**CONCLUSION**

While the Kurds do not yet have an independent state, some of the most important

developments in modern Kurdish history have taken place over the past decade. With the emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Kurds came to control the region where they lived in the country, and in 2005, a Kurd was elected president of Iraq. Another significant development was on the level of international cooperation, with the Kurdistan National Congress’ (KNK) 13<sup>th</sup> General Assembly being held in Brussels in May 2013. There, for the first time, the KRG was represented among 200 delegates from various Kurdish parties and organizations. The event was broadcast live on all of the major Kurdish TV channels, including Kurdistan TV, Nuce TV, Kurdsat, and Sterk TV.

The Kurds have seen major progress in Iraq, where they have a de facto autonomous region, and they are also attempting to carve out autonomy in Syria as well. In Turkey, too, there have been new political openings. Only

in Iran has the situation remained stagnant.

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